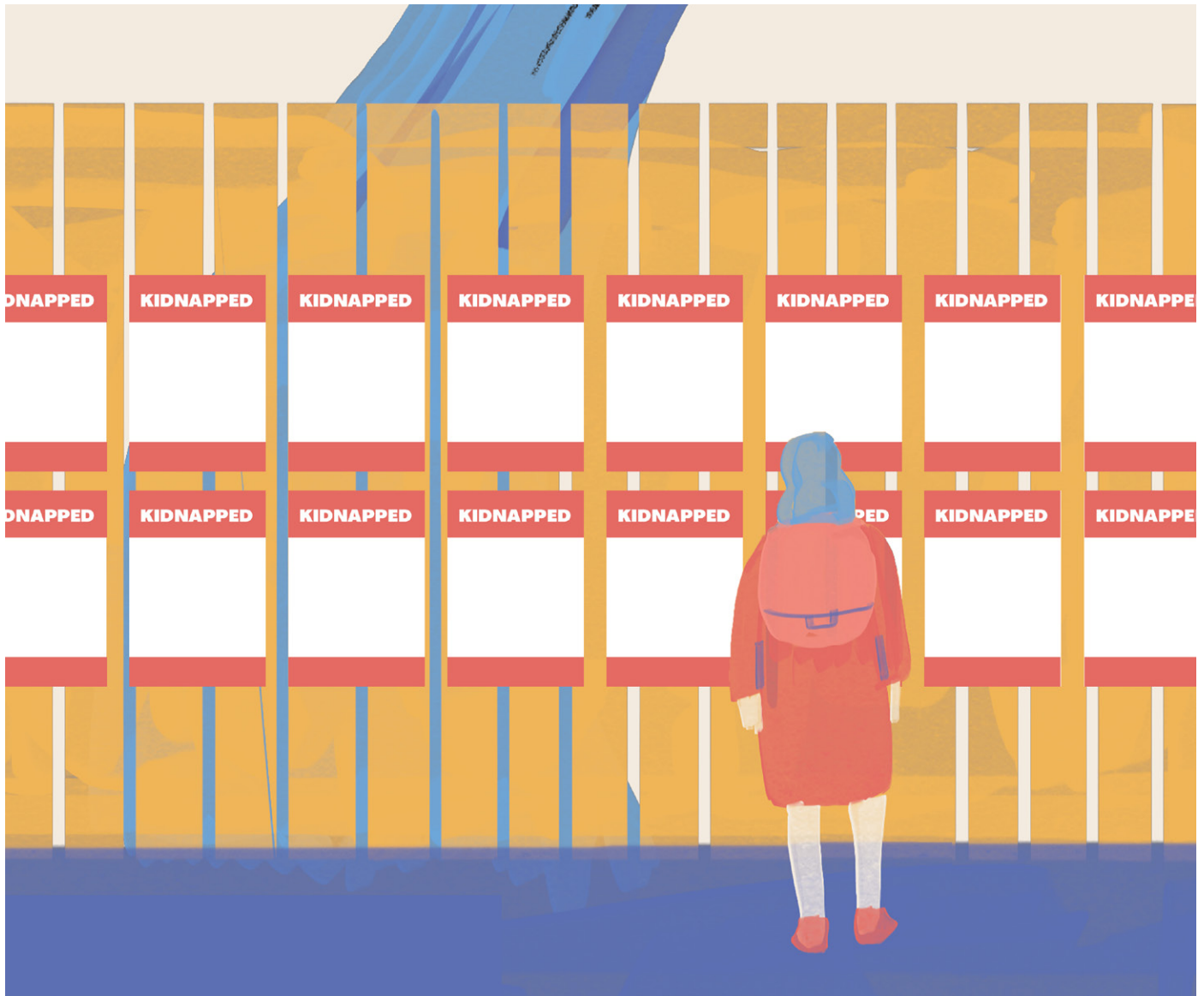


My COMFORT ZONE



My 10-year-old daughter Libby and I are something of a team. With her father not in the picture I look out for her, and she likes to think she looks out for me. Being the only caregiver means that there's always some extra juggling that I need to do, but still without doubt Libby is the best thing in my life.

The last few months have been hard on her. Ever since the war in Israel broke out, everyone here, in Santa Fe, is on edge. Our once liberal, carefree community has taken on a lot of new protocols. Our synagogue now has an armed guard outside. A teacher at my daughter's public school has been organizing pro-Palestinian protests in her neighborhood, and though it hasn't been in the school, it's not comfortable for the many Jews who go to the school. Not to mention, the school has quarterly active shooter drills, training the kids what to do in case of a forced entry into their building. And, not surprisingly, my daughter is suffering.

Libby is prone to anxiety, but it had been under control with the help of her wonderful therapist. In the past few weeks something has changed. I've never seen her quite like this. In the past, on a bad day she'd cry herself to sleep, or insist I walk her to her classroom. But in the past few weeks, she won't sleep in her own bed at all, and the school has had to call me twice in the middle of a school day to pick her up because she was hysterical. In one of her now-rare calm moments, Libby has explained to me that she's terrified that someone will break in. She's scared that there's going to be a war here like there is in Israel. She's scared something will happen to me. All I can do is hug her and tell her we're fine, and that we'll be fine.

I push Libby to go about her usual schedule as much as possible. On Monday afternoons, after school, I take Libby to the JCC for her swim lesson. Just after Libby jumped into the pool, Roni sat down next to me.

Roni arrived a few weeks ago from Israel. She came with her husband and two kids to get away. They had been evacuated from their home, and they needed to get away from the air raid sirens. Their kids needed a break, a whole month in one hotel room was suffocating, and so they decided to come visit Roni's parents here. Their short break has lasted three months and doesn't look like it's ending. Their 10-year-old, Rotem, has become fast friends with Libby.

"I don't understand this place," Roni sighed. "How can you have a Jewish community center that doesn't know that there's a war going on?"

I wasn't really sure what she was talking about. "What do you mean the JCC doesn't know that there's a war? Didn't you read their e-newsletter? They explicitly offered support to anyone, particularly Israelis, who need it right now."

"Oh, yes of course," hurried Roni to explain, "That support has been unbelievable. Really amazing. The one-to-one, the individual support has been wonderful." With that, she squeezed my arm in thanks. "But it's when I walk into this building it feels like nothing is happening. No reference to the war anywhere. No posters, no images, no signs of support at all," she explained emphatically.

"What do you want? There's an Israeli flag at the entrance," I replied, a bit bewildered.

"Didn't you always have that? What has changed? My best friend, her sister is being held hostage in Gaza. My brother - fighting in Gaza. But here - nothing. What about the "Bring them home now" posters? I want to see the faces of each and every one of the hostages that has been taken. I need it. Israel needs it. Back home, it's almost impossible to walk a few blocks without seeing their faces."

I went quiet. Faces of the hostages were just about the last thing I wanted up in the JCC. The JCC is mine and Libby's safe space. It's our space to get away from it all. Libby is scared enough as it is. She doesn't need to look at the faces of people she doesn't know. Of course, it is absolutely terrible that these innocent people are suffering, but how will putting pictures of them up do anything to help? All it will do is make my child - and others as well, including adults - walk around with an even greater sense of anxiety.

Suddenly Roni burst into tears. "I'm sorry," she sobbed, "It's just so hard. I don't mean to criticize you - you and Libby have been a life-line for us. It's just. It's just I thought, at least in a JCC, we could feel at home."



GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Do you agree with the narrator or Roni, and why?
- Are there other Jewish communal spaces where your answer would be different?

BACKGROUND

Israel has been engaged in a terrible war since October 7th, 2023. Quite apart from the horrors of the massacre itself, Israeli society is coping with the nightmare of over one hundred people still held hostage in Gaza (as of early February 2024), some 300,000 called from their families to fight in Gaza on reserve duty, and almost a quarter of a million people living as internal refugees while their homes are being bombed in the North and South.

In the meantime Jews around the world have been suffering too. In addition to their horror at the 7th October massacre, they have had to cope with a dizzying rise in antisemitism, and the overwhelming loneliness and sense of betrayal that many left-leaning Jews have felt in the face of their allies' insensitivity or hostility. Add to this, Jews outside of Israel are seeing far more of the destruction that Israel's war on Hamas leaves. While Israelis see the bottomless darkness in their own predicament, Jews outside of Israel, through the extensive news coverage, also struggle with seeing the misery of Gazan civilians.

Over this multi-dimensional trauma looms the question of our mental health, and particularly the mental health of our children. In Israel it is very difficult to shelter children from the nature of the war. Even if one could avoid every sign, poster, or news item, there are also bomb sirens and missing parents-turned-soldiers to deal with. Outside of Israel however, parents do feel they have the choice of how, when, or whether to expose their children to reminders of such suffering. In particular since the Covid years have left all of us more concerned for the mental health of our children.

On the one hand, one might say we have an obligation to "bear witness" and raise awareness about the pain of our People. In more traditional Jewish terms, we might not say Kaddish with a friend but we must say "amen" to demonstrate our shared presence and support. Yet on the other hand, parents also have an obligation to take care of their children, on the individual level.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

- What should happen when looking out for the welfare and security of the Jewish People comes into conflict with looking out for the well-being and emotional security of young Jewish people?
- Are there any ways to support Israel that do not involve emotional costs?



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