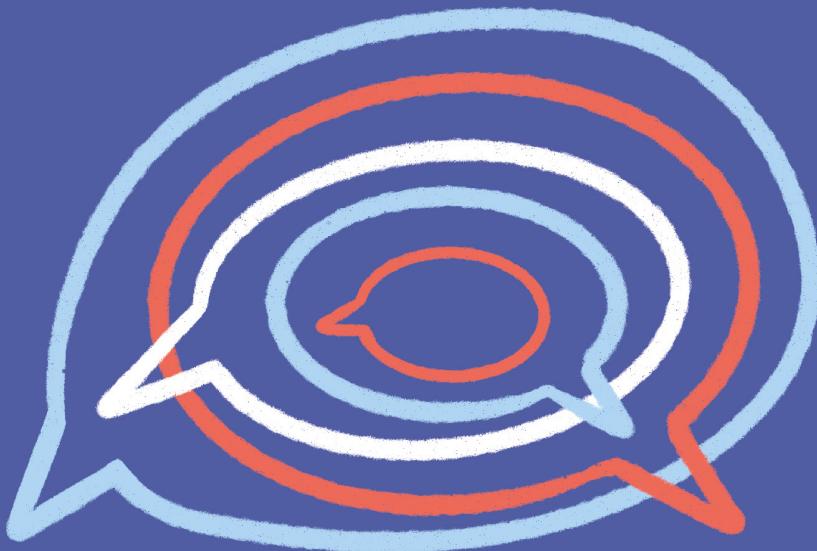




Robbie Gringras & Abi Dauber Sterne



STORIES FOR THE  
SAKE OF  
ARGUMENT

The Wartime Collection



15<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2023

The war between Israel and Hamas has broken many of us, emotionally, ideologically, and sometimes physically. As we begin to pick up the pieces we may find that we do not fit together as we once did. We may find ourselves in disagreement with others, in disagreement with ourselves.

We at For the Sake of Argument believe that short “argument-stories” are a valuable tool to enable us to begin to address how we differ, without breaking apart. The stories are fictionalized, living one step removed from our painful vulnerable reality. Talking through a story can enable us to engage with real issues in the “no-penalty area of illusion.” That is, fiction can help us talk by giving us distance and by allowing ourselves to activate our imagination.

Our stories are also honed and focused on one key issue at a time. Many times when caught in an emotional and ideological whirlwind, such as the current war and its reverberations, we find we are disagreeing over many different issues all at the same time. Our argument-stories pare down the whirlwind into discrete, hopefully manageable, pieces.

We have created four “argument-stories” for your use. They address only three disagreements you may have come across. There are no doubt many more!

If you would like to learn more about our techniques for a “healthy argument”, or even consult or engage us in addressing healthy argument in your work, please connect with us at [forthesakeofargument.org](http://forthesakeofargument.org), or sign up for our newsletter.

# I WAS BORN HERE

TRIGGER WARNING: REFERENCES TO VIOLENCE.



From the moment I have known myself I have been afraid.

Not “frightened of the dark” kind of afraid, but afraid of being injured, or even dying.

I remember when my uncle was shot while driving me to kindergarten. He kept driving, even while he was bleeding. My schoolbag was a little stained from the blood, and my parents had to buy me a new one.

My parents tell me it is our land. They tell me that we must never relinquish it, no matter how dangerous it is to live here. I think I understand. They tell me that we are at war with those who wish to take our land. Our enemies think that it is their land, not ours. I think I understand.

But I don't understand why our enemies want to hurt me.

I don't have a choice in all of this. My parents, my family, my society, they all insist I must stay here. But it wasn't my fault. I was born here. Sometimes I want to shout at them, as they block our way, shoot at my family, or throw things, "I was born here! I had no choice in your war! Leave me out of it!"

Last week my best friend was killed. He, too, was born here. He, too, had no choice.

I suddenly realized that I was no longer angry with his killers, I was angry with his parents. And with my parents.

Why do they choose to keep us in such danger?

Why can't we just run away from all this?

I want to live somewhere safe!

We have visas and money—we could live anywhere!

I awaited their return from the mourning house, ready to explode.

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[Note: This story was written in 2021]

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Would you advocate for the child to the parents, or would you support their choice to live in this dangerous place?
- Are the parents wrong for putting their children in ongoing danger?

## QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

- Do your opinions maintain the same level of clarity whether the child is Israeli-Jewish or Palestinian?
- Are parents right to make ideologically driven choices that put their children at risk?
- What is more important to you—your connection to a particular place or your physical safety?

# ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE



It was the most significant year of my life. Some ten months in Israel, learning about Israel, working in Israel, and connecting deeply with Israelis. My friends and I, we had gotten really close to a group of young Israelis around our age. We had all spent the previous summer together on camp while they were the Israeli shlichim (emissaries), and now we had joined them in Israel while they were doing their pre-army year of voluntary service (Shnat Sherut) working in the same impoverished neighborhood we were working in. Together the twenty of us worked at kids' camps and cleaning up neighborhoods - bettering areas of Israel that needed help.

Our two groups became one. We would hang out together, watch sports together, play video games together, and even occasionally hook up together. And because they were Israelis, we would argue all the time. I'm a democrat and Yochai for example was crazy about Trump, but I'd say the two of us ended up being the closest friends out of everyone. There wasn't anything romantic in it, but Yochai and I really loved each other.

Since we all went back to the States, we've kept up a fairly active whatsapp group. Sure, it's not a daily connection, and not everyone writes in the group all the time, but overall we still keep up with each other, even after four, five years. Some of us have graduated, most of the Israelis have finished their army service, and the selfies keep flying across the sea.

Then came the message from Yochai on January 20th:

*I'm sorry to be mean, but I'm telling you what I feel. All of you Americans who posted support for an immediate ceasefire with Hamas – you clearly don't give a damn about the Jewish People. I even see some of you post your stupid "Stop killing children" without even mention for our children hostages in Gaza. Screw you all.*

The moment I read it I felt like I'd been kicked in the stomach. I was on the verge of tears. Straight away there were additional messages from the Israelis, who went even further:

*I thought we were Jews together. Now I realize you don't care about us at all.*

And many posted really horrible things in Hebrew (kind of against the

law in our shared group of non-Hebrew readers) that I stopped putting into google translate after the first one or two.

I was devastated. How could they attack us in such a cruel way? And how intolerant! Disagreements are one thing, but to suddenly decide we're almost enemies?

I tried to put together a reply for Yochai. I went backwards and forwards, editing, deleting, re-writing. And in the end I sent:

*Dear Yochai and everyone in this group, in particular all the Israelis. We love you all. We worry for you and support you. We totally get that Hamas is a terrible organization and that the attack on 10.7 was an atrocity. Really. But at the same time, since when was our connection based on total agreement? Remember the fights we used to have over Trump? I used to go crazy when you put on that MAGA hat just to annoy me! But we never let that get in the way of our friendship. So, you're right that we have a different view of what should happen now in Gaza, but I still believe you are my friend. We're still the same people. I know it's on a totally different level, but we Jews in America are also getting attacked for what the IDF is doing now. Now is the time for us to stick together, even if we disagree.*

A couple of people messaged me privately, supporting me and saying thank you for saying what they'd wanted to say. But Yochai shot back almost immediately:

*Trump and Hamas its not the same. NOT THE SAME! My friends were at the rave where Hamas massacred. Some of us were in reserve duty, fighting in the streets of Gaza. Is that the same as feeling a little*

*uncomfortable with your woke “allies”? You American Jews you don’t understand anything. I don’t really think you are Jews at all.*

And then he added another short message, as an after-thought:

*And for us its 7.10. Even our dates you have to make about you.*

I am stunned. Does he really think that being Jewish is all about agreeing with everything Israel does?

I really do believe that however evil Hamas is, Israel can’t just keep attacking Gaza. All those starving children. What good does it do? I know he’s grieving terribly, and doesn’t want to think beyond survival. But why should his raw emotions dictate what all Jews must do? Just because I’m more able to think about consequences doesn’t make me an enemy of the Jewish People.

Do you understand me?

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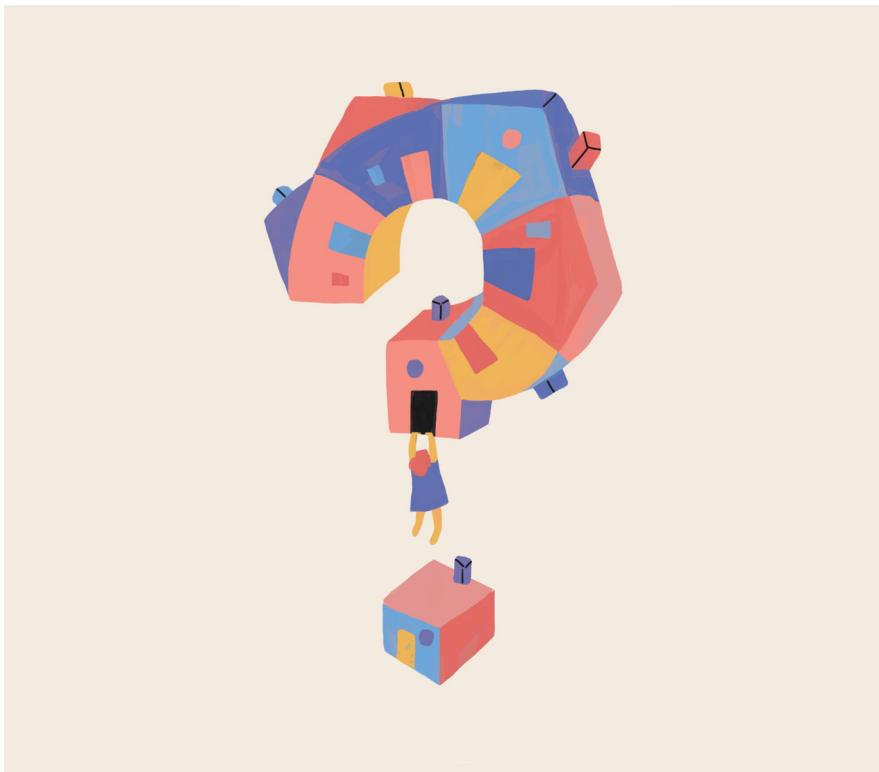
## GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Does commitment to the Jewish People mean one must refrain from calling for an immediate ceasefire?
- If this schism were to come to your attention, and you were on the board of the camp these young people had attended, or the program in which they had participated in Israel - how would you respond? (The real life event this story is based on did most certainly come to the attention of the directors...)

## QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

- What does supporting Israel mean - who decides?
- In what ways is it beneficial or damaging that there are Jews outside of Israel who see themselves as more able to look at this situation in a detached “objective” way?

# SEND THEM HOME?



I was really eager for my 2nd grader to go back to her school in Jerusalem. It had been a long summer vacation. And then, after a few short weeks of school, the holidays came, and led to a long break that began the day before Yom Kippur and was supposed to end after Sukkot on October 8th. Hamas attacked on the 7th, and the war broke out. Needless to say, the kids did not go back to school on the 8th. With teachers out on reserve duty, relentless bombing from Hamas, it took

a long time for Lia's school to re-open. It was beginning to feel like another Covid period, but instead of spreading out to avoid germs, we were huddling together in safe rooms to avoid missiles.

Finally we were given a date for the kids to go back to school, which was when the real arguments broke out. You see, our school is being renovated. And like most physical labor done in Israel, the workers are Arab. Many are actually Palestinian Arab, who live over the Green Line. When the work first began before the summer break, it was really cute. The teachers would supervise informal Arabic lessons with the kids and the workers. I remember how Lia was excited when they all made pittot together in the yard.

But that was before October 7th. That was before we all began to learn that similar warm relations with workers from Gaza had turned out to be reconnaissance missions for Hamas, who learned the exact lay-out of all the kibbutzim to which they later laid waste. We are far from Gaza, and our workers come from the West Bank, but there are Hamas cells there too. The parents' Whatsapp group was going crazy, and before I knew it, the principal called an urgent meeting with the parents, via Zoom.

"Good evening," said the principal, trying to muster a smile. "As you know, we're meeting tonight to come to an agreement about how to return your children to school safely. Earlier today, the building supervisor came to our school building and explained to me that the work must be completed. We cannot push off the renovation until after the war. The roof is open, and it needs to be closed and sealed before the rainy season."

I saw a lot of heads, each in their own rectangles, nodding.

“We have two options. We can either move back to zoom school until the building is completed, probably about two months. Or, we can learn in person, with an additional security guard in place. There are no other spaces available these days,” explained the principal. “Thoughts?”

“They’re all terrorists,” said one parent.

“They are not all terrorists,” said another. “That’s racist. But it’s true that most Palestinians read and watch different news than we do.”

“Yeah, my Palestinian cleaning lady, whom I’ve known and trusted for years, actually asked me why we – Jews – were bombing hospitals,” offered another. “When I suggested to her that Hamas is responsible, she just looked at me. I think she understood. I think she believed me.”

“Well, I’m not risking it,” exclaimed a father who was usually quiet at school meetings. “Sure, when times are good, we need to live together. But times are not good now, and I just can’t risk my own child’s safety. We can’t know if the guys working on the school’s roof are the good guys or the bad guys. Nope, not risking it.”

The principal tried to take control of the conversation again. I could feel her squirming through my computer screen. She cleared her throat, then started, “The safety of your children is of utmost importance. Their psychological health is critical, and we must get them back to school. And their physical safety is paramount. The Board will discuss, and we’ll let you know our decision tomorrow.”

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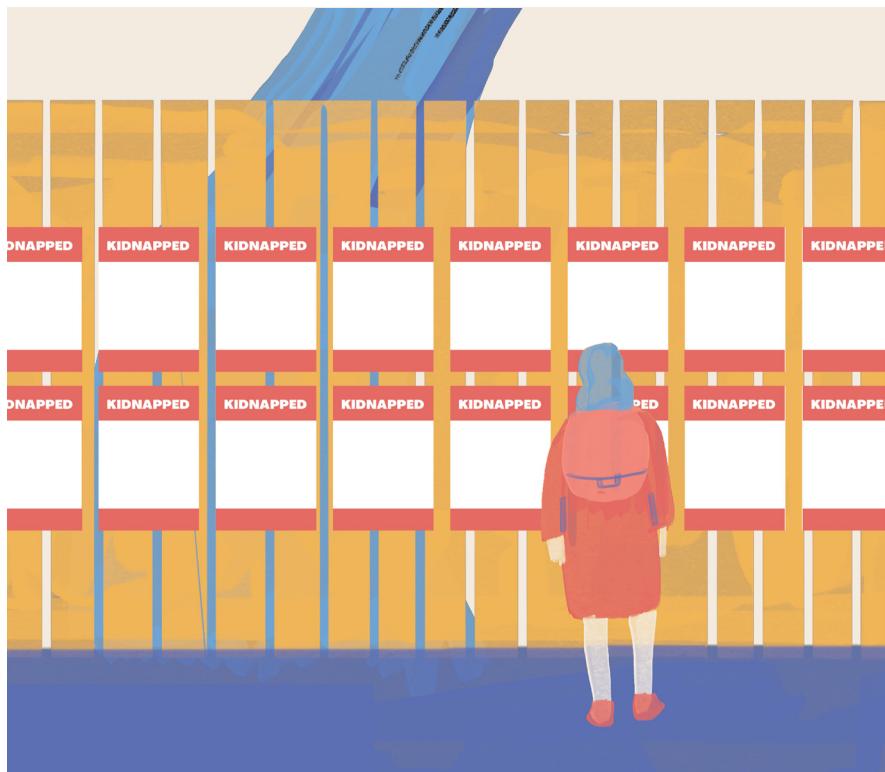
## GUIDING QUESTIONS

- If you were on the Board, what would you vote for?
- If your child was at this school, what would you want the decision to be?

## QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

- (When) is it ok to discriminate against a certain type or group of people?
- What kind of risks - real or imagined - would you take to avoid discriminating against others?

# 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."

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## 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?

# YOUR NOTES



# YOUR NOTES



# YOUR NOTES







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