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NEWS

She was trapped in her house as her neighbors died: An Israeli in Nashville tells her story

After Hamas invades her kibbutz and kills two close friends and one of her students, a school teacher and her family find respite, healing and a purpose in Nashville



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They lived among acres and acres of buttercups, pineapples, dairy cows, wheat and potatoes, an idyllic existence where all 500 or so residents of the Nir Yitzhak kibbutz looked out for each other, worked and played together.

"It's like living in heaven," soft-spoken, 41-year-old school teacher Dana Ida said.

Yes, the Gaza strip is only about two miles away. Yes, the Hamas leadership there regularly calls for the destruction of Israel. And yes, Hamas had launched missiles toward their kibbutz every few months or so, sending residents scrambling toward concrete safe rooms as community leaders shouted red-color alerts over loudspeakers.

But Ida — an Israeli now in her third month of staying in Nashville — said the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks shocked her.

She never expected to be trapped in her house's safe room with her husband and their three terrified young children for 14 hours. Never thought they'd be sharing a bucket for a bathroom. Never thought she'd be getting desperate messages from her in-laws: "Help! The terrorists are in our house!"

Never expected her close friend to be abducted and later killed. Never thought her husband's best friend would be shot to death. Never expected one of her students to be killed. And they never expected to land in Music City.

"We trusted our army and we trusted our government," Ida said. "And we believed that in Gaza, there are good people who wouldn't *think* of killing us viscously.

"We truly believed Hamas would never do something like that. We gave peace a chance. It's not that we *wanted* to believe, we *truly* believed it."

Ida paused and looked down.

"Now it feels like we're idiots," she said, her voice cracking. "I feel like an idiot."

The Ida family is the only one remaining here of six Israeli families brought to Nashville for respite by a Nashville Christian organization and some affluent Israelis who settled in Tennessee years ago.

In two days of interviews with The Tennessean, Ida detailed her family life, the horrors and fallout from the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks and her time in Tennessee.

She quietly declined to answer questions about her thoughts on Israel's response in Gaza, her country's leadership or the U.S. government's response to the conflict. The ensuing Israel-Hamas war has left thousands of Palestinians dead and appears to be widening throughout the Middle East.

Instead, Ida chooses to focus solely on her family's experiences.

'Our friends are our neighbors'

Dana (pronounced DA-nah) Ida's husband, Liran Ida, a farmer, grew up on the Nir Yitzhak kibbutz, which, like most other kibbutzim, is an agricultural-based collective settlement where some wealth is shared.

She grew up on a kibbutz about 35 minutes away; the two met when they were young adults assigned to the same Israeli service delegation. After getting married, they settled on Liran Ida's home kibbutz, overjoyed to be able to start a family on a kibbutz — even one so close to Gaza.

"Our friends are our neighbors, and the young kids, they all play together," Ida said.

"Everybody knows everyone, and we rely on each other. This is the kind of life we wanted to have, a strong, united community."

Those code-red alarms are scary, though an iron dome missile protection system destroys most incoming fire.

Still, she said, "Hundreds of missiles were aimed at us at any given moment from Gaza, but we didn't care; we felt safe inside these fences.

"We believed people are genuinely good. We believed there are good people in Gaza who want to live in peace."

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'Where's the Army?!'

On Oct. 6, a Friday, the kids went swimming after school, and the family worked in a community garden before going home for a Shabbat dinner of chicken and rice. They spent some time afterward sitting outside because the weather finally started to cool, Ida said.

The first alarms sounded around 6:30 the next morning. Ida and her husband jumped out of bed, grabbed their 6-year-old daughter from her bedroom and ran to the boys' bedroom, which was the concrete-enforced safe room in the house.

Within minutes, the Idas found out this wasn't a typical response against incoming missiles; they saw video footage on their phones of Hamas militants driving around an Israeli town just outside northern Gaza.

"At first I thought it was fake — terrorists can invade Israel and drive around a city? Where's the Army?" Ida said. "We had just told our kids, the army would stop then in an instant!"

Within 30 minutes of the alarms sounding, though, the Idas received phone messages saying there were Hamas militants terrorizing a kibbutz 10 minutes north of them.

At their kibbutz, around 10 armed men who made up the safety squad mobilized outside, not realizing that dozens of Hamas militants soon would be inside Nir Yitzhak.

The Ida family soon heard gunfire outside their home, and panic seeped in — and it was heightened by the fact that their safe room door didn't lock.

'We have to give hope'

Messages kept pouring into their WhatsApp thread — "They are inside my house!" "Where's the Army?" "Somebody please come save me!"

Liran and Dana Ida decided to break their safe room door handle in a way that it would be harder for someone else to get in, a terrifying decision because Liran Ida is going to leave the safe room to grab his tools — and a bucket they can use for a toilet.

But Dana felt the couple had to try something: "I cannot sit still waiting for my death."

The plan backfired when Liran Ida broke the door handle, and it completely fell apart, leaving the door unlocked *and* open.

"I'm shouting, 'Put it back on! Put it back on!'" Dana Ida said.

He cannot, but somehow, he slammed the door so that it at least stayed closed.

For 14 hours, the family stared at desperate messages from neighbors, heard gunshots, searched for news. No water, no food. The parents tried to distract their kids with YouTube videos and card games.

The incoming messages became increasingly painful and desperate. Dana Ida heard from one of her teen students — "I'm terrified! They're in my house and it's just me and my mom."

She texted back to hold onto the door handle and that she's sure the Army is on the way, even though she has no idea if that was true: "We have to give hope."

In a different thread, Dana Ida found out another student was shot to death while lying on a little brother he was protecting with his body.

Then, if it was even possible, the news got worse.

'Emotionally, they are broken'

The family's closest friend on the kibbutz, Tal Haimi, 41, grew up with Liran Ida.

"They were the closest friends, and everything they did, they did together," Dana Ida said.

Haimi was among the kibbutz's 10 security squad members, a perfect fit, Ida said.

"Tal is the person you want beside you whenever anything happens. He's really calm and self-assured and has confidence."

After a few hours, Haimi's wife texted she no longer was getting messages from her husband.

"We kept telling her everything's going to be OK, and at one point, she texted, 'I know something happened.'"

The fear was well founded: Hamas fighters abducted Haimi, who weeks later was announced dead, authorities said.

Meanwhile, Linar Ida received a panicked phone call from his parents, who were begging for help. Hamas fighters were inside their house, chopping at the safe room door with an axe.

"They're sitting on floor, hugging each other, just knowing their lives are about to end."

The terrorists eventually left without breaching the safe room. But Dana Ida's in-laws walked out hours later to a house that was trashed, their valuables stolen, their Israeli flag stuffed into the toilet.

"[Hamas] didn't just want to kill, they also wanted to humiliate," she said. Her in-laws "physically are intact, but emotionally, they are broken."

'I have a lot of anger inside of me'

Around 8:30 that night, an Army officer gave the kibbutz messages that they could leave protected shelters. The Ida family grabbed some supplies and joined the rest of the community in a kindergarten building.

There, they hugged Haimi's wife, cried together, and got very little sleep overnight before most families drove to stay at a hotel in the southern Israeli resort town of Eilat. The family crowded into two adjoining hotel rooms and started to hear more about the death and destruction on their kibbutz and many others around Gaza.

About 1,200 Israelis were killed, including six from their kibbutz. One of her good friends, Judih Weinstein, a Canadian-American-Israeli, was abducted and later confirmed dead.

"I have a lot of anger inside of me," Ida said. "I'm both a survivor and a victim."

After a few weeks, the Ida family got an intriguing offer: Would they like to join five other Israeli families in Nashville for a couple of months?

An Israeli native, Avigal Soreq, the CEO of Nashville-based energy company Delek, extended an offer for free airfare, free housing, free use of a car, free private school for the kids and a

small weekly stipend to get some respite. The Idas knew Soreq's aunt, so they knew the offer was legit.

"The kids were thrilled. If I could only show you the looks on their faces!" Ida said, smiling.

The Idas had two Nashville host families that helped them settle into a rental home in East Nashville and get their children enrolled in a private Jewish school. While the children are in school, Ida and her husband worked out and volunteered at the Jewish Community Center. The family has taken a weeklong vacation to Disney World in Florida and Atlanta.

And Dana Ida has become a sought-after speaker and advocate, talking with Nashville Jewish congregations and U.S. Sen. Bill Hagerty, R-Tennessee, and Gov. Bill Lee about the attacks, urging all to work for the release of Israeli hostages in Gaza.

Finding healing through telling her story

Ida said her family's time in Nashville has been healing, first of all, because she was met with such kindness, from the Jewish community and beyond. Each dinner invitation, gift and empathetic conversation has been a treasure, Ida said.

"Somebody is thinking about me, this feeling that I'm important to someone else? Do you know what it feels like after you've felt worthless? It's like, I count. Somebody sees me," she said.

"And I felt worthless on Oct. 7; I felt my life was life wasn't worth sh** because someone was coming after me to kill me and my kids in my own home. And just coming here and having people smile at us and they want us to feel good. We're important to them. And it feels like my life matters. I deserve to be alive."

Repeating her story has been difficult, but ultimately, important for her.

"I feel the more I tell it, the more I feel like it's my calling to share my story with people around the world. Four weeks ago, [my friend] Judih was announced dead. And I can't imagine my life in Israel without my friend. Without my student. My life in the kibbutz without Tal.

"But telling that story, it's my calling. I feel like this is what I need to do. It's part of my healing process. Even if it means I have to relive my trauma, I process my story, and I tell it in a different way. What I'm taking from Oct. 7 is, I choose to live. I was facing death, but I chose life.

"And I'm going to live a happy life."

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