The College Commons Podcast

Lee Yaron: Weaving the Threads of October 7th

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Introduction: Welcome to the College Commons podcast and our acclaimed author series, a partnership between HUC Connect, the online learning platform of the Hebrew Union College, and the Jewish Book Council, featuring conversations with authors recognized by the National Jewish Book Awards. My name is Joshua Holo, your host.

Joshua Holo, Ph.D.: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast and our conversation with journalist Lee Yaron. Lee Yaron is an award winning Israeli journalist and winner of the twenty twenty two Yitzhak Livni Knight award for free speech in media and the twenty twenty four national Jewish book award book of the year, which she earned at thirty as the youngest recipient of the prize's history. As a journalist for Haaretz, her investigative reporting has resulted in the founding of state level commissions and substantial changes to Israeli policy and law. She is an elected member representative of the executive committee of the union of Israeli journalists, and we're really thrilled to have Lee Aron with us. Thank you so much for joining us on the College Commons podcast.

Lee Yaron: Thank you for having me.

Joshua Holo, Ph.D.: Your new book, Ten Seven, is a collection of experiences from the Hamas attacks on October seventh. You take pains in this book to comment on the war that followed and the suffering of Palestinians, but you also point out that their stories are not yours to tell. You wrote ten seven as an Israeli telling Israeli stories. And in this way, you clearly felt empowered, but you pursued these stories very soon after the tragedies. How did you manage, and how did your interviewees manage with everything so terribly raw and recent?

Lee Yaron: I started writing something like two weeks after the massacre. And in a time when I felt overwhelmed by grief and by anger and with this feeling that I need to do something for these victims. And the only thing I felt like I could do is what I always did, which is to write. So I've been with the arts, the Israeli liberal newspaper for almost a

decade now, and I've always been focused on human stories and stories of people on the margins of the Israeli society. If it's the elderly, holocaust survivors, people living in poverty, people with disabilities. And writing these stories in the last decade, time and again, I've seen how people in power were not just shaping policies that affected these people's lives. They were actually retelling and mistelling their stories. So I've learned that if I want to tell the true political reality to my readers, I have to do it from the bottom up. We've been flooded with all of this information and misinformation and disinformation about Israel and what happened in the war and Netanyahu and Sinwar. But most of this information came to us again from the top down. It came from the people in power, from politicians, from generals, and we just didn't hear enough from the real people who lived and died on the Gaza border. So writing this book, it was this attempt to reclaim the story of ten seven, to take it from the people in power and bring it back to these everyday people. And what was so important to me, and I think for these families, what allowed them to to participate and do these interviews so early, is that I didn't want to write about their loved ones solely as victims. The book is not about their last moments. In many ways, it's not a book about death, but it's a book about life. I wanted to know who they were, what were the communities they came from, their families' histories. The book goes back in so many stories two and three generations to their grandparents coming to Israel. So you get a lot of the political and historical narrative combined with these personal human stories. And these families wanted us to remember their loved ones as people for who they were, not just as victims of Hamas.

Joshua Holo, Ph.D.: In your introduction, you describe the Jewish process of mourning. And in fact, in Judaism, I think we often express great attachment to our process of mourning. We sit seven days of grief called Shiva or Shiva in an ancient, communal, and gradual process of grief and healing. But you confront us with this tragedy and the notion of a tragedy, which even this deeply thoughtful and textured process of mourning is ultimately insufficient. You

ask it this way. You write, if one has lost one's son, daughter, mother, and husband all on the same day, Should they be mourned collectively, or is there a certain order? Should one sit seven days of Shiva for each individual, or sit collectively for one week long stretch? What does one do without a body to bury? Your book, ten seven, recounting a hundred stories of loss, tries to confront this insufficiency of mourning in the face of the magnitude of death and destruction. Did writing ten seven help you in your morning?

Lee Yaron: It helped me in many ways even though the process was so painful because I had a mission. My mission was to tell the stories of the people who were silenced, and I

think being active in this time and having a mission really saved me from despair. The question I'm trying to ask in in the introduction and I was asking myself while writing the book is also the question of seeking peace, of seeking shalom. Because one of the things we're not allowed to do while we're mourning during the seven days of the Shiva is to say the word shalom in Hebrew because we're not expected to find it within ourselves or outside with other people. And I'm asking the question that if in our region, in the Middle East, in Israel and Palestine, we are constantly siding Shiva on someone, we're constantly in this circle of grief and death and pain, how can we change it? How can we break the cycle if we're not supposed to seek for peace, for shalom while we're mourning? I come from a generation of Israelis who are fifty percent of the Israeli population, and we are thirty years old or younger. And this number, thirty, means that we were born with or after the assassination of prime minister, Zakhrabin. And in so many ways, with the murder of the hope for peace with Rabin, I, myself, all the people who are fighting this war, we just never felt this hope that this conflict can be solved. We were told all of our lives by this Netanyahu government, Netanyahu is in power now for more than eighteen years, that our only way is to try to manage this conflict, that we can only count on technology and the iron dome and the sophisticated sensors to protect us. And they told us that we'll have good lives as Israelis with this ongoing, never ending war. And after October seventh, I ask myself even more every day what we can do to continue the legacy of Rabin and to try to solve this conflict. This is for me real Zionism living in peace with our neighbors in our land.

Joshua Holo, Ph.D.: Returning to the events of October seventh and the heart of your narrative, Many of the stories reflect a dizzying chaos in the attacks, people escaping and coming back for others, people not knowing from within shelters, and of course, explosions and gunshots. What compelled you as a storyteller about the chaos that you both learned about and that you communicated to us, the readers?

Lee Yaron: One of the problems I saw in general media, Israeli and international covering, October seventh, when they covered it, is that they mostly told the story as a story of individuals. We heard one story each time, but the tragedy we feel now as Israelis is a collective tragedy, is a tragedy of full communities that were destroyed. People who lost not just one member of their family, but multiple members of their family and their friends and their neighbors and their doctor and their teacher. So what I did in this book is every time I interviewed a bereaved family, I ask them about their relationships and the connections their loved one had with other victims and survivors, and this web of relationships and connections became the backbone of the book. So I think what you're describing as this chaos is also part of this relationships and the way I try to show the reader that everyone were connected to each other.

Joshua Holo, Ph.D.: Indeed. Many of the stories inside themselves have many strands that are interwoven. And in one very chilling story from, you describe the death of the young Amar, an Israeli Bedouin who was murdered by Hamas on October seventh. You recount how a policeman called Amar's father, whose name was Auda, giving him the brutal news of his son's death without any preamble. And you describe the father, Auda's reaction. You say, Auda was deeply offended. One should not announce such news over the phone without preparation. It turns out that Auda later learned that his son, Amar, died saving two girls' lives, but he, Auda, the father, didn't learn the story and the fate of his son for some time. And in the meanwhile, Auda felt shunted by the Israeli authorities in his own desperate attempt to learn about his son. Much of October seventh is the story of the politics of Israel and Palestine as two separate societies, peoples, and governments. But you went out of your way to describe the social complexities and that interwoven texture among Israeli Jews, Muslims, non Jewish immigrants, and others. Did October seventh teach you something new about that internal dynamic within Israel?

Lee Yaron: Absolutely. One of the things I wanted to do is to show people and and help them understand the diversity in the Israeli society. Society. For example, so many people forget that twenty two percent of the Israelis are Palestinian Israelis, Arab Israelis, who are equal citizens in our society. Among them, the Peruvian community, people who are even serving in the IDF, but are living in horrible conditions and suffering discrimination from the Israeli government for decades. Some of them, like Audah and Amar, are living in this unrecognized Bedouin villages in the Negev desert, sometimes without electricity or running water and without the protection of the iron dome. And they too fell victim to Hamas. And people tend to forget the suffering and the stories of the Palestinian Israelis because their stories are too complicated or because people are having a hard time to think about people with these two identities. And it was so important to these families that will share their stories, and people will know what they've been through. And I think, you know, in so many ways, these people are showing us the way forward. They're showing us that it's possible to be pro Israeli and pro Palestinian. So the story of of Amar and the way he sacrificed his life to save two little Jewish Israeli girls he'd never met before, without hesitating, he was called if he can help them, and he just left his car in the middle of the road and just ran and tried to save the mother and the two little girls. Some of, you know, the most beautiful things that I tried to show in the book, We're all like this extended family even if we're not related to each other. It's one of the things I hope people can can learn from the book and the Israeli society. And then we have so many other minorities and groups in Israel's population that were totally overlooked when we're speaking about October seventh. And I tried to write their stories in the book. For example, stories of Ukrainian refugees in Israel. There's this community of over fifty thousand people who fled Ukraine after February of twenty twenty two and came to Israel with this dream of a safe

place for Jews, only to find themselves fleeing one year later from the Hamas rockets. These people are victims of two wars, and they're struggling, nobody speaking about them. There are stories of Thai and Nepalese students who came to Israel studying agriculture and working in the fields, who were brutally murdered by Hamas. We're forgetting them. Another community people are not speaking about enough is the kibbutznikim, the peace community. In so many ways, Hamas murdered the Israeli peace community. They murdered the people who did the most for Palestinian statehood, who donated money to families in Gaza every month for over twenty years, people who volunteered with Palestinian kids to take them to Israeli hospitals to give them better health care. I checked their voting grade of this Kibbutznikim along the border. Ninety four percent of them voted for left wing and central parties who were supportive of a two state solution, and that day really changed forever the Israeli peace community and what was left from it.

Joshua Holo, Ph.D.: I'd like to get back to that positioning of so many of the kibbutzim on the border with Gaza. But before we get there, I wanna return to the the human experience of and what it represents. He took such personal offense at the unceremonious manner in which the policeman informed him of of the greatest loss of his life, of his son's death. And I find it poignant and telling that there's room for personal offense amidst widespread and devastating tragedy. There's something reassuring to me that we demand a certain kind of sensitivity as a stubborn spark of our humanity even in the very, very worst of times. What do you make of the sheer offense of this tragedy and its consequences? How is the outrage to people's basic human sensibilities shaped Israelis' responses across the political spectrum?

Lee Yaron: In Israel, it still feels like time is frozen. We're still more than one year and a half later reliving this day of ten seven, the shock and the grief, especially when there are still families of hostages waiting for their loved ones to return home and so many people fighting for that in the streets. It feels like we can't start the healing process without it. But we do see some change when I'm looking at the numbers. If a decade ago, when you asked Israelis what they think about peace, sixty percent of them would say they support to state solution. And even a month before the massacre, it was something like fifty percent. But if you check the numbers now, it's only twenty five to thirty percent of the Israelis who say they still believe we can solve it and still believe we can have a better future. I spoke with so many of these families who were advocating for peace, and they say we feel like fools today. We feel like fools because we lost our homes and we lost our kids and we lost everything we believed in. And they don't feel like they have an ally and someone to trust. And, obviously, you hear the same voices from Gaza.

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Joshua Holo, Ph.D.: So let's go back to the political context here, and and you point out how many of the victims of October seventh represented the Israeli left and believed in a two state solution. And you're not alone in pointing out this fact because as as a sociological point of context, it's often been cited as a bitter irony that the Peaceniks were the frontline victims of the Hamas massacre. But I'm not sure if it's really ironic because we know that Hamas has no interest in a two state solution. And, really, even much more importantly, I think, and more revealingly, I think we also know that whereas maybe sixty percent of Israelis would have wanted a two state solution prior to October seventh, we also know that many Palestinians with no terrorist sympathies whatsoever, nevertheless agree that the two state solution is really just a version of Israeli conquest and Palestinian defeat. Is it time for us to come to terms with the fact that the two state solution may or may not be the best solution in the end? But regardless, that it's not really a position of peace. Or if it is, it's at best a version of peace on the conqueror's terms, which isn't very much of a peaceful solution for the defeated.

Lee Yaron: I don't see any other solution, but a two state solution. I don't believe Israelis and Palestinians can live together, unfortunately, in one state. I think a two stage solution is the only one that is acknowledging that both of our people are indigenous to this land and have the right to have their own country. I know so many people, Israelis and Palestinians, who still believe in it and are working towards this future. There can be many, many versions of a two state solution. But, you know, I'm outside naive, and we just spoke about the fact that my generation wasn't even born to this Oslo process. But so many years later, we don't see any alternative.

Joshua Holo, Ph.D.: Much of your career today has to do with journalism and policy, something never too far from politics. Today in Israel, the question of the hostages, even the question of advocating for their return, has become not merely politicized, but shockingly polarized. How are we to understand the fact that Israelis are villainizing fellow Israelis who demand the return of their loved ones?

Lee Yaron: Israel is a country of a mandatory military service. And that means that we have the social contract that says we don't leave anyone behind. This social contract is what allows parents to send their kids at eighteen to the IDF. Many of these people protesting now asking for the hostages to bring them back home are saying don't break this social contract. And they are thinking about the hostages, but they're also thinking about what will happen to Israeli society before we break it. The other side who are against making another deal to bring back hostages in a ceasefire are claiming that Israel can't pay the price of releasing terrorists who murdered many people. For them, the people who are protesting to release the hostages are not thinking about the future and are risking other people. It's a very, very painful dispute in the Israeli society right now. And, you know, you need to remember that when ten seven was the first Shabbat in thirty nine weeks, there there was no protest against this government and and Netanyahu for so many weeks before ten seven, Israelis were protesting about the judicial overhaul or judicial reform and the the government's attempts to weaken our democracy. It felt like we were in the the verge of a civil war before ten seven. So now one year and a half later, I think we're in a way closer to a civil war than we were on October sixth. The the hate that we see between the Israeli left and center to the Israeli right wing, the the way people speak about some of these hostages, telling them that if they're leftist, they should go back to Gaza, seeing every call for peace or acknowledgment of the Palestinian suffering as as not being loyal to Israel is just horrible. And, unfortunately, this government is encouraging it.

Joshua Holo, Ph.D.: The complexity and the polarization is not unique to Israel. In June of twenty four, you reported for Haaretz on Columbia University's attempt to investigate the phenomenon of antisemitism on campus. And you described competing or ill resolved definitions of antisemitism and divergent assessments of the gravity of the situation. Presumably, the deeply human stories of your book, ten seven, might help to cut through the legal and political jockeying in favor of the resonance of shared experience and and hopefully empathy. But I wonder, have you encountered either among Palestinians or Israelis examples of people's capacity not to be touched by empathy and other people's stories, but in fact, by a disturbing capacity to resist a given story's humanity?

Lee Yaron: I believe empathy is the only way forward. And when I'm telling these stories, I I can see it, you know, whether I've been book touring the US and Europe for most of this year. The book came out in seven languages. And when we're telling this complicated stories with with the history and criticism and love and complexity, we see that a dialogue starts. I can give you one example from a story of a young man named Shaha Temach. Shaha was a peace activist, a man who were volunteering for the peace organization, Breaking the Silence in Hebron. And he was living in Kibbutz Beri, one of these very peaceful communities. And on the morning of ten seven, when he understood so many terrorists entered the kibbutz, he was among the first people to take a weapon and try and

go and defend his neighbors while the IDF wasn't there. He locked his wife and two little kids in the mamat, in the shelter in their house, told them to put the refrigerator on the door, and he stood outside of the clinic of Kibbutz Berrie where some doctors and paramedics were trying to save the injured of Berrie for eight hours, calling the IDF again and again. And when he ran out of bullets and he saw the hamasterer is coming, he put his hands up, and he said, I'm not your enemy. Please don't shoot me. I interviewed the survivors from the clinic, and they told me it was Shahar's last words. And while writing his story and speaking with his family, especially with his father, Doron Sema. Doron said, you know, I want people to to remember Shahar and who he was and what he believed in. And I want people to remember the story of Kibbutz Beri and what we believe in. And I also want people to understand our history and remember my mother. And his mother, Carmela Temach, was just a girl, thirteen years old, when she survived the Farhut pogrom in Iraq, in Baghdad in nineteen forty one, when two hundred of her Arab neighbors murdered one hundred and eighty of their Jewish neighbors. Carmela survived. And a few years later, when when Israel was founded, Carmela was one of the these first people to to make Aliyah and was one of the founders of this kibbutzim to try and establish a safe place for her family. Like Carmela, so many more than a million Jews needed to flee or to leave Arab countries when Israel was founded. And, you know, Israel is we come from so many places around the world, and this day of ten seven is really opened for so many people, this ancient wound, this feeling of this multigenerational trauma for so many of the families I interviewed. It wasn't the first time they lost someone of their family for being Jewish. So a lot of people are now thinking about this day, and Israelis are rediscovering the fact that they are Jewish, and they're thinking about this day, not just as part of Israel history. They try to put, you know, the an end of the the experiences of Jews in the diaspora and the pogroms and the persecution, but as part of Jewish history. And, yes, I find that when we speak about the complexity of both of our stories of of Jews and Palestinians and the suffering the two people have been through, I find that it's very helpful, and I believe it's the only way forward acknowledging each other's humanity.

Joshua Holo, Ph.D.: Tell us what surprised you in writing this book.

Lee Yaron: What we just spoke about, this ancient wound and the fact that people are still living it, the fact that it's been three generations, but in so many families I interviewed, if they came from Arab countries or the former Soviet Union or people who came to Israel after the Holocaust, they've all been speaking about ten seven as this day when when it wasn't just a physical barrier that was crashed, when when the the fence was broken, that it was, in so many ways, their dream of generations that was broken. And so many people are asking themselves, what is the way forward? What is a safe place for Jews? I heard it from families who are in Israel for generations and generations and from the boy who just

fled Ukraine now and came to Israel a few months before the war and already moved three times in the last three years trying to seek for a safe place. And we're seeing so many Israelis now leaving Israel. The last year we have data for twenty twenty four, there is a record number of more than eighty thousand Israelis who left the country seeking for other places. And in the same time, we're seeing more and more people, especially in North America who are now opening Aliyah files saying they don't feel safe, or they don't feel like they belong anymore where they are, and they wanna go to Israel to look for a better future. So I've really learned that this is the question that so many of us are asking right now.

Joshua Holo, Ph.D.: Well, Lee Aron, thank you so much for joining us on the College Commons podcast. Congratulations on your National Jewish Book Award. It was a pleasure to speak with you.

Lee Yaron: Thank you so much for having me.

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