

'Even a candle is a big light in the darkness'

The Israeli stand-up comic Noam Shuster-Eliassi, who's known in the Arab world too, asks people to stop ignoring the grieving on the other side

Tamar Kaplansky

On October 6, Noam Shuster- Eliassi's life seemed particularly good. In August, her stand-up show received a prestigious four-star rating at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, and in September, out of nowhere, after undergoing fertility-preservation treatment (egg-freezing), the now-37-year-old comedian who had mined her bachelorette status for comic material as much as she did the Jewish-Palestinian conflict, met a guy. In fact, that Friday, her parents came to Tel Aviv to meet him for the first time. The next day, however, everything changed, even for someone who had managed to reach millions of people in Israel and in the Arab world, conveying complex messages about Jewish-Palestinian partnership.

"With the third air-raid siren, it was clear to me that we were going to Neve Shalom." A dinner meeting in the city with her parents turned into a week-long stay at their house, she says. Neve Shalom (Wahat al Salam in Arabic) is the Jewish-Arab community Shuster- Eliassi's parents have been living in for the last 30 years, ever since they decided "to raise us in a social experiment," as she describes it. (Her mother is an Iranian-born Jew and her father a Jerusalem native born to Holocaust survivors from Romania.) "If there is a place to be during times of crisis, that's it," she says. "With all the difficulties, there is some degree of sanity maintained there." And on October 7, she explains, she "realized right away that something very different was happening."

How did you know?

"Because I consume media in both Hebrew and Arabic, I realized that we were entering a situation in which the two sides were experiencing what was happening in completely different ways. I felt it landing on top of me, feeling that reality was splitting into two parallel ones, that it wasn't certain that there was a way – I hate the word 'bridge,' but always pride myself on having a way to be a bridge, due to my fluency in both languages and knowing both narratives, as well as the jokes. Crap, it all went down the drain that very second."

Like so many Israelis that Saturday, Shuster-Eliassi found herself

over-whelmed by events. "All of a sudden, I'm getting a lot of messages. Moria [Zerachia] , the comedian-playwright who writes my scripts, said that in her family they were trying to locate her cousin, who was at the rave party. She sent his picture so I could share it. Then there was a message about [director Osnat] Trabelsi's nephew, and one from Maoz [Yinon, the peace activist whose two parents had been murdered], who posted a death notice. These are my friends. I'm involved in it all day, while at the same time I am aware of the parallel reality. On one hand, female Palestinian followers were writing, asking me not to change my political views because of what happened; on the other hand, I saw posts in Arabic making fun of it all, as if it hadn't happened. For the first time in my life, I was encountering the same levels of propaganda and inanity and denial on all sides. It was a total shock. What can you possibly say in such a situation?"

Reaching out to MBS

It seems that nothing in Shuster-Eliassi's life taught her to remain silent. Not her childhood at the dual-nationality community northwest of Jerusalem, not her acting studies in New York, not her work running a United Nations pro-gram, and not her physical presence, or the fact that, she says, she has "the name of an Ashkenazi pilot and the body of a Persian Amazon."

In 2017, the local branch of Inter-peace, the organization founded by the United Nations to promote peace-building efforts at the individual level between citizens in countries around the world, shut down. Shuster-Eliassi had led the program in Israel for five years. Now, she abandoned "diplomacy" in exchange for a style of work in which things are said much more bluntly. She became a stand-up comedian. Her pointed messages, her self-mocking humor and her ability to do this in three languages, brought her to stages in Tel Aviv, East Jerusalem, Rwanda and Berlin. In 2018, she was crowned "Best New Jewish Comedian of the Year" in a competition held by the Jewish community of London.

What turned her into a household name in the Arab world, however, was a joke she made on the Arabic edition of the news on the Israeli TV news channel i24. In 2019, against the backdrop of warming relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, Shuster-Eliassi related that she was 32 years old and still single, adding that her grandmother and aunts were urging her to get married, no matter to whom. Aiming high, she said she had set her sights on Mo-hammed bin Salman, the Saudi crown prince ("He is very tall," she told the host). She turned to MBS on air, telling him she was

setting up a political party, "Ne'emeh," the Arabic form of her name, aimed at achieving peace in the Middle East, and would be very happy if he supported the party, or her.

When she woke up the next day, she discovered that she'd gone viral. "It was totally insane. At the UN I felt I was influencing maybe 20 people, and suddenly, with one joke about normalizing relations with Saudi Arabia, I reach 20 million," she says.

'If there is a place to be during times of crisis,' says Shuster-Eliassi, it's Neve Shalom. 'With all the difficulties, there is some degree of sanity maintained there.'

That joke took her further than she could imagine. She was invited that same year to Harvard Divinity School, which offered her a fellowship to develop a stand-up show, which she was to perform in clubs around the United States. When she told Lebanese-Canadian filmmaker Amber Fares (maker of the documentary "Speed Sisters," about the first Arab-female race car-driving team) about it, Fares took out a camera and started following her.

But then came 2020 with its lock-downs, and Shuster-Eliassi had to fold up her dreams and jokes and return to Israel, or more precisely to quarantine at the first hotel for arrivals diagnosed with COVID-19. The miserable return and the strange fellowship with other infected people at the hotel were documented by Fares, who was joined by filmmaker Rachel Leah Jones (co-director of "Advocate," about the human-rights attorney Lea Tsemel), as writer and producer. Some of this documentation appeared on Al Jazeera and in The New Yorker, in a short called "Reckoning with Laughter."

When the world returned to normal, Shuster-Eliassi began appearing on stages – and TV screens – again, with a regular guest segment on Guy Zohar's popular Channel 11 TV show and a part in the satirical show "Shu Esmo," on the Israeli Arabic-language Makan Channel, in which she mocked the Abraham Accords. At the same time, she began performing the stand-up piece she had begun writing during her Harvard fellowship, which she titled "Co-existence, My Ass." "I was right," she says today, with a sad smile.

Surviving Dizengoff

During the first tumultuous weeks of the Gaza war, Shuster-Eliassi found herself in uncharted waters emotionally. She found it difficult to find the right words. This inability to speak out publicly, she discovered, was not

well received by some. "That entire Saturday I was caught up in the calls, the announcements and the terror," she relates. "In the evening, someone, a Jewish-American woman, wrote me on Instagram, telling me that the fact that I had not yet posted anything about my brothers and sisters was putting to shame the Jewish people and the heritage of Iranian Jews. That was the moment I decided I was going to say something, come what may."

Were you afraid to express yourself before that?

"It wasn't fear. It was the feeling that there was no way of saying something that would be understood by both sides. Everyone retreated to their own corner so quickly."

But you're used to invective, with people calling you a traitor, telling you to go to you Gaza, and so forth, aren't you?

"Of course, who isn't? There isn't a leftist who hasn't been told to go to Gaza. So many people have wished for leftists to go to Gaza and, what do you know, now it's full of leftists. It's too early for that, no?"

Yes, but it's a good joke.

"I'm used to nasty messages, but this one broke my heart. Did she think I wasn't posting on social media because I was having fun? So many people I know from so many different circles had been hurt, I myself was in shock – how could someone think I was just sitting back, not caring?" Her eyes fill with tears. "If there's something that really broke my heart, it's the separation of our grief and compassion [as Jews from that of Palestinians]. I don't need to prove to anyone my record of political activity in order for me to be allowed to look for my friends, to mourn the people I knew."

Do you mean that Palestinians were also angry with you?

"Someone who was a friend said to me: 'I've gone over what you've been posting. It's very problematic, especially now because we're going to be attacked.' He wasn't sharing my grief. He was already concerned that he was about to get screwed. Another [Palestinian] friend told me, 'I'm mad at you, and I don't even know why. I looked at your [Instagram] stories and everything was ...' And I say, was what? People I know were kidnapped? Is there anyone who doesn't retreat into his own grief? Do you think I lack the political savvy to know that they are also victims of this stinking, stupid

fucking failure? Do you think I believe that there's some kind of Islamic terrorism and that I am part of the propaganda that Israel is going to use to justify what it's about to do? Definitely not. I have Palestinian friends whom I was able to get through to [emotionally] this time. And those friendships are now stronger. But there are other friends that I lost. They couldn't see me beyond the public statements and politics."

What were they supposed to see?

"That I'm a human being and in mourning and that I am pained by the people who had been activists for decades and opposed what the government was doing and dedicated their lives to fighting the occupation – and in the end, they were brutally murdered," she says, crying. "And, now their deaths are being used to prove something they were strongly opposed to. I could also easily see myself in such a situation – what would have happened if I had died in the attack."

That's not just a throwaway line. On April 7, 2022, Shuster-Eliassi was on a date at a hamburger place on Tel Aviv's Dizengoff Street, when a terrorist opened fire at a nearby bar. Like dozens of other people, she fled and hid in a stairwell for hours. For months afterward, she suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. "Trauma is the best comedy material, but April 7 was not funny," was the title of a column she wrote about the experience for The New York Times.

"Being at the scene of death is some-thing that burns in your soul," she says today. "You don't go back to being the same person. Months later I still imagined myself as dead."

You know what people said about Vivian Silver [the veteran peace activist murdered in her home in Kibbutz Be'eri on October 7], "You see, it was her Palestinian friends who killed her."

"Exactly, when someone like Vivian Silver is murdered, rightists come along and say, "You see, even her.' You understand? Leftists aren't tolerated, we are an embarrassment, traitors who should flee to Gaza, that is, until our deaths can somehow be used for propaganda purposes. The most shocking thing I saw was that some wrote on an [unused] artillery shell, 'In honor of Vivian Silver – may God avenge her blood – who believed in peace, and still they murdered her.' That's horrible. Why use her memory that way? I spoke with her son Jonathan on the podcast ["Political Date," the Hebrew show she co-hosts], and he said: 'My mother's death didn't prove that she was wrong; on the contrary, it proved that she was right. There's no justification for what

happened to my mother, but there are circumstances.' It's amazing that even when those who have been personally affected by this disaster say this, there's no one to listen."

How do you explain that?

"People didn't give us a minute to mourn, to take in what had happened. The government was afraid of there being silence, that we would turn our anger on them, so they didn't wait, they took advantage of the chaos to go straight into a campaign of revenge. Let's bring out the big guns, call up everyone for reserve duty, so that the people don't have a second to think – let's go. It's clear that there is no operational plan here and that the people who got us into this situation are not the ones who are going to get us out of it. But you see everyone putting on uniforms, picking up their weapons and leaving, and you say, that's it, there's no one to talk to.

"... The pain and suffering, even now, is shattering. There's no justification for it. But the silencing of criticism, the fact that from the beginning it was prohibited, almost a taboo, to talk about the fact that they [the Palestinians] are also victims, and about how lazy our leadership was for so many years and about the fact that nothing good will come out of the war – that I don't accept. I will speak out. I will talk about who fed the Hamas monster and how what is happening now in Gaza will only bring destruction upon us."

That is the reason she agreed to be interviewed now, even though she's not selling a new show. "I am shocked by the silence. Not only by artists but everyone. Silence and silencing and blindly following the government. How can you be silent? Tens of thousands of bodies in Gaza, hunger, thirst, disease. We must talk, first so that they stop the killing. It is neither radical nor complicated, it's the minimum. What is radical about wanting to stop killing, to make agreements that will bring people back here alive? How many more children's bodies do we need?"

What is your response to those who say that Israel needs to destroy Hamas?

'People end wars, protests end wars, mothers who are fed up with sacrificing their children end wars, because they understand that lazy leaders who prefer to send the mothers' sons as cannon fodder will not end the war, so it's up to them to do it.'

"What does it mean to 'destroy' Hamas? Is that an operative plan? A

plan of action? That's a strategy?"

The government and the army say yes.

"Okay, so far, that hasn't been proven. There's no justification for what happened to us on October 7, for the brutality and cruelty. No, no justification. And, there's no justification for what we're now doing in Gaza. Millions of homeless people without water and food. The Jews in Israel must understand that while they are deep in their grief and saying that this isn't the time for empathy, 'Don't talk to me about the other side' – this is the time when things are being done that we will not be able to undo. We're using our pain and trauma to create a reality from which there will be no return."

Living the alternative

The interview takes place in a café, not far from her home in Jaffa. A month ago, she related on Instagram that she was getting engaged. "Yes, it happened fast," she says, smiling, and then adds, mockingly, in English, "'When you know, you know.' Have you run across those types? Wow, I really hated that sentence. I could have smacked people who said it."

Every once in a while, a woman stops next to us, sometimes a few women. They exchange greetings in Arabic with Shuster-Eliassi, in some cases also a hug, and admire the ring. Nothing unusual here, just prosaic chit-chat in the neighborhood coffee shop. But the very fact that it's happening reflects the depth of the everyday separation between most other Jews and Arabs in the Israeli space, a reminder of how irregular this regularity is. It's not just the Arabic, which Shuster-Eliassi speaks like a second mother tongue. It's a deep sense, self-evident and transparent for her, and so exceptional for Jews in Israel, of genuine equality between her and those who stop by our table. Not as a declaration, as simple reality.

"It's really not a symbol, I don't symbolize anything," she says. "I don't deny the absolute separation that exists outside. But from my point of view, it's something I feel in my DNA; not to talk about the alternative, but to live it. Otherwise I will get lost within the hatred and the separation. From my point of view, this coexistence is taken for granted. The fight has to be for something a lot bigger, for the balance of forces, so that people will have access to the same rights and the same resources. Coexistence is meant to be its by-product, its sweet aftereffect. Not to speak in slogans – 'a common destiny' – but concretely: about what the policy is and what the leadership is and what we're willing to give up so that we can live on this soil as equals."

The question is whether we want to live here as equals. You're talking about full civil equality, about a state of all its citizens, but the Jewish population in Israel doesn't want that equality.

"I think that if we don't live on this soil as equals, we will not live on this soil [at all]. All the billions and all the most sophisticated technology and the best-trained army and the highest and most giant fence – nothing will succeed in protecting us. That has proved, and is now proving, itself to be true. All the blood that is being shed now is a disgrace. Every person who dies, goes for no reason. After all, it was clear from the start of this war that in the end there will be a cease-fire. The fact that Hamas is dictating the rules and not vice versa – I don't understand how the government is using that as a defense."

Please explain.

"I don't care about Hamas. What interests me is our government, which is very much supported by the strongest countries in the world, which has the ability to do tremendous things glob-ally... As long as the captives haven't been returned, and soldiers are dying for no reason – and from 'friendly fire,' at that – the responsibility lies with the state and with my horrible government. Israel needs to see to it that its citizens are not left there for one more minute [than is necessary]. Instead, they are just rotting away there and along the way the IDF's rescue operations failed. Instead of turning over every stone on political and diplomatic paths to get them back alive, they have sacrificed both hostages and soldiers, bringing them back in coffins.

"What is all this blood for?" she adds. "For something that is clearly going to happen anyway in the end? There is already so much death in this territory, from the sea to the river, the soil is already saturated with blood. We are supposedly continuing to live, but we are living within an ongoing disaster, which could have been reduced, which could have been averted. It's so insane that in the end there are cease-fire agreements on the table. Suddenly you get a push [notification] on the phone that [Hamas political leader Ismail] Haniyeh received the [draft of an] agreement and 'is going over it.' Well, how about that? So there are mediators, there are channels, there is dialogue! So why [all the death]?"

'My left-wing 'children' are in deep-freeze at Ichilov [Hospital]. Do you know what a successful round I had? Thirty-four eggs in one round. That's already

demography that can threaten Bibi's continued rule in another 18 years.'

People will tell you that Israel has the right to defend itself.

"I long for the day when we will implement that right. What's happening now is not self-defense, but the opposite. Twenty-one soldiers [killed] in a day, families destroyed, is that defending us? People also need to understand that in the same way that the Holocaust is for us an intergenerational trauma and a trigger, the Nakba is the intergenerational trauma for Palestinians. I see my friends in Jaffa who are here only because their grandfather by chance didn't get on the boat in 1948 [referring to the expulsion of Jaffa's Arabs via the sea to Gaza and Beirut]. They're not just watching the news and seeing families in tents undergoing the Nakba again – they are seeing themselves," Shuster-Eliassi says tearfully. "It's not some far-off place where you can look and say, 'Oy, those poor people,' and move on. They tell me, 'If my grandfather had boarded the boat, that would be me, those would be my children.'"

You know that many Jews are not willing to hear what you're saying, certainly not now.

"Obviously. I have Jewish girlfriends who have become impermeable. A friend from East Jerusalem told me that Jewish girls aren't willing to listen to her. They tell her, 'Leave me alone, I'm in mourning.' But what does that mean – she's mourning, too, you know. She has family in Gaza, she's mourning. Only they're not capable of seeing that. The emotional languages are to-tally separate. When it's the mourning of your people, it's paralyzing. And to be able to feel at the same time the mourning and the grief of those who are supposedly on the other side, that's tough. To understand that one act of mourning does not need to come at the expense of another's mourning, is an emotional language that people who are caught up in nationalism are not able to speak."

As Shuster-Eliassi sees it, Palestinian citizens are not only denied the right to mourn by the Jewish public, that mourning is often perceived as support for Hamas. "I don't know how my Palestinian friends who have family in Gaza even manage to function. And they're not even allowed to express it. In the best case, people don't want to hear about it, and in the less good case, if you write something, you are liable to be arrested.

"People need to understand," she continues, "that we are living here with the offspring of those who remained here after the Nakba of 1948. They are our neighbors, our doctors, and also the people we treat with racism and

don't vote for the Knesset and arrest for the type of Facebook post Jews write freely and even worse. They are part of our life, for good and for ill. So why does it seem to us that what the Palestinians are already calling the Nakba of 2023 will not become part of the fabric of our life? We are perpetrating it. We are writing another tragic story for ourselves – displacement, refugeehood, hunger. All this death, and the settlers still want to move there? That is their vision? On a mass grave?"

You are third-generation [to the Holocaust] yourself, right?

"Yes. My father's parents were Holocaust survivors from Romania. My grandmother was in a labor camp. She lived with very significant PTSD, she was silent a lot of the time. I watched the trial in The Hague [at the International Criminal Court, in which South Africa accused Israel of committing genocide], and I suddenly saw it from the side: the granddaughter of the survivor of a Nazi labor camp sitting across from [the television, listening to] the terrible quotations attributed to our elected officials. The Hague is the nightmare of nightmares. Not that we were put on trial, but the things that were revealed there. The numbers of bodies, of the hungry. We can do hasbara [public diplomacy] until tomorrow, and send [Israeli actress and Zionist advocate] Noa Tishby with a million necklaces [in the shape of a map] of Greater Israel. There's really no way to defend it."

Of the conference held on January 28 in Jerusalem whose participants called for Israel's (re-)settlement of the Gaza Strip, she says, "There is some-thing almost astonishing about how it's all flaunted openly. In the demonstrations on Kaplan [Street in Tel Aviv] against the [Netanyahu government's] judicial overthrow, people like me, who insisted on talking about the occupation, were told: 'It's not relevant right now.' We were silenced, they said it was 'off-putting.' And then we get this messianic vision, with a population transfer at its center, smack in the face. This is what we warned against. That you can't talk about democracy for Jews only. That conference is becoming the face of Israel, it's no longer on the margins and it's not some imaginary fear. There are no more warning signs and hints, it's there for all of us to see. While the captives are rotting in Gaza, they are planning their settlement enterprise in Gaza. Without shame."

Shuster-Eliassi is infuriated when she hears Israelis say that the residents of the Gaza Strip support Hamas, or in the version of right-wing Mideast commentator Eliahu Yusian and certain leaders: "No one in Gaza is innocent."

"Forget Yusian – in the social networks people who don't even term themselves right-wingers are saying that," Shuster-Eliassi notes. "What

stories we tell ourselves in order to live quietly with what is happening there, so we won't have to question the Israeli response, heaven forbid. You know, when arguments like that are used about us – that we're all Ben-Gvir and we're all racists and look at that fascist country – we don't accept it. And you know what, let's say the all do support Hamas. Let's say that every Palestinian expression of solidarity is support for Hamas and a survey was conducted showing that the Gazans are in favor of a Hamas victory over Israel – does that mean they deserve to die? We don't feel solidarity and unity during this crisis? We don't stand behind the leadership and the war and the killing and the 'Together we will win' without a word of criticism? So, do we deserve to be condemned to death?

"And let's say you're an Israeli who doesn't give two hoots about the situation in Gaza," she adds. "I am deliberately exaggerating in order to get into the head of these people. Let's say you don't have a drop of compassion for the Palestinians and you don't care in the least that tens of thousands are dying, most of whom even the army says are not involved. So that's it, you are forgoing the captives? So say it. Don't do 'hashtag Bring them home,' because there is no 'Bring them home,' if that's the talk. If there are no innocent people in Gaza, then, *yallah*, kill them all."

'Disillusioned' from what?

Last November, the judges of the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam chose Fares and Jones' "Coexistence, My Ass" as the winner of the IDFA Forum Rough Cut Award for most promising work in progress. It is scheduled for general release in 2025. Shuster-Eliassi, the film's subject, stayed back in Israel to work on her podcast. "It was hard for me to be happy then," she says. The podcast served her in her effort to emerge from the muteness and paralysis.

"Everything around was revenge, revenge, and I felt like I was drowning, that I had to hear other voices. That's how the idea came up of holding conversations with people who were hurt on October 7 and weren't on a revenge craze." Among her guests on the pod-cast have been Maoz Inon, who lost both of his parents at Kibbutz Netiv Ha'asara; Ziv Stahl, who survived the massacre at Kibbutz Kfar Azza; and Mohammed Darawshe, whose nephew Awad Darawshe, a paramedic, stayed to assist the wounded at the Nova rave and was murdered. "Sitting with those people once a week in the studio restored the oxygen to my lungs," Shuster-Eliassi says.

In what sense?

“In many senses. Very quickly I realized that if I was barely talking, the Palestinians in Israel were on mute. I saw people persecuting my friends, monitoring their posts, interpreting their every word in the worst way possible, like in the shocking case of Dalal Abu Amneh [an Israeli singer who was arrested in the wake of an Instagram post and has been hounded ever since]. An obsession with condemnation sprang up: Who condemned [the Hamas attacks] and who didn’t condemn, and why did you not condemn? And also feigned innocence by asking, ‘What’s the problem with condemning?’”

What is the problem, actually?

“When you demand that someone condemn an atrocity like that, you assume from the outset that they haven’t already condemned. They are automatically suspected of not condemning. It’s casting doubt on their basic humanity, and that is not a place from which to launch a dialogue. Why are Arabs immediately suspected? Are my friends in Haifa, Jaffa, Nazareth just sitting at home enjoying observing the atrocities? How can you call into question the basic humanity of so many people? This whole preoccupation – who’s with us, who’s [publicly] condemning, as though these Arabs have some hidden agenda, maybe they’re a little bit happy at the price the Jews are paying – is shocking.

“And it’s clear that even before the scale of the October 7 atrocity was known, they sat in their homes frightened, because they knew right off that it would blow up in their faces. To this day people are occupied with condemnations, instead of coping with our disintegration here. The people I spoke with on the podcast, who personally underwent the atrocities and paid the most terrible price, didn’t talk about [condemnations] at all. The question didn’t interest them. They didn’t cast doubt on anyone’s humanity, because they saw with their own eyes that Bedouin and Palestinian citizens of Israel also paid the price. After all, it’s clear that this was a collective atrocity that happened to everyone here.”

But even so there were some who expressed doubt about the gravity of the atrocities.

“Look, I also have friends on the Palestinian side who said, ‘Noam, it didn’t really happen, the captives are alright.’ During the first cease-fire, I received videos showing how clean and shiny the returning captives looked. I told them, ‘Friends, I have room for only one moral army, don’t stick me with another moral army.’ It’s that illusion, which I know so well as an Israeli, of

clinging to and wanting to believe that we are fine people, that we are humane, we're giving the Palestinian kid that bottle of water. Like our denials, the Palestinians, too, want to believe about themselves that [they're only involved in] freedom-fighting and only by moral means. It's so desperate, that effort. And when it happens with a boom, from the most victimized and powerless place, they do all they can not to believe. 'But there's no proof,' 'It can't be.' And I say: Obviously, it can be. Are you special or something?

"It's like all the 'disillusioned' types. Which detail of the story surprised you so much? The rape and the cruelty and the horrible things – hello, news flash, men with power do appalling things on a battlefield. It's not something new in the history of the human race, and Hamas didn't invent it. I was in Rwanda in 2009, and my world collapsed when I saw their Yad Vashem [equivalent]."

Why?

"I entered a room where there were testimonies of murderers who talked about the process that led them to do what they did. Teenagers who were there, who are all survivors of the genocide and HIV positive in the wake of the atrocities, said, 'Noam, it helps us recover. In what way? Because we understand that we are not different. It happened here and in Namibia and in Cambodia, and to Jews and to Native Americans.' But we in Israel refuse to see the process of the events, the fact that we are not all that distinct."

That sense of exceptionalism, Shuster-Eliassi avers, is detrimental to us. "All this talk, as though the world doesn't recognize our suffering, it's not true. Down with that. The biggest newspapers published reports about the rapes, they continue to interview the survivors and to keep the subject alive. On October 7, the whole world saw what was done to us and was shocked. But then they also saw the country's response and [heard] what the elected officials and the people were saying: 'Harbu darbu' [Arabic phrase meaning "war strike" or "mayhem," the title of popular post-October 7 song], God save us. Our response to the October 7 disaster should shame and embarrass any human being, but we are completely disconnected from it. We don't have any real idea of what is happening in Gaza and what the world is seeing."

That disconnect, she maintains, allows Israel to continue to entrench itself in a posture of self-victimization. "So the whole world is against us, and every protest against Israel is a violent, antisemitic onslaught. Are protests outside of Starbucks a problem? Bella Hadid and her followers are the

problem? The BBC is the enemy? A few, you know, gender-fluid students? Who in Hollywood condemned and who didn't condemn – is that the issue? Not a government that can't take responsibility for October 7? Not a reality in which, a few weeks ago, the Hostage and Missing Families Forum had to issue a statement explaining that they weren't the ones who blocked the Ayalon [Highway]? What the hell – go out and block it! No one in this government is going to bring your family back. They didn't take responsibility for the abduction, so why should they bring them back?

"Instead of not playing by the rules anymore, the forum publishes a clarification – anything so as not to upset someone. That's what should be bothering us, not the condemnations game. The fact that the captives are hostages in the hands of a criminal government. How is it that we went into the streets after Bibi fired [Defense Minister Yoav] Gallant and we aren't on the streets for this? It's tragic what's happening here. And very scary."

Are you afraid there will be an expanded, regional war?

"Obviously. Is there anyone who isn't afraid?"

There are people in the north of the country who are calling for that war.

"Tamar, I am against war. I don't know if I mentioned that."

What gives you consolation?

"I feel that I am a little like a beggar. Collecting crumbs of hope. Whatever there is, I'll take it. There was a day when I was very sad, and I wrote to Golshifteh Farahani [Iranian actress who was exiled from her country after appearing in an American film]. We've known each other since 2016, when she came here to shoot a film directed by Eran Riklis. She was at my parents' place and she sat with my grandmother and they sang songs in Farsi. She was interrogated for seven hours when she came into Israel. She told me, 'Now I understand that Israel established the Savak [secret police during the shah's reign, which Israel helped to set up and train] – I underwent an interrogation [in Israel] like I did in Iran.'

"I wrote to her in the second week of the war to ask how she keeps hope alive. She wrote back, 'You can't fight the dark by sinking into the dark. You need to keep on glowing; even a candle is a big light in the darkness.' Do you get it? Someone whom the Islamists expelled from her homeland, who experienced oppression and fascism and lives in exile and continues to do art, writes telling me not to sink into the dark. I felt that, no matter what,

I wouldn't let this moment be extinguished. I find hope wherever it is. In the relations with my friends that grew closer. In the fact that my mother and her neighbors are dreaming daily dreams together."

Meaning?

"When I became engaged, the Palestinian mothers who raised me in the [Neve Shalom] community called to congratulate me." Shuster-Eliassi catches her breath. Her eyes fill up again. "While they are mourning for family members and for the people whose lives are being destroyed in Gaza, they call to congratulate me and they rejoice in my joy and they're planning how they will decorate, together with my mother, the trays that will hold the sweets at my henna ceremony. That makes me even sadder. This [Neve Shalom] is such a small place, unrepresentative, but it could be

'We are living here with the offspring of those who remained here after the Nakba of 1948. They're our neighbors, our doctors, and also the people we treat with racism, don't vote for, and arrest for a Facebook post of the kind that Jews write freely and even worse.'

representative. There is nothing special about me. And the fact that I am in a place where there is nothing I can do with the example that succeeded, is very painful."

You mean, because you have the knowledge that it's possible?

"Yes. There is a great deal of despair, but I think that the hope is simply there. There's no other choice. Hope also resides in establishing a family, in believing in love. I feel that to stop and choose one person is a brave act. I am proud of myself for doing it."

Being a single woman was a significant part of your stand-up routine.

"Wow, do you know how many girls wrote me when I announced my engagement? 'What, are you abandoning us? What, did you really find someone?' When the war started, Rona Tamir, my writer in New York, told me, 'Fine, the whole part about the conflict is out, but at least you still have the jokes about being single.' When she heard I'd become engaged, she called and said, 'Now you really have thrown everything into the garbage.'"

'I'm choosing you'

Like in the cliché, love arrived when Shuster-Eliassi didn't expect it. "In the summer of 2022, I underwent a process of fertility preservation, egg freezing. I'd heard what was said in the Knesset two years ago, in a session headed by [Labor MK] Naama Lazimi, when this possibility was discussed for the first time as preventive treatment that can spare women fertility treatments in the future, and I realized that I had a tool that enable me to take charge of the situation. Afterward I also did some snooping around about joint parentage. I went to this agency, and sat facing a man who told me how he and his male partner have two daughters in joint parentage, and he looked at me like I was a product. 'Honey, you're 36, do you think some prince is going to show up and you'll walk off together into the sunset? Get out of that movie.' He told me how women of 39 or 40 come to them, but me, I was 36, and 'People will jump at you, honey, don't delay.' And I thought, hey, [joint parenting] is an option, but I can also establish a family tomorrow in the way I choose. I felt really strong."

Now you were under less pressure.

"In hindsight, I understand how this stance, of wanting a child and being afraid of the biological clock, can weaken you in a relationship, make you stay in places that aren't good enough. It's a dramatic change for me. I am not chasing anything, I'm with you because I want to be, and I'm choosing you."

You have a plan B?

"Exactly. My left-wing children are in deep-freeze at Ichilov [Hospital]. Do you know what a successful round I had? Thirty-four eggs in one round. That's already demography that can threaten Bibi's continued rule in another 18 years. It was funny, too. I get to Ichilov and the Haredi nurse says to me, 'Terrific, you came on time, and this is so important, every Jewish woman today has to do it,' something like that, and I'm already squirming with unease in the chair. Then she looks in the computer and says emotionally, 'Wow! And the most amazing doctor in the world will do it for you: Prof. Fouad Azzam!' I split a gut laughing.

"Do you get it? Life, fertility, death – we [Jews and Arabs] are intertwined with one another all the time. That's not some mystical statement – it's concrete. It makes no difference how much they try and with what means, separation is impossible. Everything that happens to one, happens to the other. The illusion that one has no rights and the other lives

in tranquility on a kibbutz, the fantasy of 'managing the conflict,' has been shattered. If one suffers, the other suffers. That's why everything we wish for the Palestinians, we need to know that it's also a wish for ourselves."

What you're saying is going to rile up a lot of people. Are you considering that it might hurt you, affect your livelihood? That you won't get invited to work, won't be cast for parts?

"I think the price of shutting up is more onerous and harder for me, and there's more of a loss in it for me than what might result or not result from my speaking. All the people and artists who are sitting around and waiting for it to pass, for some spirit that has nothing to do with us to appear and make it go away, or people who say, 'I feel pain for the innocent people, but there's no choice' – no, we do have a choice. People end wars, protests end wars, mothers who are fed up with sacrificing their children end wars, because they understand that lazy leaders who prefer to send the mothers' sons as cannon fodder will not end the war, so it's up to them to do it.

"Such things have happened in the world. With my own eyes I saw people coming out of worse situations than ours and succeeding in changing the course of history. But it has to end immediately. To save whoever can be saved. There need to be more voices calling for an end this madness."