

OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

Trauma Is the Best Comedy Material, but April 7 Was Not Funny

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By Noam Shuster Eliassi

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I was eating a burger on Dizengoff Street in busy central Tel Aviv one night when I found myself [fleeing a Palestinian shooter](#) who had opened fire at a bar nearby. Since that day, I have imagined getting killed constantly. My therapist tells me I have PTSD.

When comedians encounter trauma, we typically hear an internal voice telling us: Good, more material. I heard that voice when the Covid-19 pandemic derailed the prestigious U.S.-based fellowship I was enrolled in and sent me home to Israel; I heard it when Covid made me terribly sick. At the time, I thought: Who needs lungs? At least I gained some Instagram followers.

And as a stand-up comedian performing in Arabic, Hebrew and English, I'm used to drawing enormous — often explosive — attention in the Middle East. I was raised in a sociopolitical experiment, in the only intentionally mixed Jewish-Arab village, [Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam](#). I've made material out of that, too. I also, naturally, became a

peace activist. And yet I have long said that if I really want to make a political impact, I need to write jokes.

Earlier this year, I had the dubious joy of a video I made going viral: I performed a song in Arabic on an Israeli-produced Arabic-speaking satire show [mocking the Abraham Accords](#), which gave Israeli citizens access to Dubai. And a few years back, it seemed the [entire Arab world learned about me](#) when I joked on Arabic television that I was still unmarried and maybe Mohammed bin Salman was available. (I'm still unmarried — wink emoji to cute male readers.)

And yet my life is a paradox; if the conflict between Israel and Palestine ends, I will have no career or meaning in my life. Joking about it is what I've done for the past several years. But I still have not been able to share what happened to me in Tel Aviv, where I live, in April.

That night, I was on a date with my now ex-partner. I remember taking a bite from my (non-vegan) burger and telling him everything I'd learned about the meat industry and swearing this would be my last carnivorous moment. It was clear my joke needed some work; he didn't laugh. Suddenly, there was shattered glass all around us. We heard gunshots; chairs were flying everywhere. People were running and screaming, sounding like wounded animals.

We ran, too, leaving everything on the table.

A handful of diners ducked into a nearby building. The shooter, we learned, was on the run. In the hallway, a door opened; a gamer-type with long hair looked out and offered us some Coke Zero and a joint. We said no. I was shaking. A second door opened. It was an Arab man, frightened and pale. He also asked if we wanted Coke Zero. We again said no. He kept his door open. A third door was opened by a religious Jew. He, too, offered us Coke Zero. (Thank you, Coca-Cola, for seeing us through our trauma. You must be making a ton of money in the Middle East.)

We went back into the street. It was besieged with police, what appeared to be armed civilians, and journalists; we were told to hide. I was surrounded by young, fearful, traumatized people. Some threw up from fear anytime there was the slightest noise.

All this time I couldn't call my mother because I had left my phone at the restaurant, so we went back. At first, it seemed the tables had been stripped of our possessions. A restaurant worker, hiding in the back of the cafe, saw us. He ducked out to hand me my phone and my bag. Later, I realized: This man risked his life to save my stupid phone.

At any other time I would have been live-tweeting or making fun of myself on Instagram Stories, but I kept quiet. I could see the headlines: "Leftist traitor comedian known for her pro-Palestinian opinions dies by a Palestinian shooter." Surely they would have mocked my naïve attempts to bridge gaps between Jews and Arabs with my "comedy for peace."

Hours after the shooting began, my date and I made our way to the home of a friend of a friend. I was still full of fear and adrenaline.

When we arrived, my host, a filmmaker — a lefty, of course — hugged me and said: "Well, he is a terrorist to all the gunmen chasing him outside. But to some he could be

considered a freedom fighter, you know?” My head was so heavy, my body was so shaken, all I could say was: “Please don’t offer us Coke Zero. Do you have wine?”

In the morning we learned that two men had been murdered in a bar a few doors down from where we’d sat. They were university students and [childhood friends](#), and one of them had just gotten engaged. A third man died of his wounds the next day; he had three young children.

The shooter was from a refugee camp in the West Bank city of Jenin. Hours after the attack, he was shot [dead near a mosque in Jaffa](#), about three miles south of the bar on Dizengoff Street. I wondered if he was purposefully trying to make his way to Jaffa — in Arabic it is known as “[the bride of the sea](#).” This ancient city within a city lost much of its Palestinian population during the nakba in 1948. It is a symbol of unreachable freedom for Palestinians, who dream of seeing the sea from their homes in the West Bank.

I kept thinking about the circumstances that led up to this moment, my hamburger, these deaths. What if the occupation ended 20 years ago, before the invasion of the shooter’s home in the Jenin [refugee camp in 2002](#), when he was just about 8 years old?

I want to dream that in 20 years, the children of one of the victims will be young adults and can go out to a bar in central Tel Aviv and be OK — instead of joining the army and potentially participating in another invasion of Jenin. And I want the 8-year-old in the Jenin refugee camp, growing up in this unbelievably unfair reality, to be able to come to central Tel Aviv with a swimsuit, not a gun.

Over the next eight weeks, I feared crowded places and going outside, I panicked at loud noises and I had trouble sleeping.

My close friends ask if the reason I have not joked about the night of April 7 publicly is because the attack changed my politics. My simple answer is quite the opposite. Do I still think ending the illegal occupation in Palestine is the only just and truthful solution? Absolutely. Will it solve all our problems and end all violence? Hell no. This will take generations to repair.

In early September, I learned the Israeli Army had [demolished the family home](#) of the Dizengoff Street shooter, part of an Israeli policy that amounts to collective punishment. Around the same time, I saw a photo of one of the Dizengoff victims’ daughters on her first day of school, accompanied only by her mother. Maybe, I worried, the 68 miles between Tel Aviv and Jenin are simply too vast.

In my work, I have tried to bridge these miles; sometimes I even succeed. And yet this attack flattened me.

After all, what is left now? A little girl who is going to her first day of school without her father and an entire family destroyed and unmoored. Where’s the laughter in that?

Maybe I will find a way to process what I experienced from the stage, or maybe, as I have learned, I do not always have a witty message to offer. Sometimes I am just the girl with the wrong guy, trapped in the wrong place at the wrong time.

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