

My thoughts and feelings after three days of riots and extreme violence in Israel and military operation

After three days of a reality that I never thought I would need to experience, I decided to share with you, my friends and partners in the diaspora, what is happening to me here. I am guessing that you are watching a lot of news and monitoring closely Instagram and social media, just like me, but I think that the real experiences of people on the ground can't be heard there and these experiences are the most important.

I am sharing with you these thoughts because I believe that just like Akko and Israel are important to me, these places are important to you, and you believe in the big project we are trying to do here: a shared society of the diverse and special population living in this city.

I don't have answers to all that is going on now. I will not try to offer solutions to the current situation in this letter. I just want to tell you what is happening.

On Tuesday evening, we had already heard for a few days about violence between Jews and Arabs in Lod and in Jerusalem, and there were missiles fired already at the Gaza envelope. My family goes in and out the shelter. We feel a sort of heaviness in our hearts, but Akko is quiet. I go outside for a walk and I feel that I need to hear from the people on the streets. I go to the shuk (market), to stores that I already buy from and ask my shopkeepers, the individuals that for 10 years I buy from, "How are you doing? What do you think about what is happening? What do you feel like is going to happen?" I hear a lot of optimism and I feel that the street is relaxed. Throughout the day I hear that there is supposed to be a demonstration of Arabs at the entrance to the Old City. I know that the situation could be very explosive and that there is a chance that there will be violence. With great concern I pick up the phone to Muhammad, the principal of the Arab elementary school, with whom I worked a few years in the city. We always turn to each other at times of crisis. Muhammad understands the concern but he seeks to reassure me, saying that the leadership is strong, that they do not intend for there to be violence. The purpose of the demonstrators is to protest what is happening in Jerusalem and to go home quietly. I ask Muhammad to protect Akko, and I remind him that we know what happened during Yom Kippur in 2008 and we are all afraid of it repeating itself.

That evening the demonstration gets out of hand. Young men mostly are setting fire to Jewish businesses in the Old City, throwing stones and molotov cocktails and walking around the city smashing glass. My partner, who was at our friend's house in the same area of the city, can't leave and return home because the violence is so scary and we had already heard about the lynch in Lod. She stays to sleep at our friend's house and I understand that we are in a very bad situation.

On Wednesday we call together a forum of guides in the city of Akko and decide to respond in educational ways. We speak about the role of the educators kibbutz in the city. I speak with Muhammad, who already sounds broken and in pain, and he apologizes for not taking what I had said seriously enough. We agree that each one of us is responsible for their own public. We both end the conversation embarrassed, feeling that everything is scary and dangerous. That same day, a few educators from the educators kibbutz gather the parents of the children from the mixed Arab and Jewish preschool to which they send their own children and they all make a sign "Akko is a city of peace" and hang it up on the main road. They receive a lot of negative reactions but they believe in the message and the parents of the preschool, Jewish and Arabs, actually feel

better. In the evening, we receive messages about a demonstration of Jews that will take place in the Shikun, the Jewish part of the city. We understand that this protest will be violent. We get called and are asked if we can come and try to deescalate the situation. We hear that people from extreme right wing Jewish terror groups from outside of Akko will be coming to the demonstration and we understand that it's going to be very bad - it won't be possible to talk to this angry mob. With a heavy heart, we decide not to go.

In the evening the excited Jewish mob begins to walk in the direction of the mixed (Arab and Jewish) part of the city. When they arrive at the first round-about, about 200 meters from the educators' kibbutz, they encounter groups of Arab demonstrators. Violent riots begin on the spot. At a certain point, we hear that there was a lynch of a Jewish teacher who was there to try and calm the protesters, by Arabs. At that moment (8:30pm) and up until 3am, the entire area around the Educator's Kibbutz turns into a battlefield. Underneath our home people are throwing stones at each other, lighting dumpsters on fire, setting fire to businesses, throwing molotov cocktails, shattering everything in their paths. We had to call the police to ask them to come and keep away people who were trying to throw rocks at our building. A group of border patrol police arrive and fire tear gas bombs. We are all in tears and the smoke from the fires enter into our building. We designated people to be on watch on our roof so that others could go to sleep. Everyone went to bed with a heavy heart but very few people were able to sleep.

On Thursday morning, after a night of no sleep, I spend time trying to secure the building from what could come in the following days: installing security cameras, upgrading the automatic fire extinguishing system and writing a plan on how to protect the building from all possible scenarios. At noon I receive a phone call from the military and I am drafted to reserve duty.

As I am writing these words, it's 11:40pm on Friday, we receive a message that the Akko Theater has been burned down, inside of which our club, which many of you know, the "AkkoJam", is located. For the past three years the Jam there has been bringing people together to co-create - secular and religious, Jews and Arabs - every person found a home there for our work. Now it's been burned down.

In all of this mess, my heart is broken and hurting. We are trying to lick our wounds and the wounds of our community, which is something so hard to do while the events are happening. We try to bring together as much as possible the different groups we educate, to take care of our participants and continue to believe in what we always believe: that we can live in peace and together. But our faith stands at the hardest test it has stood to date.

Your support from afar helps, I am receiving a lot of worried and encouraging messages to which there is no substitute. I encourage you to continue to do so. Thank you for the partnership. I would like to continue to tell you about what is happening here and to answer your questions.

I hope for better days and for peace,

"עושה שלום במרומיו, וברחמיו, הוא יעשה שלום עלינו ועל כל ישראל, ואימרו אמן"

Oseh shalom bimromav ya'aseh shalomaleyenu ve'al kol yisrael, ve'imru Amen.

May the one who creates peace on high places bring peace to us and to all Israel. And we say Amen.

Mirit Sulema

From the Akko Educators' Kibbutz