

## **Israel in 600 Words or Less**

*The more things change, the more they stay the same* | Non-Fiction | Canned Soup  
Etgar Keret, October 31st, 2023

Since October 7, I haven't really been able to write. For me, writing is a state in which you briefly release the suffocating grip of rationality and let your guts speak, but ever since this war broke out, my guts aren't saying anything. It's not that I don't feel: I feel too much, all the time. But the things I'm feeling – whether sorrow or fury or loneliness – don't lead anywhere. And when your gut goes silent, nothing meaningful can be written, at least not the way I write. My head is full of raw emotion and bits of information, things I need to remember so that I can say them to the next person who tells me Hamas is a legitimate resistance organization, or the next person who tells me that all Palestinians in Gaza are Hamas supporters and are therefore legitimate targets. My mind contains a lot of good answers to bad questions, and some fragmentary memories from my upsetting meetings with children and adults who lost their whole world on October 7—but other than that, not much else.

While desperately searching for an Alphabet-Soup-worthy piece of writing, I came across the first op-ed I ever wrote for a U.S. outlet. It was 22 years ago, during the Second Intifada. The nice editor of the weekly magazine's culture section explained that readers were very interested in the Middle East, especially since 9/11, but knew almost nothing about the region. "It would be great," he suggested, "if you could explain to our readers a little about the history of the conflict, the current geopolitical and human realities, and maybe some reflection on the future of the conflict and possible solutions. Oh, and if possible, we'd be happy if you could do it in 600 words or less."

It was a rare opportunity to publish something in a U.S. magazine, and I seized it with both hands. Over two decades have gone by, and the Middle East has only grown messier. Hamas, now a proxy for Iran, has become even more radical; Israel has imposed a blockade on the Gaza Strip, essentially turning it into a giant prison; the cycles of violence have grown ever more vicious. But amid this deterioration, one thing remains constant: the world still longs to understand the hellish chaos in my part of the world, and I'm still here to try and explain our unfathomable reality as best I can—if possible, in 600 words or less.

My mother says I'll never be able to understand what it's like for a nation to be without a country. Now, my mom, she really knows what she's talking about. After all, she went through the Holocaust, saw her home destroyed in Poland, lost her mom and dad and little brother and finally ended up here, in the land of Israel, her country, the land she swore she would never leave.

My Palestinian friend Ghassan says I'll never be able to understand what it's like for a nation to live under occupation. No, he didn't go through the Holocaust, and his whole family is alive, thank God, at least for the time being. But he's had it up to here with the Israeli soldiers at the border checkpoint. "Sometimes you make it through the roadblock in a second or two, but

sometimes, when they're bored, they can make you feel like life isn't worth living. They force you to wait for hours in the sun for no reason, to humiliate you. Just last week, they confiscated two packs of Kent Longs from me, simply because they felt like it. An 18-year-old kid with a rifle in his hand and a face full of zits just came and took them."

Adina, the neighbor from downstairs, says that I'll never be able to understand what it's like to lose a loved one in a suicide bombing. "No death can be more meaningless than that," she says. "My brother died for two reasons -- because he was Israeli and because he felt like having an espresso in the middle of the night. If you can think of any dumber reasons for dying, let me know. And there isn't even anyone to get mad at. After all, the guy that killed him is already dead himself, blown to pieces."

My mother says that we have no other place to go, that no matter where we go, we'll always be strangers, hated, Jews. Ghassan says that my country, the state of Israel, is an alien and strange entity and that there is nothing like it anywhere else in the world. There it is, in the middle of the Middle East, pretending to be in the heart of Europe, participating in the Eurovision song contest every year, making sure to send a soccer team to the European cup games, and it just doesn't get that it's located in the heart of the desert, surrounded by a Middle Eastern mentality that it refuses to acknowledge. Adina says we're living on borrowed time, that every time she sees the Palestinian children going wild with joy and handing out candy after every terror attack, she thinks about how these children are going to grow up. So I should stop all that nonsense about peace.

And if there is one thing that my mother, Ghassan and Adina have in common, it's that they are all certain, absolutely certain, that I simply can't understand what's going on in their heads.

But I'm actually pretty good at figuring out what's going on in other people's heads, sometimes, especially when times are bad. I even manage to make a living at it. All kinds of foreign publications call me and ask me to explain, if possible in 600 words or less, what people in Israel are thinking.

It's just a shame that I can't invent new thoughts for them, too -- ones that are a little less afraid, a little less hateful. Thoughts more positive, optimistic, compact, no more than 600 words.

*This piece was first published by LA Weekly on December 07, 2001*

*Translated by Ruchi Avital, Intro translated by Jessica Cohen*

### **Discussion Questions**

- 1) 24 years later is this piece still relevant and on point?
- 2) Why did Keret choose to re-release this piece when he did?
- 3) What is the message here?
- 4) What is the common thread among the three "stories"?