

Bikes By The Bomb Shelter

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Photographed by Avery Chenault and Rebekah Marcotte

“I know on the other side of that wall there is a woman who is just like me,” an Israeli woman said, standing on her front porch in Kfar Aza, Israel, a mere few miles from the Gaza border. “We just want for our children to live in peace.”

Shards of mortar rockets were scattered at her feet. Many of these explosives were launched over the border just a few days before. Toddlers squealed from the playground next door.

A few feet from her house, Israeli children propped their bikes by a brightly painted bomb shelter while they went to school. I moved closer to analyze the colors: an IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) soldier, three screaming faces and the word “boom” in English were painted in child-like imagery on the walls of the shelter. The scene was jarring against the bright colors on the concrete walls. This is a scene every child living in the Gaza Envelope knows well.

I visited the Gaza Envelope for the first time in May 2022 as part of a study tour with Passages Israel, which I now work with. The Gaza Envelope is defined as the area within four miles of the Gaza Strip. Our intent for the day was to learn about the geopolitics of Israel, but I left the border that day having learned so much more than that.

On that first morning at the border, I learned the words *kibbutz* and *Tzeva Adom* on the same day.

Kibbutz - a small community in Israel founded on communal values, shared land and living life together.

Tzeva Adom - Red Alert; run to the shelter immediately.

These two words are used often in this area. In each community, there is a constant threat of war — a constant reminder you only have 15 seconds to run to the shelter when the siren sounds.





Many community centers are built with reinforced concrete walls, functioning as both places to gather and places to hide from incoming rockets. A menorah in the town square of Sderot, Israel is built from the ruins of missiles fired by Hamas, combining both tragedy and tradition. When Israeli toddlers hear the Red Alert siren, they instinctively throw their hands in the air, reaching to be carried to safety, the heartbreaking reality of childhood in a warzone.

During my time at the Gaza Envelope, I saw communities filled with constant reminders of war. But I also saw communities with every right to be fearful and bitter hold hope for peace.

I watched as Israelis gazed at the rooftops of Gaza City that peeked over the border wall.

“A boy in Gaza has never seen an Israeli like me,” a man said at the border while shouting over the sound of gunshots as IDF soldiers practiced firing in the base next door. “Maybe he thinks I am a monster. I hope he doesn’t.”

Visiting the Gaza Envelope was an experience that forced me to consider the realities of the Middle East in new ways.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict was no longer 8,000 miles away. It was in the gravel underneath my feet. In the faces of the people I met. In a rocket lying in a woman’s garden. In children’s bikes propped up against a bomb shelter. It was in the immense pain in this region contrasted against immense hope for the future. At the Gaza border, I learned that hoping is never easy and hoping in a war zone is even harder, yet here, I could see it vividly before my eyes.



Several months after this encounter at the border, the Gaza Envelope was at the forefront of my mind again as Hamas began firing thousands of rockets into Israel and violently intruding into Israeli communities, brutally killing and kidnapping hundreds.

As I finished up a late night closing shift in the student commons on Oct. 7, 2023, the Israelis I had met at the border were waking up to the deadliest day of their lives.

As I watched a war unfold through my phone screen, I immediately wondered if those I had met were safe.

Was the woman I met at the Gaza border safe? The woman who stood on her front porch and spoke of a future of peace? Were the toddlers with their arms

up in the air being carried to the bomb shelter now? The toddlers who ran on the playground that cool morning in May?

I awoke a few hours later to the news that Israel had declared war on Hamas, and the aftermath of Oct. 7 was too horrific to describe.

Images of the Gaza Envelope resurfaced again. The two communities I had spent the morning at were now destroyed. I remembered sitting in Kibbutz Kfar Aza underneath a sprawling tree that rained purple flower petals on the ground. I recognized a photo in the news of the same spot. There were no flowers this time, only destruction.

While at Kfar Aza, I learned that each time a period of conflict between Israel and Gaza concludes, the tight-knit community comes together to celebrate

the conclusion of the fighting. They eat together and drink together and celebrate a break from constantly running to the bomb shelter. I long for this community to experience this again, but I also mourn for the dozens of empty seats that will be at the table when they do.

There is beauty in seeing a slew of children’s bikes waiting to be eagerly snatched from the ground after school. There is brokenness when you look closer and see exactly where the bikes are resting.

Some of the strongest people I have ever met live in the Gaza Envelope. Running to the shelter is their instinct. Despite all they have experienced, maybe hoping is their instinct too. Heavy military presence, rebuilding and reserve duty are normal sights for the people of southern Israel. Amid the violence, hope shines through the rubble.

An Israeli woman will plant a garden in her yard knowing that at any given moment, Hamas may fire a rocket into her home. And yet, she sows and cultivates a corner of beauty in the shadow of a terrorist organization.

Israeli children will run wild through a playground and race their bikes down the street knowing at any moment a rocket could fly overhead. And yet, they squeal and shout and wait eagerly to ride their bikes after school even if they must rest their bike by a reminder of conflict:

By a bomb shelter in the Gaza Envelope.