

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK / THIS YEAR'S 1ST GRADE CLASS STANDARD IS A LYCHEE FRUIT

Flag rescue project lets evacuated Kibbutz Be'eri open school year in customary style

With help from a Bedouin embroidery maven, displaced kibbutz continued traditional 1st grade flag parade with banners carried since 1952 in a ceremony at Dead Sea

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Volunteers involved with the flag repair project pose at Kulna, Yeruham, southern Israel, July 29, 2024. Racheli Schreiber heads Kulna's traditional arts and crafts program and is seated bottom right. Nirit Shalev-Khalifa is standing in the back row, second from right, holding a flag and one of the new storage bags. (Sarit Uziely)

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On a recent Monday in Yeruham, a small town in Israel's south, sewing machines whirred quietly in a large hall overlooking the cream-colored folds of the Negev Desert as a motley crew of volunteers carried out an unusual task.

Jmia Ihwemel, a veiled Bedouin mother of seven and an expert in Bedouin embroidery from the nearby village of Rahma, sat at one machine. Behind her was Tal Nachmias, a self-described embroidery and textile buff who makes a living as Moize, the "wandering barber" in Jerusalem. "Hair," he explained, was "just another kind of thread."

Further along was Gil Shavit, a married father of three and a former accountant from northern Israel who now works in textiles. He sported a pink hat, a jumble of necklaces, and Mary Jane shoes, popular in 1950s school playgrounds.

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These and other volunteers had gathered to help renovate 71 flags.

Not ordinary flags, but school standards rescued from a storeroom at Kibbutz Be'eri that was destroyed — thankfully not burned — on October 7 when Hamas terrorists invaded the Gaza border area.

On that day, they murdered 1,200 mainly civilians from the region and kidnapped 251 back to the Strip. Out of 1,000 people living at Be'eri (550 of them kibbutz members), Hamas terrorists killed 101, 90 of them members.



From right: Tal Nachmias, Shoshana Mandel and Gil Shavit discuss a sewing issue, Kulna, Yeruham, southern Israel, July 29, 2024. (Sarit Uzieli)

Each Be'eri flag bears the name and image of a fruit, plant, or bird, and has been lovingly embroidered, painted, or decorated with applique for the kibbutz's traditional start-of-school-year ceremony.

Since 1952, Be'eri children entering first grade have carried their new flag at such ceremonies, while kibbutz members from earlier years have carried theirs.

Immediately after the Hamas massacre and rampage on Be'eri, who could have dreamed the flag ceremony would take place? Most of Be'eri's residents are still in hotels, mainly at the Dead Sea, because temporary homes planned for Kibbutz Hatzerim are not all ready.

But on Friday, a small, private, flag ceremony took place at one of the Dead Sea hotels. Children entering first grade

received their new flag and T-shirts — all decorated with a lychee fruit — accompanied by the repaired standards discovered under the rubble of their kibbutz home.



Children going into first grade at Kibbutz Be'eri in southern Israel hold their flag, with the name Acacia. (Courtesy, Kibbutz Be'eri Archive)

Objects as testimony

Starting in mid-November, a team led by Dr. Nirit Shalev-Khalifa has been moving from one ravaged Gaza border community to another searching for [objects that can testify](#) to what happened.

Shalev-Khalifa heads the Visual History Department at Yad Ben-Zvi, the Jerusalem-based state research, culture, and education institution. She works with leading experts in artifact documentation and preservation.



Dr. Nirit Shalev-Khalifa carries a damaged flag from a collapsed storeroom in Kibbutz Be'eri, southern Israel, December 6, 2023. (Sarit Uziely)

She is collecting items whose materials, form, or function have been altered by events such as fire, smoke, and bullets.

She only learned about the Be'eri flags in December, thanks to retired speech therapist Tamar Ben Zvi, who runs the kibbutz archive.

Ben Zvi and her husband Uri lost their house on October 7. (The archive survived.) They hid in the loft while terrorists circulated downstairs. After 12 hours and fierce gun battles between the terrorists and the IDF, they were rescued.

But the house, like the one next door, where [Pessi Cohen](#) lived and died, was ultimately destroyed by IDF tank fire in an attempt to kill dozens of terrorists inside. [Cohen and 12 out of 13 other hostages with her were killed](#), either from gun or tank fire.

It took Ben Zvi, a mother of five and grandmother of seven (all of whom survived), time to return to the kibbutz. While there, she photographed her grandchildren's kindergartens.

"After a few days, I remembered that I'd helped arrange the start of school ceremony a month before and that the flags had been stored," she told The Times of Israel.

Worried that the bulldozers might soon take the flags with them, she raised the alert.



The flags were found in the collapsed storeroom at Kibbutz Be'eri, southern Israel, on December 6, 2023. (Sarit Uziely)

Kibbutz member Danny Meizner and researcher Shalev-Khalifa and her team headed for the collapsed storeroom and followed Ben Zvi's instructions.

They retrieved the flags despite the collapsed roof, which had pierced the plastic bags in which they were stored, causing diagonal tears in the flags' fabric.

Water, mold, and metal had left stains, and the wooden flag poles were broken.



Danny Meizner of Kibbutz Be'eri, who helped to extricate flags from the collapsed storeroom, poses with his year group's flag, Shita (acacia), from the school year 1978 to 1979, Kibbutz Be'eri, December 6, 2023. (Sarit Uziely)

Shalev-Khalifa called in Shoshana Mandel, a former textile curator at Jerusalem's Israel Museum, who has managed the technical side of the repairs, consulting with Dalit Yitshaki, whose sewing workshop at Kibbutz Be'eri was destroyed on October 7.

"It was the work of many volunteers," she said modestly, singling out Jmia Ihwemel (who declined to be photographed) for her skills, devotion, and fast work, some of it at home.

Threads of connection

Last year, Shalev-Khalifa and others from Yad Ben-Zvi attended a confab on traditional arts and crafts at Kulna, Yeruham, which explores the heritage and culture of Islamic and eastern lands.

That led to Kulna opening its facility for the flag project, bringing in former students such as Tal Nachmias, and recruiting [Jmia Ihwemel](#), with whom they have a long relationship, and who teaches embroidery at the school. She provided the sewing machines, embroidered, and sewed the special bags where the flags are protected.

In another twist, Shalev-Khalifa discovered that Kibbutz Be'eri had supported Ihwemel's village within the framework of Yeruham's "[Future in the Desert](#)," which connects the desert's communities.



Pazit Chen Hirschfield works on the flag of her brother Raz's school year, Egoz (nut), at Kulna, Yeruham, southern Israel, July 29, 2024. (Sarit Uziely)

Veteran hobby seamstress Pazit Chen Hirschfield, 66, from northern Israel was among Monday's volunteers.

Her parents died when she was 27. Her brother Raz, then 15, was adopted by Kibbutz Be'eri's Danny and Vered Fuchs.

"I wrote to Danny about the flag project," Hen Hirschfield explained, "and he said, 'Come and work on the *egoz* (nut) flag of Raz's year group.' By chance, that's the one I was given to repair first."

Gil Shavit met Shalev-Khalifa by chance in New York. He said he welcomed the opportunity "to contribute, to be part of what happened on October 7, and not to feel helpless."

He repaired the Irit (chives) flag and sewed a little pocket to secure what resembles part of a bullet or shrapnel from October 7.

Shalev-Khalifa said that after seeing so many burned-out houses and murder sites, the flags were "the first thing we came across that could be repaired and raised, that would return to life."



Gil Shavit poses with one of the flags he repaired, Irit (chives), Kulna, Yeruham, southern Israel, July 29, 2024. (Sue Surkes/Times of Israel)