

# ASCENT

Concordia College ~ Moorhead Minnesota

ESSAYS

## Fifty Days of Summer, 2014 ~ Jennifer Lang

Posted on January 30, 2017

Day 1. A quiet day. A disturbing night. When, around 10pm, a siren sounds, I'm dumbfounded. I wrongly thought the night before was a one-off, random rocket but now I realize it was a directed attack, a guided missile to scare innocent citizens. While the alarm wails for ninety interminable seconds in Raanana, I think *what the fuck?* Since when are Hamas's missiles, situated sixty miles south in Gaza, long-range or powerful enough to reach us in the center of this paltry piece of land? I remember the first time they rained down on nearby Tel Aviv in November 2012 during an eight-day operation, but never had they headed toward or hit our city.

Our abbreviated family—husband Philippe, seventeen-year-old Daniella, fifteen-year-old Simone and I—scamper downstairs to the basement and file into our sealed room, leaving the door slightly open for oxygen. The absence of our twenty-one-year-old son, who lives in neighboring Herzlia, hurts. “You okay?” I ask my girls. They nod, wordless, seemingly unfazed; I'm not. My mind torments me with unanswerable questions and unsettling thoughts: did Benjamin hear the same siren? Did he have time to run down to a basement shelter or duck under the stairwell of his apartment? Since he's in the army, did he have insider information that Hamas would be aiming missiles all over the country, a retaliation for the murder of a sixteen-year-old Palestinian boy following the kidnapping and killing of three Israeli Jewish teenagers in June?

After the siren ends, we return above ground, where there is cell reception. Daniella downloads the Red Alert application to be notified of every incoming rocket attack. Raanana is quiet, but her phone continually dings, announcing alerts throughout the south.

Day 2. When listening to the car radio, I learn that the ping-pong of violence between Hamas and Israel these past twenty-four hours has been dubbed ‘Operation Protective Edge’. It sounds like a Gillette razor. ‘Operation Just Reward’ in summer 2006; ‘Operation Cast Lead’ in winter 2009; ‘Operation Pillar of Defense’ in winter 2012; ‘Operation Protective Edge’ in summer 2014: all euphemisms for war. What will the Israel Defense Forces concoct next?

While driving around town, every radio program is constantly interrupted by *Tzeva Adom*, literally translated as the Red Color, an early-warning radar system in the south near the Gaza Strip to warn civilians of inbound missiles. (Outside of areas serviced by the Red Color system, like where we live, standard air raid sirens are used.) A two-tone electronic audio alert is broadcast twice, followed by a recorded female voice, saying *Tzeva Adom* and the rocket's destination. Whenever I hear the Red Color on the radio or on my daughter's phone, my chest seizes. We might not be in direct danger of most attacks, but the country is miniscule. It's only been two days, but everyone feels affected. The army is calling up thousands of active soldiers as well as reserves, including one friend's husband, another friend's daughter, and my cousins' sons.

Day 3. Benjamin warns us he has to head south near the Gaza border. Like every aspect of his army service, he can't divulge much. Since when does a soldier in Intelligence swap his computer job for fieldwork? I'm grateful he's not in a combat unit like so many other boys and girls we know, but still, my stomach clenches. Philippe and I agree not to tell the girls.

Day 4. Simone leaves for a one-month trip to France to visit grandparents, to be immersed in her father's language and culture. That night, Benjamin, Daniella, Philippe and I eat dinner with friends. Before we usher in the Sabbath, the hostess, an American woman who's been living here at least a decade longer than me, wishes Benjamin and every soldier a safe return. I dab at my eyes with the cloth napkin. Daniella eyes me from across the table. "What's going on?" she mouths.

Day 6. Just yesterday, the day of rest, two friends visited in the early afternoon, and while dunking in the pool to cool off, we discussed *the situation*, as Israelis call it. We gazed at the endless sky, its color a cross between baby and celestial, as their phones bleeped in the background announcing Red Alerts. How could our patch of blue in Raanana remain so peaceful while missiles zoomed through the heavens and sirens shrilled ten, twenty, thirty, forty and fifty miles south in Tel Aviv, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Sderot?

In mid-afternoon, Daniella stuffs a mosquito net and borrowed hospital scrubs into her duffel and departs on a four-week volunteer medical program in Ghana. With both girls gone, I breathe. If only I believed in God; I'd pray for Hamas to disband and disarm and for this operation to end swiftly, for every soldier to return whole, now, before the situation worsens.

Day 8. Israel accepts an Egyptian proposed ceasefire, but Hamas rejects it. After holing myself up in my office to write all morning and afternoon, I meet a friend at the mall for coffee. Benjamin had texted earlier to say he'd arrived safely at his temporary base at the border. I'm jumpy and cradle my phone in my hand. It rings. "Où tu es?" Philippe grills me. Where am I in the mall? How close is the street? Where's the nearest shelter? When will I be home? He tells me about an email warning a colleague sent him that something big might happen. "You're worrying me," I say to my non-alarmist husband. "You're worrying me," he says. My friend and I part ways. My

phone rings again. I jump. “Hey,” my son says casually. “I’m okay, but the food sucks.” May that be the worst of his—everybody’s—problems.

Day 9. After an eerily quiet day writing at home, I rendezvous with a friend on Ahuza, the main avenue, to walk together to a nearby movie theater. Usually, I love walking. Today, I fret about feeling vulnerable. Fear of death by missile feels real even if no one, thus far, has been hit; by chance, most rockets fired from Gaza have landed in empty fields or been intercepted mid-air by the Iron Dome anti-missile system, designed to destroy short-range rockets and artillery shells. But, once on the street, I’m stunned by the number of walkers and runners and bikers. Being outdoors helps my mind empty. For a moment, I’m able to free myself from Operation Protective Edge, the media’s increasingly negative portrayal of Israel, the world’s anti-Israel sentiment, the thousands of soldiers waiting for orders, in limbo.

Day 10. My morning yoga class in my basement studio starts late. Everyone’s skittish, myself included. My students hail from America, Israel, South Africa, England and Canada, and together we make a Middle Eastern melting pot. Seconds after finding a comfortable cross-legged seat, we’re interrupted by a siren’s unmistakable up and down lilt. I stand, walk seven steps to open the door to the sealed room, and usher in my students. They frantically dial home to check on children and spouses. Seconds later, we detect a far-off, muted boom. “You hear that?” we look at each other. “Do you think that was it?” someone asks. A second, louder boom causes the hulking steel door and walls throughout the house to shudder. After several sirens, we know now either a missile has landed or the Iron Dome has felled it, causing fragments to fall from the sky. The loud boom indicates it’s safe. We pause in the silence. The danger has passed.

We return to our mats. It’s difficult to assume the role of teacher, but these women expect me to lead them, to help them experience the magical mind-body connection of this ancient practice. We sit, facing each other, close our eyes, take a deep breath, and chant Om, a vibrational, lulling sound representing all the sounds of the universe.

When a second alert occurs eight hours later, at 6pm, Philippe and I scramble back to the sealed room together. It’s the first time since the start of the operation we have experienced more than one siren in a single day. He rubs my shoulders. “I never signed up for this,” I announce, reminding him of the years of conversations we’d shared about moving back here, to the country of *his* dreams. After meeting and marrying and spending our first five years together in Israel, we had left for two years for school and family. Two turned into sixteen—because of me, because I had refused to raise kids in a country where acts of terror and random missiles had become commonplace. My indomitable husband’s touch becomes tender yet strong.

An hour later, we drive to our friends’ house for a backyard BBQ. At the table, we’re eight adults and six teenagers, each of us with our cellphones near our plates, each of us checking the news incessantly. At 10:30, someone reads aloud: “IDF began ground operation in the Gaza Strip. Hamas had bombarded Israel with over one hundred missiles since the humanitarian truce ended only seven hours earlier.” A heavy sense of dread inhabits every cell of my body. And I know from the conversations and the lulls in conversations, as well as from the absence of laughter, I’m not alone. What would happen if I screamed *FUCK* at the top of my lungs, skyward?

Day 11. As soon as I wake up I remember the news, and while my body wants to stay curled up in bed, I force myself to start the day. An hour later, I enter a pilates class at the gym and tell the teacher I need my phone nearby. “*Yesh lach ben sham?*” she asks if I have a son there. The general, all-encompassing *there*—the pronoun to refer to Gaza—needs no modifier or adjective. Benjamin’s not *in* Gaza like so many other boys we know, my cousins’ and friends’ and neighbors’ kids included, but he’s close enough. She sees the answer in my eyes: somber, half closed, shrouded in darkness. To keep my mind occupied and tire my body, I stay for two classes. We place thick rubber bands around our feet, legs, knees, hips, bellies, waists, arms. My abdominal wall aches, and the intensity of the movement dulls my thoughts.

Later, when Daniella calls from Ghana, I tell her about ground troops. “So is it a war, or are they still calling it an operation?” she asks. The semantics haven’t changed, but the sentiment—mine at least—has. “I don’t know,” I say. I tell her we’ll talk later because I need to pick up our *Shabbat* houseguests, two young women on Nativ, a seven-week program for lone soldiers who immigrated without their families and for soldiers converting to Judaism. Philippe and I would rather have our soldier son here, but neither of us say it aloud.

The soldiers’ stories move me: the twenty-four-year-old is a college graduate from California who said goodbye to her family to enlist, and the twenty-year-old moved to northern Israel as a child with her Russian Jewish father and Chinese mother but has to convert, since Judaism is transmitted through the mother. This fall, they’ll be released, after having served two years. Both girls love the country but worry about their friends on the front lines.

When Daniella calls again at 6pm, I pick up just as a siren blares. “Sorry, can’t talk,” I say, hanging up abruptly. Then I pound on the bathroom door where one soldier is showering and on the guest bedroom door where the other is changing clothes. “*Azaka!*” I scream. Philippe, the two girls, both dressed in towels, and I trot downstairs to the shelter. He’s smirking. I know his sense of humor; huddling in a bomb shelter with me and two half naked young women will be the highlight of his summer.

After the alert, I phone Daniella to tell her we’re fine, then I call Simone, and finally Benjamin. Aside from hunger, he’s exhausted because of pre-dawn explosions, when the IDF discovered and detonated the first of Hamas’ underground tunnels nearby. At 11:09pm, I text him: *Good night and Shabbat shalom*. At 11:11pm, he texts: *Good night*. At 11:13pm: *U OK?* At 11:13pm: *Ya, tired*. At 11:15pm: *Same... love from us*.

Day 12. By the time I wake up, Philippe has left for synagogue. He observes the rules of the Sabbath; I don’t. I reach for my phone and clutch it tightly like a baby with his blanket. As I lie in bed, I gauge the virtual situation: email, Facebook, news threads. One heading: “...nine Hamas militants entered Israel via a tunnel, wearing IDF uniforms and carrying weapons, handcuffs, syringes, and sedatives, where they were met by the IDF. One militant and two IDF soldiers were killed in the resulting exchange of fire, while the remaining militants escaped through the tunnel.” I can’t control my outburst: *what the fuck?* Finally I get up and feed our visitors, who leave for synagogue after breakfast. For the next ten minutes, Benjamin and I exchange the most mundane one-line text messages. On the other end of my cell, he’s safe. Then, I text my two Israeli cousins to check on their sons. My cousins each served in the First Lebanon War, and now, thirty-three years and many wars later, are sending their sons into battle.

Hours later, I check my phone again. Daniella's online. We whatsapp. She tells me she heard from Benjamin; I tell her the second cousins are okay; she tells me Ghanaian food's disgusting; I tell her Benjamin's hungry too; she tells me she cried during dinner Friday night, and two British volunteers said prayers for her, including the Hail Mary in Irish. I grip my two-by-four-inch cell, feeling downhearted and helpless. For my daughter, who's far away but aware of the situation, and for my son, who could be eye-to-eye with Hamas terrorists should a tunnel open up next to his base, and for all the other soldiers we do and don't know personally on the front line. Saturday night Simone calls from Paris. She knows about the sirens but not about the ground invasion or about the western world's rage against Israel's role in Gaza. But earlier that afternoon, she stumbled upon a huge anti-Israel protest near Sacre Coeur. I wish I could protect my youngest child from blood-stained signs and vilified outrage, but I can't. Nobody can. She demands to know what's happening. I answer her questions until they stop.

Day 13. I wake up, and the whole cycle starts all over again: email, Facebook, news threads, then texting my son, and whatsapping with my girls. I need to know my children are safe near Gaza, in Ghana, and Paris. We have raised them to want to explore the world, speak different languages, make friends with and respect others who are different from us, but everything happening around us seems to be sending them the opposing message: of hatred and anti-Semitism and small-mindedness.

At 8:45am, my yoga students arrive, and I crank up Jack Johnson's *In Between Dreams* album only to be interrupted twenty minutes later by Philippe. "Azaka. Don't you hear it?" he says, dashing down the studio stairs. As soon as I lower the volume, the inimitable wail summons us. We walk into the window-less room. We stand with our arms crossed in front of our chests. We hear a close-by boom. We wait a few seconds. We return to our mats. I begin the sequence of poses from the beginning to recapture my train of thought and block out all the other terrifying ones.

By midday, I'm unable to concentrate on my writing assignment, flitting back and forth to Facebook and ynet and jpost to see where sirens are sounding and trying to determine who's suffering more—Hamas or us.

When our former au pair Skypes me from Switzerland, I collapse. With our cameras on and our faces exposed, we cry. My head hurts and my stomach aches, and after we hang up, I force myself to step away from the screens. For the remainder of the afternoon, I lie on my bed, awake, my mind pounding.

Amidst the despair, we go out to dinner with close friends, a date we'd set in June, long before the operation began. Diners occupy every seat. Laughter and chitchat ring in my ears. Would we hear a siren if it sounded? Would we all fit into the restaurant's bomb shelter, assuming it has one? Before ordering, we acknowledge how weird we feel and wonder about Israeli protocol for times like this. "You can't stop living," our friend says. "Yihiyeh beseder, as they say," every Israeli's favorite expression for it'll be okay. I shove my phone across the table, toward Philippe. My head stops throbbing. I force myself to eat. When, about an hour later, the white light on my phone blinks, a whatsapp from Daniella asking if we're safe, I answer immediately. Then Simone calls with the same question. They might be far away physically, but emotionally, they're here. Philippe and I arrive home close to midnight, realizing it's too late to call Benjamin. In bed, we hold each other and lull our bodies to sleep.

Day 15. Benjamin's week at the border ends, and when he finally busses back to his base, we meet him. Philippe takes a picture of our son in his khaki green uniform hanging off his lanky body, a bulky bag filled with dirty laundry slung over one arm and his other arm draped lightly around me. I'm thankful my son's away from the line of fire, intact, untouched, yet I can't stop thinking about all the other soldiers we know still *there*: driving tanks through bombed-out streets, treating the wounded in field hospitals, following their specially-trained dogs to sniff out hidden explosives in tunnels. The *Am Yisrael Chai*—people of Israel are alive—emotion runs so deep during crises like these it's as we're one family; those soldiers are all *our* children.

Day 16. When American and European airlines put a provisional thirty-six-hour ban on flights to Israel, due to safety concerns after a missile landed about one mile from Ben Gurion Airport, an intense feeling of isolation presses down on me. "Everybody hates us. The whole situation is so fucked up," I sob when a friend phones from New York. Nothing she says can console me.

Day 17. A siren at 11:01am. I scurry downstairs to our shelter solo. No crying. No shaking. I don't leave the house all day until Philippe and I take Benjamin out to sushi. To fatten him up. To hear his thoughts about his week. To help him decompress and unwind even if he claims he's fine.

Day 18. Friends come for *Shabbat* dinner with their nineteen-year-old son, home on leave from his combat unit, along with a twenty-year-old American boy who's midway through his volunteer army service and living with this family, and Benjamin, who's due to finish his three-year service in September. Usually it's too humid to eat outside, but this summer's been exceptionally mild, so we set the table on our deck. Seconds after we begin reciting prayers over the wine and the challah, a siren interrupts us. The seven of us dart downstairs silently, and my girlfriend and I wrap our arms around one another until the alarm stops, we hear a thud, and the coast is clear. Dinner *al fresco* resumes, but Operation Protective Edge possesses us like the devil. Is this our new normal?

Day 20. A friend from New York is visiting Tel Aviv with her husband, but I'm too scared to drive and meet her. What if a siren rings while en route to the city? I imagine myself curled up on the street next to my car, lying face down on the roadside with missiles overhead. *Fuck!*

Day 25. Philippe and I visit my great aunt Bruria and her youngest son on their *moshav*. A seventy-two-hour ceasefire begins. All morning long, eighty-three-year-old Bruria shakes her head side to side, telling us how ill she feels because she's lived through too many wars. Because three of her grandsons—one in a special ground unit in Gaza and two in tanks—can't call home for unknown amounts of time. Because war in Israel is inexorable. Because there is no solution.

Day 26. An old college friend spending the summer in Jerusalem sleeps over for *Shabbat*. A siren blares at 6am. We race downstairs to the sealed room. Silent. Half-asleep. Heartbroken.

Day 28. Philippe convinces me to take advantage of the most recent ceasefire, and, an hour before sunset, we head to Sharon Beach at Herzlia. On the way, we discuss the smartest place to put our towels and debate whether crouching under the lifeguard's tower or plunging into the water is safest in case of a siren. By the time we leave, it's dark; we're hungry, a little chilled. The evening is siren free. We're relaxed, our legs like jellyfish after an hour of diving headfirst into the waves and kicking our way back to shore.

Day 29. According to the *LA Times*: Israel pulled the last of its ground troops out of the narrow seaside strip, deploying them in what it described as “defensive positions” on Israel's side of the border fence. Overnight, Israeli forces completed the demolition of thirty-two militant-dug tunnels its forces had located. How can Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu or IDF Chief of Staff Benny Gantz be certain there aren't another thirty-two tunnels in the works? My *fuck* alarm rings in my head. Although sirens in Raanana are seldom and missiles aren't causing any appreciable damage and, on the whole, the country doesn't appear ravaged by war, the psychological effects are long-lasting and pervasive. Everyone's teetering on the edge, battling a sense of doom that I've never felt before. I long to believe what many Israelis believe—*yihiyeh beseder*—it will be okay. Just like I long to believe in God.

Day 32. As the seventy-two-hour ceasefire nears its end, Israel agrees to Egypt's call to extend it; Hamas doesn't and resumes launching rockets. Oddly, Tel Aviv has become less of a target, so Philippe and I splurge on one night at a boutique hotel. We dine with friends Friday night, read on the rooftop's chaises lounges Saturday morning, and walk to the beach and back that afternoon. The people of Israel are alive and seemingly well; *Am Yisrael Chai*. Hundreds of Israelis swarm the seashore, sunning, swimming, picnicking, blasting music from boom boxes, and smoking water pipes. The world couldn't be more higgledy-piggledy: sun and sand here, but missiles and sirens and utter devastation there, in the area surrounding the Israeli city of Sderot, near the border with Gaza, sixty miles south.

Day 35. Daniella arrived home from Ghana yesterday, and Simone from France today. I need them nearby. If something were to happen, at least we would be together.

The government is encouraging citizens in the south to flee north, but some return home during ceasefires to retrieve mail, change clothes, water plants.

At an informational meeting about adopting a Lone Soldier in Raanana, I'm overwhelmed by the number of people, from young families to retirees, in attendance. I'm interested because Philippe and I so enjoyed hosting

the two soldiers earlier in the summer. And because the recent death of two American soldiers, Max Steinberg and Sean Carmeli, touched me—and the entire nation—deeply. Their families, in Los Angeles and Texas respectively, flew thousands of miles to bury their boys here. If hosting a soldier from America or Europe or Russia for an occasional meal is a way to help, then I want to help. I learn supply outweighs demand—because I live in a country where soldiers are revered, where strangers visit wounded soldiers in hospital, where well-meaning individuals send pizza and hamburgers, socks and razors to soldiers in need, and where children draw pictures of suns and seas and stick figures holding hands to say thank you to the soldiers, who affix them to the sides of their tanks.

Day 39. I take the girls book shopping even though the Ministry of Education considers delaying the start of school if the operation continues.

Friends join us for Friday night dinner with their three teenage daughters, the oldest one serving in the army. When I hear our children discussing the situation at the far end of the table, I despair. “It’s like there’s no solution,” my middle one says. “I feel so hopeless,” says their nineteen-year-old.

Day 44. Number of rockets Gaza launched toward Israel in one day: 168; number of IDF reservists recalled from leave: 2,000; number of targets Israel attacked in Gaza Strip: 60; number of times I’ve said “fuck” this summer: 1 million.

Day 46. A young family living in the south quickly returns to their home on Kibbutz Nahal Oz to unpack and repack their bags to head north again until the war ends. While waiting in the car, four-year-old Daniel is killed in a direct mortar hit. A hush, a moan, a deep sadness sweeps across the country from house to house, from family to family.

Day 48. Twenty-two days have passed since a siren has sounded in our city. I try to wean myself from checking the news from hourly to either morning or evening.

Day 50. Israel and Palestinian factions in Gaza agree to an open-ended ceasefire brokered by Egypt.

Philippe and I throw a joint ninety-eighth birthday party to each celebrate turning forty-nine, his belatedly and mine upcoming. Nobody raises a glass to toast the end of the operation. Nobody believes this ceasefire will be respected by both sides. Nobody supports the government leaving Gaza with all those suspected tunnels of terror possibly buried beneath us.

Everyone is raw. “How was your summer?” is a question we avoid even though there are still twenty-six days left.

Unlike those who were close to death or lost their homes or spent days in shelters, too frightened to leave, we are seemingly intact. Our distress cannot compare with the loss of an innocent toddler or of an eighteen-year-old new recruit or of a civilian in the wrong place at the wrong time. But we know this never-ending madness will erupt again in twelve or fifteen or twenty-four months, until the end of time, and that reality seems too heavy, too much, to bear.

*Am Yisrael* will march on, but, unlike the Israelis, like my cousins and the majority of my neighbors, who were born and raised here, who have lived through decades of war, the sentiment *yihiyeh beseder* does not resonate with me. Everything is not okay. It is not *fucking* going to be okay. Probably ever. But I'm here. For my husband, my kids, and this big extended family of a country. One operation or war or whatever it's called after the next. And tonight, we're okay.

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