



EPISODE 3.3

SPECIAL EPISODE: BRING THEM HOME

OREN SEGAL: Welcome to Extremely, a podcast from the ADL Center on Extremism. I'm Oren Segal.

JESSICA REAVES: And I'm Jessica Reaves.

OREN: This is an emergency podcast that we put together because we felt it was important to speak to the families of those who have been kidnapped by Hamas terrorists. So this is going to be a little different than our normal podcast. But we think it's important for people to hear these incredible stories of resilience and action from Abbey Onn and Alana Zeitchik, both of whom have families that have been murdered and kidnapped.

JESSICA: One of the challenges in situations like this, the kidnapped family members are sometimes reduced to numbers. And hearing from their family who are living, breathing, not sleeping this every single day, I think does so much to humanize and to remind us all that these are people and they need to come home.

OREN: Coming up is our conversation with Abbey Onn and Alana Zeitchik.

Abbey, thank you for being here. For the listeners, Abbey's aunt and young cousin were killed on October 7th when Hamas terrorists rampaged through their kibbutz. Abbey has three other family members that were taken hostage that day, including 12-year-old Erez, his 16-year-old sister Sahar, and their father, Ofel.

It's been over 40 days. I know you're meeting with authorities, elected officials, presidents, and so many others. Do you feel like people are doing enough to help you get your family home?

ABBEY: On one hand, it feels insane that they're not here yet. Right? It's 40 plus days. And so how is it possible that 240 or so people are being kept? And on the other hand, as an American who moved to Israel almost a decade ago, I have never been more proud to be an American in the way the U.S. government responded. It was coordinated and empathetic.

And I think anyone in Israel will tell you that they've never seen politicians show up in the numbers and with the speed that they did. And each meeting was humane and emotional. And they listened even when they were told they needed to go. There were tears. There were hugs. It was very, very real. And then on the other hand, you feel like how is it not possible that these

major power players in the United States of America hasn't figured out how to create some sort of negotiation to release anyone.

OREN: Are they - are they providing you with regular updates? I presume both American government, Israeli government. perhaps even French government. Do you feel like you're getting consistent updates?

ABBEY: So, I can tell you there's a couple of details to add here. So Carmella was an American citizen Her father was born in the United States. He made aliyah, or moved to Israel, in the 30s before it was a state, to build the kibbutz, and because of Carmella's citizenship that unlocked all of the relationships for us with the US government and senators and so on, and because she was murdered the family is no longer considered American. [reaction sounds]I know -- it's an interesting one. So, I am doing everything I can to continue to press that they be considered an American family because I think if we don't then it gives Hamas points for murdering her. So that has been one of the challenges.

So, I am still in touch with my senator from Massachusetts, Elizabeth Warren, I'm in touch with Leader Schumer and a number of other people. But it is a challenge that was unforeseen in this case because how is it possible that because she was murdered the rest of the family wouldn't be considered American?

The people that are being held hostage right now are French citizens, and so we do have communication with the French government, and I do believe in some level France and the United States are trying to communicate with each other. I think one of the challenges for us is the communication with the Israeli government.

You know it took a long time for it to happen and since it started it's been more consistent, but Israel has two goals and they don't overlap. To eradicate Hamas and to save the hostages are very, very complex and they don't necessarily align. And so, as a government and as a country and a military, I understand at some level the complexity of what Israel is trying to deal with.

OREN: It's shocking to hear that one ceases to be an American citizen under these conditions. I think that would be a shock for most people to hear and just something seems off about that.

ABBEY: So, Carmella has this citizenship. Her grandchildren children don't have it. But if she were alive, the whole family would be considered an American family. And so, it just feels like we're really pushing for that consideration because I believe strongly and deeply after seeing the response that I want the U.S. on my side in this.

OREN: So, it's interesting. It can be very difficult for some people in general to rely on others for resolution of any kind, whether it is something at this scale or just something smaller. Some people just want to be able to have control over situations that are hard to control. I mean, how are you handling that process of knowing that there's certain limits? I mean, you can't run into Gaza and get them yourselves.

ABBEY: There was a grandmother yesterday that got on the back of a motorcycle and was like, I'm going to Gaza to get them. And I was like, lady, I feel you. Like I really feel you. I don't think they're going to let you in, but I get you.

It feels...this is the most challenging part. In the first few weeks, where everything was hectic and overwhelming, I mean, it still is at some level, but it was 24-hours a day, no eating, no sleeping, no resting, just doing everything you could because the things came at us.

And now, it's almost like we need to go look for what to do to make sure this stays and the headlines because there are other things that are overtaking the new cycle, right? Whether it be antisemitism or wars in other places or our own government in the United States.

And you do understand that you've reached a ceiling where the people that are negotiating for the release of these hostages are people that we generally don't want to play with, right? They're people, and you also understand having been privy to some of the things that have happened, how deeply messed up government and politics and all of it.

It's human life at the end of the day, this is human life and it feels very hard that people are not standing on their balconies or in their streets or wherever they are screaming for the release of these innocent civilians, that they should be confused with a conflict that is complex. And unless you know it well, I don't believe we should be talking about it.

These are 240 people that were taken from their beds, from a party, from their guard posts and they are wounded, and they are babies, and they have medical conditions, and they are young, and need to come home. And it feels to me like something we should all be able to connect on, and instead it's become divisive.

OREN: You're speaking out, and others, about this are really important part of putting this sort of humane understanding beyond a conflict that these are people, to your point. And you're actually in a position that I think nobody can really imagine themselves in. And the fact is, you're helping people understand what it's like to be in that position by speaking out the way that you have.

Is there anything that you've learned about yourself through this process that stands out, that maybe surprised you?

ABBEY: So, my husband and I, who has been kind of my other side of my brain and my heart through the whole thing, we were sitting and thinking. I understand that I deal well under pressure. And my husband and I met in the aftermath of Katrina. I led Hillel's response to rebuild homes there in Mississippi and Louisiana for three years. And we understood for a moment, wow, I've done this before.

I've been in the middle of disaster, and I've been able to manage myself. And that was almost 20 years ago, without dating myself. And I know how to manage in the middle of a lot of different things happening at the same time.

And I think you see in this moment that there are people who can do that and people who can't. And there's no judgment either way, right? These are my family, but these aren't my children. I don't know where I would be right now if these were my own children.

And we also know that we have a very big family and a lot of us are operating at our highest level right now. And through this process, we've been able to meet so many families and we carry each of their stories in our hearts. But some of them have one person who's operating right now because other people can't. And you understand that as much as you're fighting for your own family members, you are fighting for every one of the hostages.

Every time I talk about this, I say that there's a wounded person there because I'm talking about Hirsch, who's missing half of his arm. And I'm talking about fear who went from nine- to 10-months old there. Right? Like, I know their names, I know their faces, and I believe that the world should.

And I think that at the end of the day, that you understand if you are given an option to speak up or not, you choose to speak up. Right? What side of history do you want to end up on? You want to speak for people who can't. And I don't think that I've ever done that in such a big way before. And I think now I feel that conviction.

JESSICA: To that point, Abbey, is there something, anything that our listeners, that Oren and I can, what can we do? What do you want us to do? What's, sort of, the action call here?

ABBEY: I think the most basic is to keep talking about it everywhere you can, if you are on social media, to keep posting about it because it feels and some level that the world is moving on, which again, there's no judgment. Everyone lives in their own world, but these 240 people are not living in that world right now and we want to say their names and we want to talk about them.

We built a campaign with the National Council for Jewish Women. It's called Voices for Hostages. And you can go there and there's a form letter that you can send to your elected official. And I think we need to keep raising our voices to the people who are going to put pressure on the administration right now to make sure that this stays their highest priority.

Because we see what's happening in Gaza. It is an awful situation. I believe that Hamas has created not only terror for us, but for their civilians. And we want this to end. This ends when the hostages come home. This ends when Hamas stops attacking us when we are able to root them out. But until we bring these people home, we can't stop talking.

OREN: One of the items that has resulted from the massacre is these posters of kidnapped people, not only in the United States, but around the world, being torn down. Almost a denial of Jewish suffering.

Frankly, I can't wrap my mind around why people are doing that in a way that I can wrap my mind around pretty other dark things because of the work that we do. I am curious how you have processed those images and videos that I'm sure you have seen yourself.

ABBEY: They're heartbreaking. But at the same time, I think it helped us move from the first few days of understanding that Israel was attacked, to understanding that Jews are being attacked everywhere. That this is not a geographical issue, that this is an issue of Jew-hatred, and it's something that we have all experienced in our lifetimes no matter where you live or how old you are.

And I think this was a confirmation that unless we, as a people, in Israel and abroad, everywhere, unite and own our identity, then we have no other option. Right? And so, for me, it felt heartbreaking, but a confirmation that this is the way forward - is just to continue pushing and make sure that we strengthen our identity and our own voice in the world.

OREN: You seem very measured. I know you've been speaking to folks for 41 days. It's almost like you have trained your muscles on how to process and talk about this. Are you finding time to, not to get too personal, but to be angry, not as polished? Or do you feel like you have to do that publicly in order to get the message out?

ABBEY: I honestly want to go on the news and scream, right? Like I want to go on and just scream and I understand that generally I am facing an American audience and I think it won't be received well, so I've tried to remain calm. composed. We just came back a few hours ago from the Shloshim from the 30 days of Carmela and Noya, who were murdered. And my head wants to burst. It feels impossible that 30 days have passed since they were murdered and we buried them. And this is still going on.

I spoke with a friend yesterday and I said, you know, I can tell you exactly when I cried. I cried when I saw the video of Eris in the hands of Hamas. I cried the day after I learned about Carmela because I was about to go do something when I got the news and I just held.

But there is anger. There is anger, and there's fear, and there's uncertainty. And at the same time, there are amazing people to a person around us, both here in Israel and in the United States, who are lifting us and supporting us and reminding us that we are in a position to share the story and to help other people understand. And we kind of, again, it's Israel, so we laugh at the wrong time, at inappropriate times. And so we say, when this is over, when they're home, that's it. We're gonna open the wine and we're gonna cry and we're gonna stand in a field and scream and we're gonna let it out, but we don't have the luxury yet.

Right in the beginning, when I woke up and I would brush my teeth, I would think, how am I brushing my teeth? There are people sitting in tunnels. How do I make my coffee? There are people that don't see the sun today. And the more you allow yourself to think it, you paralyze yourself. And so, you kind of take it and push it aside and just keep pushing until the day that they will come home. And when they're here and they're safe and they're with their mother and their family, then we'll break.

JESSICA: It's such a hard balancing act. You have to take care of yourself, you have to take care of your immediate, the people around you, you have to be so strong. And yet, there's this thing happening that is unfathomable to pretty much everyone.

I'm just really grateful that you've joined us and that you're here and sharing your story. It's so important and we will do our very best to make sure that no one forgets.

ABBEY: Thank you.

JESSICA: Appreciate it.

OREN: Yeah, Abbey, thank you for spending a little time with us. I know that nobody asks to be in this position, but you are. And the comfort that you bring others who don't know what to do, who may not know people there, but are similarly angry, upset, want the hostages home, are looking to people like you to give them voice and how they feel.

And so it's not a burden that you asked for, but we appreciate that you've taken it on. And again, thanks for joining us today.

ABBEY: Thank you for having me. Challah is in the oven. The most normal thing we can do, right?

Oren: Find that normalcy anywhere.

ABBEY: Thank you. Thank you guys so much. Shabbat Shalom.

JESSICA: So Alana, welcome to extremely. And thank you so much for being here. Before we get started, I want to share a little bit of background.

On October 7th, six members of your family were kidnapped from their homes in Israel by Hamas terrorists. Your cousin Sharon, her husband, David, their three-year-old twins, your cousin Danielle and her five-year-old daughter.

And like so many others, we read your incredibly powerful November 5th op-ed in the New York Times. And you really describe viscerally the horror of not knowing the fate of your family. And you also touch on something that's so important, which is this incredible emotional pain that you've experienced since October 7th, kind of at the hands and words of fellow Americans who don't seem to be capable of or willing to grasp the enormity and the brutality of Hamas's attacks. So, I encourage everyone to please read the op-ed.

But first I just want to ask, I mean, how are you doing in the midst of all of this? How are you coping? Are you coping?

ALANA: It's not always an easy question to answer. Like it can depend on the minute of the day that you ask me. I'm surviving, you know? I move through the day with what I call this sort of like, overcast of like an emptiness that is ever present. You know, like those cartoons of like the person walking through the street with like the cloud above their head.

JESSICA: A little storm cloud.

ALANA: Yeah, that's kind of what it feels like a lot of the time, in a way, because it's just always with you, you know? The uncertainty and the need to know what is going on with them, when will they return, will they return? And in terms of coping, the way I've been coping is by putting myself into action, by being vocal, by leading this cause for my family here in the West. And I feel it's a responsibility, a duty, but also in the strangest of ways, a bit of a destiny that I was meant to be a voice for them here.

I have a very big family in Israel, and I don't have family in America besides my immediate family and my aunt and uncle that live here. I don't have cousins in the U.S. So, I've always played this strange role of both American and Israeli and had to, you know, make sense of my own identity of being that.

And now more than ever, I realize that, you know, I'm able to use the American side of myself powerfully in this moment. So that's what I'm doing. I'm focusing on that. Really, it's a full-time job now until they're back.

JESSICA: On that note, can you tell us a bit about the Bring Our Family Home campaign that you just mentioned. And also, what would you want people to understand and to really hear about what you all are going through?

ALANA: Right. So the Bring Our Family Home campaign is a campaign that we created specifically for my family. We're, of course, in contact and work with the Hostages and Missing Families Forum. In Israel, my family is involved in that forum. Obviously, our family is included in all of the media that comes out of, like on social media and things like that. But this was something we created very quickly to focus on my family. We have six, like you said, six family members missing... or hostage, not missing.

And I just wanted to humanize them more. Humanize them, like allow us to have a platform to share about them, to let people know more about them, really to also feature a lot of the media that I've been doing this, my UN speech, the speech I gave at the rally on Tuesday. So, it's a place to rally around my family specifically.

My hope is especially that people in the West can just connect with us and perhaps it will resonate. And, you know, I've said from the beginning, I want people to love my family the way I love my family. And so that's why we created it. And that's meant to also be a representation of all of the hostages. And what I would say in terms of the hostage crisis, we have 240 hostages from 30, I believe, countries. And it's becoming a number, not names and faces.

And people in the West, in particular, seem to be ignoring that and focusing a lot on numbers. So, they're focusing on the numbers that are coming out of, you know, the Hamas-run Gaza Health Ministry and focusing on the number of hostages, but not the people, especially when it comes to the Israeli people. And I want people just to start to open up their minds and their

hearts a little bit more. More to start to get to know the people that have been taken hostage, the babies, the children that are being held hostage, which is a crisis against humanity.

And to perhaps empathize with them a little bit more and to have a bit more urgency around the cause. Because it seems like, and I said this in my speech on Tuesday, it's become a footnote in the way people in the West are talking about this, right?

I will never try and diminish the suffering of Palestinian civilians of women and children in Gaza. And the crisis there is unimaginable. However, the hostages are not a footnote, they are actually the center of this.

The country is reeling from the massacre and still recovering from all of the death and destruction and horrific, horrific acts of terrorism. But the hostages are actually at the center of all of this. And I can't say what will happen once we get the hostages back. How do I know what will happen thereafter? But I do know that this is not going to deescalate until we have them home.

OREN: So it has been over 40 days. And I know you are speaking out, meeting with authorities, elected officials, and so many others. Do you feel like you are getting people to do enough to get your family home?

ALANA: Well, in Israel, I think there's a little bit more communication because there's more of an organized forum. But my family members are not Americans. So, my struggle as an American and, you know, I'm not personally a dual citizen because my mom didn't want to deal with the bureaucracy of that when I was little. But my brother, Liam, is a dual citizen. My mom is a dual citizen. And so, in our family here, we have dual American and Israeli citizens.

And I also don't think it should matter, to be honest. I'm American. My family is and we're American here. We want the government here in America to start speaking to us a bit more and start prioritizing our family a bit more. Kirsten Gillibrand spoke about our family on the Senate floor. But the offices we've spoken to here in the US – we hit a ceiling since my family that was taken [are] not American citizens. So, I'm finding that to be incredibly frustrating.

You know, I know there was the other group that was with me. On Tuesday, right, they went to the White House. My family wasn't invited to that. And I'm very frustrated with that distinction that's being made here in the US.

And at the same time, I don't have any...it's hard to have opinions when you have so little information about what they're actually doing to negotiate these hostage deals. I hear in the news the same things that you do. What I know about these potential hostage negotiations is going to be the same that you know.

And while I can recognize that sharing that information would probably be problematic in case it leaked out, I can understand that, I do think it would be great if the State Department was in contact with my family here and giving us updates even if there are no updates.

I want to know that something is happening, currently. That there are negotiations being had or discussions being had and who they're being had with. That would be helpful. But I do feel confident that the hostages remain a priority for our American government, for sure.

OREN: You're in a position that people just frankly can't imagine themselves in. And in fact, you're helping people understand and imagine what it is like by speaking out the way that you are. Is there anything that you've learned about yourself throughout this that stands out, something that you didn't know about yourself because you obviously haven't had to be in this position before?

ALANA: I would say something I've learned...I'm a very emotional person in general. And in my life, I certainly have, and I've done a lot of therapy around this, but I've had, especially around Israel in the past, have reacted very emotionally to the hatefulness, the ignorance, and I've taken things very personally in that way.

But I've found that this was changed for me. I felt that I could no longer be that way. I know I no longer had the strength to fight back and react emotionally, and I felt...something I learned about myself is I actually can be a person who just speaks my truth, speaks with great compassion and empathy that I know that I have, and that it may be slower, but that people are finding me that way.

I'm focusing on love and I'm focusing on empathy and compassion and trying to show people what it's like to be us, but I never knew that I would, I would react in that way, and I think this is an unimaginable circumstance, so I would say on that end, I'm actually, I've seen a lot of growth in that sense that I never would have expected in this type of trauma.

JESSICA: I think all of that came through so beautifully in the times op-ed. That is what stuck with me sort of the most - how compelling your writing was, but also the nuance with which you delivered the message. So, it's interesting to hear that that is not necessarily sort of that that's not necessarily comes naturally to you in terms of like such a perfect balance.

ALANA: Yeah, I would say it didn't before this moment.

JESSICA: Right. So, if you could speak and you are speaking directly to our listeners, but also to the people who read and really responded to your op-ed, what do you need right now? What can we all do to help?

ALANA: I think continuing to raise awareness about the hostages, continuing to create sense of urgency around the hostages without being inflammatory with compassion and love and just trying to ask people to understand that these are human beings who are being held by terrorists.

And to focus on what matters more than focusing on the suffering wars. Or, you know, the battles in the comments on social media. I don't think that those are effective...I don't think it's an effective use of anyone's time.

And then there's also, I think there's a website called One Second a Day, which helps you. They say just one second a day to call your Congress people. It's really simple. They give you a script. I think that's another really actionable way people can continue to make this a top priority amongst our government is to, you know, take a few seconds a day to call their Congress people, to write an email, you know, requesting or demanding the release of the hostages.

OREN: I have to say, I just continue to be struck that you didn't ask to be in this position. And yet, of course not. And yet there's a clarity that I think that you are expressing, that I think a lot of people would be shocked to hear the idea of going through this and not being hateful.

It seems difficult for a lot of folks. What happens to you after? Like, I mean, you can never kind of go back to the way it was.

ALANA: I can't go back to the way. I do see that this will continue to be my future. I don't know how. So if anyone has any ideas, I'm open to them, but I'm starting to think about what does an advocacy group look like for me, where I am at the helm of that? What could that look like? Are there groups I can work with?

How can I continue using my voice to get my family home, but further to humanize the Israeli people and to also bridge, you know, the space in between the suffering of both people and move us closer to peace, because I would say if anything, I am pro-peace, more than anything.

JESSICA: Alana, thank you so much for joining us. It's been a real pleasure to hear from you. And again, thank you for everything that you're doing to shed light on the hostages, on the families, on the unspeakable, you know, you're speaking the unspeakable and we're very grateful. So, thank you very much.

ALANA: Well, thank you so much for having me.