How Israelis turned to God after the horrors of October 7

BY FLORIT SHOIHET

► THE PHRASE "there are no atheists in foxholes" – often attributed to the US correspondent Ernie Pyle, who wrote about the Second World War – is eminently applicable to Israel after 16 months of conflict.

Recent surveys, social media trends, pop songs and increased public participation in religious activities indicate that Israeli Jewish society has undergone a collective shift towards religion. As the state and the army appeared to have failed the people, many found God, even in the killing fields of the Gaza envelope on October 7.

For Shir Zohar, 22, a Nova festival survivor, that was the day when her relationship with God fundamentally changed. "I come from a completely secular household. I believed in God, but didn't quite grasp it beyond that," she says.

On that fateful day, Shir went with her best friend, Ester Borochov, to the festival.

As the missile attack started, they rushed to their car, "and then the chain of miracles began".

Shortly after starting their escape, they faced an ambush from five terrorists who shot at them, yet no bullet hit them.

The young women decided to abandon their car and flee in a different direction on foot; later they would find out that it had been stolen by terrorists and used to transport hostages to Gaza.

"At this point, God sent me a guardian angel," Shir says. Ori Arad, 22, was fleeing in his car, stopped next to them and said: "Don't worry girls, I will save you." They got in with him.

She recollects: "I was wearing very revealing clothes, basically my top was a bra.

"I knew that I could get raped or murdered. Ori sacrificed his body and soul so I could be here today."

Ori decided to crash into the terrorists, injuring some of them – yet it drew others to shoot at their car.

The car flipped three times and landed in a tunnel next to the notorious Mefalsim Junction, where dozens of festival-goers were murdered or kidnapped.

"I was the only one who did not lose consciousness. Ori was shot, and Ester's head was sticking out of the back window. Both were still alive. I decided to pull her head in.

"Only at this point did I start to talk to God, asking why am I here? Suddenly the back window was shot at. The miracle was that I stayed awake and could pull her in."

Shir describes hours of horror ("I heard horrendous things, rape and abductions") and listening to prayers to God for guidance.

Eventually, Ori woke up with a death rattle. He smiled to Ester and put the radio up to full volume.

The terrorists fired dozens of bullets and Ori died.

"We were probably noisy and he tried to cover for us," Shir says. The terrorists didn't notice Shir and Ester and they played dead before finally emerging from the overturned car and eventually finding a group of IDF soldiers.

For months Shir struggled to sleep. Then she was given a book of prayers for her birthday.

"Things started to fall into place; I have fewer nightmares."

Nowadays Shir wears long skirts, keeps Shabbat and prays. "I don't have a psychologist, God is my psychologist," she says.

Further examples of the increased role of religion for Israelis can easily be found even among the most secular people.

Shortly after the October 7 attack and the reservist call-up, one father

> "God sent me a guardian angel. I knew that I could get raped or murdered. Ori sacrificed his body and soul so I could be here today

– a non-Jewish Russian atheist – whose sons were called up for duty, found himself rushing to the nearest jewellery shop. He bought his sons silver Magen David necklaces "for protection".

"Culture gives us a toolbox to understand reality. In a traumatic situation, many people may approach religious practice as its language is clear and familiar to them, allowing them to obtain meaning and comfort," says Dr Rachel Werczberger, a scholar of contemporary Judaism from the Jerusalem Multidisciplinary College.

Indeed, many interviews with Nova festival-goers showed young people praying "Shema Yisrael" while facing death and horror.

This same prayer was used by some survivors from the largely secular kibbutzim to determine whether the men outside their door were rescuing IDF forces or camouflaged Hamas terrorists.

The released hostage, Keith Siegal, 65, from Kibbutz Kfar Aza, testified that in captivity he prayed "Shema Yisrael" twice a day, and used food blessings, although sometimes incorrectly.

According to a September 2024 survey led by the political scientist Professor Asif Efrat of Reichman University, 37 per cent of Israelis aged 18 to 35 have reported an increase in their belief in God since the outbreak of the war, compared to only 18 per cent among those aged 56 and older. Similarly, young adults reported a higher rate of adherence to religious tradition.

Efrat compares the results to a similar survey carried out in April 2024, saying: "The war brings Israelis closer to religion, and this rapprochement increases as the war continues." Interestingly, Muslim Israelis (about 20 per cent of society) showed similar patterns.

Rabbi David Stav, chairperson of the Tzohar Rabbinical Organisation, which aims to bridge the gap between Orthodox and secular Jews, also sees these shifts.

He says: "We live in a fascinating era and it is hard to underestimate its significance. There are indications for a Jewish awakening, not necessarily a religious one.

"It is not a mass movement to return to a fully religiose lifestyle, but a will to adopt some of the Jewish religious customs and more open attitude toward Jewish texts and songs.

"It is a gentle process and I believe that in the following years the Israeli society will develop a new Jewish-Israeli identity."

One of the most vivid recent examples is the story of the released hostage Agam Berger, 20.

"Agam grew up in a secular house

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Religious shift: (left) a man praying at the Western Wall during a vigil for victims of the massacre in November 2023. *Above*: Judaism scholar Dr Rachel Werczberger and Rabbi Stav, who works to bridge the gap between Orthodox and secular Jews. *Right:* Ori Arad, who was killed at the Nova festival, and Shir Zohar, who survived

yet, while in captivity, she refused to cook for her captors on Shabbat, avoided meat to keep kosher and prayed. The media coverage pushed more released hostages from non-religious backgrounds to share that they fasted on Yom Kippur and adopted some Jewish practices. Agam's story was noted even by leading Orthodox rabbis, who praised her devotion," Rabbi Stav says. Shortly after October 7, young women and teenagers could be seen on TikTok cutting and destroying their "non-modest" clothes.

Although the influencers did not adhere to their new code, it begs the question whether this "awakening" will last, and if so, how it will affect Israel's future.

Currently, Jewish Israeli society is divided between religious and secular, with the former spanning Orthodox, modern Orthodox and traditional (practising some traditions).

According to the Israeli Bureau of Statistics, in 2022, 64.5 per cent of Israelis defined themselves as "secular" or "traditional who are not so religious".

However, Werczberger argues that "these categories are not relevant any more, and perhaps never were accurate, as they were relying on modern Christian secularisation concepts.

"The Israeli majority has never been really secular; some 'secular' individuals believe in God, while others practise some traditions to stay connected to the mainstream culture."

Rabbi Stav adds: "The label 'religious' until October 7 was social.

"But now we are facing a period in which we will meet many non-religious yet very Jewish individuals, who will seem completely secular – men without yarmulkes and women with short shorts – but their identity will be more traditional and Jewish."

Werczberger concludes that there is a growing parallel stream to institutional Judaism in Israel, which can be described as "folk religion" or "popular Judaism".

"It has always existed, but the war has exposed this deeply religious aspect of wider society," she says. According to Efrat, the trend of Israel becoming more religious started long before the war and is primarily driven by demographics, but also by social factors such as young adults, who tend to define themselves as more religious – perhaps as part of a search for identity and meaning.

"It is hard to estimate the future, but the war can be a catalyst to this ongoing process.

"More religious societies tend to be less liberal, with less commitment to democratic values," Efrat says.

> "There is a growing parallel stream to institutional Judaism in Israel – you can describe it as "folk religion" or "popular Judaism"

Efrat highlights data, however, that shows steady and broad support for LGBTQ rights in Israel.

In that context, Werczberger emphasises the individualist aspect of this popular Judaism, which allows believers to approach God directly without traditional representatives.

Or as Zohar puts: "The most important thing is not to belong to a stream or follow a particular rabbi, but to raise your eyes up, and believe that someone is listening to you.

"There is no need to be fanatical, but to know that there is someone there for you."