

## Spirits of the dead

**At the checkpoint north of Ofra, a few hours after a lone sniper killed 10 people there, a cast of characters from the theater of war**

By Gideon Levy

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Where did all that blood go? Did the earth drink it? Rivers of blood without a trace? Everything's dry now? The blood of ten killed and three wounded? Is that how the killing fields look, a few hours afterward? Just a few knapsacks strewn around on the road to hint at what happened here this morning - part battle, part massacre.

And the hush. A terrible deathly silence shrouds the checkpoint. Even when the chief of staff arrives in the afternoon, surrounded by his officers and security men. And afterward, the sudden appearance every so often of a car full of settlers, more frightened than usual. A huge and terrible silence in the shadows of the cypresses and the pines planted here long ago, alongside the building that was once a British police station. The general effect is that of a quiet pastoral scene somewhere in Europe. The ridges on both sides of the road are also forested, but the trees are a lot thinner there, green swatches on the canvas.

Behind one of those trees on Sunday, a Palestinian was hiding, bent on killing. His carbine, the British police station, the "Highwaymen's Valley," Abu Jilda - old images conjured up one after another this past week, like spirits of the dead, amplifying the sense of mystery and wonder. Strange indeed, how a lone gunman could stand and fire unimpeded for half an hour, one shot every 45 seconds from a forgotten old rifle, managing to kill 10 people, seven of them armed soldiers, and wound three others. And then get away, without even taking the rifle, as if to say: Look, you see? Even the weapons of the weak can kill soldiers of a powerful, well-equipped army with smart bombs and fine officers, the army of the occupation.

"N... Na... Nahman Me'uman" (a pop neo-Hasidic slogan and bumper sticker), says the large scrawled graffiti, which no one ever bothered to clean, somehow solidifying the desolation and neglect of these IDF checkpoints, planted on the roads of the West Bank due to pressure - not to say extortion - by the settlers, for no reason and to no purpose. Few checkpoints on the West Bank are more useless than this one (or than the Ein Ariq checkpoint, the most recent previous site of slaughter). Here in the middle of the road in the middle of nowhere, not even an intersection or a forest to provide a sensible name, in limbo on a settlers' road from Shiloh and Eli to Ofra, the settlements of futility.

When Sara Lisha, a teacher, was murdered here a year ago, the settlers twisted arms until they got this checkpoint, starting with an illegal "outpost" and then threatening on television in the usual way that if the IDF doesn't create a presence there, then they will - until they got their way and the army put this checkpoint there. A death trap, with or without Hasidic graffiti: It certainly didn't help those poor soldiers.

Nothing much has changed. This week, another settler leader, Binyamin Regional Council chairman Pinchas Wallerstein, threatened that if the IDF leaves that death trap, the council members will set up an illegal outpost there and soldiers will naturally then be needed to guard it. Redemption for Ofra, but not for the soldiers - nor for us.

Meanwhile, new regulations are in effect at the checkpoint. Lessons were learned. An armored car sits crosswise on the road, a few dozen meters ahead of the checkpoint, and stops all who approach. A roadblock guarding a roadblock. But there's another bit of satanic business here: on the road, a few feet from the vehicle, the mangled corpse of a black cat. A few weeks ago at the Qalandiyah checkpoint, a soldier stood guard with another canine corpse, that one a tiny orange kitten, underfoot. Now it's a dead black cat - a bad omen. No one bothers to remove the corpse, so the dead black cat stays there by the frightened soldier, side by side.

Red-and-white plastic New Jersey barriers stand there, and these, too, are full of scrawled graffiti: "Cohen Ben David," says one, near a battered, rusting tin sign, announcing the existence of the checkpoint - a Military Police sign, but the MPs aren't there, and the sign is in Hebrew only.

Does the intifada chief of staff - who naturally isn't responsible for anything that goes wrong here, but who has just arrived, expression grave, to see what lessons can be learned - does he notice any of this? The British-era police station by the roadside has been

renovated and whitewashed, a pair of green-painted chemical toilets to one side, and there's a rusting old container, camouflage screens and barbed wire, all bespeaking neglect. "British Police Checkpoint," "Highwaymen's Valley Checkpoint," "Checkpoint North of Ofra" - that was this nameless checkpoint, this week. Hereinafter maybe it should be called the Nahman Me'uman Checkpoint. Maybe it won't help, but it can't hurt.

A few kilometers north of here, on the outskirts of Shiloh, up toward the ridge, there's another roadblock to guard the roadblock that guards the roadblock. Another armored car sits crosswise on the road and another bunch of armed soldiers, tense, but mainly scared, hides along both sides of the road, pointing their guns at us, not putting them down. One soldier hides in the shade of a sign about the housing project for the Ma'aleh Levonah settlement, with a toll-free phone number at the bottom. No doubt, no one is interested any more, and the sign remains to no purpose, other than as a hiding place for the soldier.

The soldiers are a lot more anxious lately. One signals us to stop, another signals to move forward. What to do? A minor misunderstanding could end very badly. It's unclear who's more afraid of whom - the unarmed traveler of the soldier pointing his loaded and cocked rifle, or the soldier of the unknown traveler. Palestinian cars don't pass here anymore, remember.

A few hours later, at another roadblock, the Hizmeh checkpoint near the entrance to Jerusalem, a lone Border Policeman will stand, and he'll ask: "Where are you from?" as always, to hear your accent and your ethnicity, his face beaded in sweat and his shirt wet with it, on a day that's not even warm. Meanwhile, the chief of staff has concluded his visit to the checkpoint of death and it's open to traffic again. Only a few settlers were traveling on this road this past Sunday. A woman settler, not young, set out in a private car from the Beit El settlement, sitting alongside the driver, heading south to Jerusalem and wearing a steel helmet.

The street lamps on the Ramallah-Nablus road, or rather the Beit El-Eli road, are all double-lit: one side illuminates the road and the other, the rocky ground looming threateningly on either side. It's been a long time since this road was as quiet as it was this past Sunday. The bright blue sky has jagged trails of white that could be passenger aircraft at high altitude, or bombers on their way to Ramallah. At Hizmeh, there's more of a sense of large forces making ready to go out where the fighting is. "The Ma'oz Tzur ATM is open to the public," announces another irrelevant roadside sign, in a zone where the atmosphere seems more suited to Russian roulette than to the Ma'oz Tzur ATM. "Good evening, despair, and good night, hope / Who's next in line and who's turn is it next ..." is on the radio.

"Kindly leave the area immediately," orders the stunned officer at the checkpoint of death. On a few big cement blocks intended to provide a defensive wall at the entrance to Ofra, settlers sit and wait for a ride. A while back, someone scrawled "revenge" on one of the big cubes. The nearby village, Ein Yabroud, is blockaded on all sides; its semi-imprisoned residents plod along on foot.

Rabbi Yisrael Eichler is talking of redemption on the radio, sounding not that much weirder than the politicians who are demanding that the IDF really sock it to the Palestinians - harder, again. "Choose the best," recommends a Palestinian billboard at the abandoned City Inn junction in this desolate landscape, for whoever might be buying a car alarm. Closed long since, needless to say. The lower end of Ramallah close to Beit El looks like a ghost town, a no-man's-land with the hawks of war on all sides.

Two fighter jets circle over Ramallah. How elegant and clean they look, their pilots the best of our young men, the best educated and the most enlightened, and at any moment they may be sowing death and destruction on the people below them, no less than the suicide bombers, those human beasts.

The road to Ofra was being widened, but the yellow bulldozer lies idle now on the shoulder. Why widen this deserted road? The first house in Sinjel, the village just past the checkpoint of death, belongs to the Darhalil family. The father, Rushdie, drives the village ambulance. His nephew, let's call him Majid, works illegally as a bartender at one of the well-known pubs in the bustling entertainment district adjacent to the police interrogation rooms of the Russian Compound in Jerusalem. Rushdie was notified on his mobile phone that someone from the village had been wounded; Majid, afraid of revenge attacks, was making his way from the pub at the Russian Compound to his home in Sinjel. At first light, he heard the sounds of firing at the checkpoint at the British police station, right next to his house.

Rushdie Darhalil brings his wounded to the clinic at Salfit. He can't get them to the hospital at Nablus, not even with the ambulance. Tonight he plans to take his family to a relative's house further from the checkpoint, because their own house has become too dangerous. Maybe whoever shot the soldiers went past here that morning when he fled the scene, and the IDF is liable to take revenge. Anyhow, all the windows of the shuttered veranda where we are sitting are broken; that's from the stones thrown by the settlers passing by on the road. But tonight, after what happened, it's better to get out.

Rushdie has already explained all this to his six children, and they understood. This isn't the first time they've left their house out of fear. Sitting there, dressed in a pair of sweat pants and a T-shirt, he listens to reports on his mobile of Palestinian casualties in the area. That morning, after what happened, he didn't dare try to get to work at the Ministry of Health in Ramallah where, on normal days, he distributes medicines to hospitals and clinics. The last few days have brought lots of work, but he can't always get out of the house. A red extinguisher stands at the ready by the door, just in case.

His nephew Majid shows no visible signs of last night's ordeal: "I was at the pub, and suddenly we heard this explosion, you know, forget about it. The roof shook. After a minute and a half, we heard the police sirens and the ambulances. My boss said not to leave the kitchen, they'd screw me if they caught me. I have this boss, forget about it, a good guy. If there's a problem, he takes me home with him. I have a key to the place.

"Yesterday, there were four tables all night. One French, one American, one with Arabs from Nazareth, and one regular with Israelis. We closed out the cash register with NIS 850. We usually do seven and a half, eight thousand. Yesterday we also put a doorman at the entrance. So a terrorist wouldn't come in. And so they wouldn't see me, the boss says, you stay in the kitchen.

"I sat in the kitchen for three hours, and after that I sat around with the waitresses and the bartender. I wear an earring in my ear and no one sees. I have a lot of friends there and no one would say to me, you're an Arab; no one would catch me. In the daytime, I sleep at the pub, I have a little room there and sometimes I sleep at my boss's house. I don't go out.

"We closed up at one-thirty; usually, we close around four or five. I cleaned the place up, I got dressed, and I came here. I took a taxi to the Old City, and another taxi to the Al-Ram checkpoint. I was afraid they'd catch me on the way, so I did a detour on foot around the Al-Ram checkpoint, and at six in the morning, they caught me at the Qalandiyah checkpoint. I had a plastic bag, and they said, what's in the bag? and I said, a shirt and a pair of pants. Where are you going? I said, to the village. He said, it's closed, do what everyone else does, do whatever you want, go around. So I went around, a kilometer and a half, and I got into another taxi to Ramallah. From Ramallah to Bitin. Then on foot again for another kilometer or so, until I got a cab to the village.

"Suddenly, we heard something was going on at the checkpoint. Some guys came and killed the soldiers. We got out of there fast. From Bitin, I rode to Dir Dibwan and from there to Raamoun, from there to Taybeh, then to Kufr Malek, then to Turmouss-Ayeh and then home. At a quarter to nine I got home, thank God. Twenty-five days, I haven't been home. I don't know if I'll go back to the pub. It's scary and dangerous there now. A terrorist comes in, you're standing there with an earring in your ear, he doesn't know if you're a Jew or an Arab, so what good is the money? For now, I'm not going back. I want to thank everyone from the bottom of my heart. I want to thank my boss and the people there for how they helped me.

"They call me "Mushmush" there. The workers know I'm from Sinjel. If the secret police come, one of the waitresses puts her arms around me, and I have the earring in my ear. The best is when I make Greek salad, I do it from the heart, but I'm good at blintzes too. It's great, I drink Southern Comfort. It's a great drink. When I'm upset, if there's stuff going on in the village - my boss lets me drink ... like when there's shooting going on there. He let's me drink then. When things are normal, he won't let me. But I drink, when he's not around. Three or four glasses, no more. When he's around, I don't drink because he watches me. Sundays, Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, I work at the bar, in the kitchen, and I help the waiter, because it's empty. On Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays I cook. What do I think about what happened? Walla, I have this good life of my own."

The mobile phone beeps: someone from Sinjel was killed at a Palestinian checkpoint in Ramallah. Israeli aircraft are flying overhead. Yellow buses from the Binyamin Region Development Company speed by on the road one after another. The Shiloh settlement is visible from the kitchen window, up there on the hill.

Meanwhile, it seems that the man reported to have been killed is actually severely wounded and is now in intensive care at the hospital in Ramallah. A bullet pierced his jaw and exited through his cheek. He's in critical condition. That's what they told Rushdie by mobile phone. Muhammad Harb, the village painter. Age 46.

"We'll gaze at one another, wondering ... sometimes me, sometimes you, we really need some comfort," from the radio. "It weighs on your conscience," says the poster someone is just now pasting up on the billboard at the Givat Ze'ev intersection, protesting the force-feeding of geese. At the Tolar checkpoint, two helicopters circle overhead; the traffic jam is endless. There's been a warning about a terrorist vehicle. A car belonging to Zakah (Identification of Disaster Victims) is already parked at the roadside.

At the Beit Dagan intersection, two ultra-Orthodox youths are standing, holding burning torches and dancing. "Jewish blood will not go cheaply," says the sign held by these dancers - dancing for blood. The crowd of mourners at the gates of the military cemetery in Ramle stands at attention. One man in a white shirt and a black skullcap is holding a sign: "No Arabs, no terrorism, Rabbi Kahane was right. Arik Sharon go home."

Evening has fallen. Glue drips from two newly-posted bereavement notices, one from the municipality and the other from the army. Roni, the IDF administrative officer for Jerusalem, says: "The family has requested privacy at the burial." It's the funeral of Staff Sergeant Raphael Levy, who was killed that morning at that checkpoint. Son of Suzanne and Avraham. Age 41.

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