Naharin leading a mass Gaga session recently in Tel Aviv. "I've nothing to lose, because it's my work that speaks, and by means of it I will continue to create." *Ascaf*

or stopped creating and developing the dance method he invented, even after stepping down as artistic director in 2018. His creative pace typically dictates a new work every two years; the latest, "MOMO," premiered about a year ago. Since then he also staged a spectacular reprise of his seminal and perhaps best-known work, "Anafaza"; like in the early 1990s, he also performed in it, wearing a red velvet robe, singing and playing electric guitar. "Anafaza" was supposed to return to the stage yet again, but the costly production has been postponed. In any event, neither Naharin nor his company have the will or desire to mount it now.

In the meantime, Naharin seems to be keeping a relatively low profile. In mid-December he returned from Los Angeles, where there was discussion of his possible role as choreographer in a film being directed by Maggie Gyllenhaal (among others he worked with there was Christian Bale, the movie's star). But he's dividing his time mainly between the Batsheva studio and his home in the heart of Tel Aviv, where he lives with his wife, Eri Nakamura, their daughter Noga, a dog named Momo and the two kittens they recently adopted. Our conversation takes place in their pleasant kitchen, but he sounds more cautious than before when commenting about the general situation in Israel. (Full disclosure: We have become friends in recent years, following the interview I did with him and Tomer Heymann in 2015.)

'It was possible to stop on Oct. 10, a few days after the massacre. To try to bring back the hostages – that takes precedence over everything. When will the number of dead be reached that's supposed to let you feel you've won?'

You have always expressed your views and opinions, and that exacted a price: You were a target in a violent and threatening campaign conducted by the ultranationalist Im Tirzu organization, and there were threats to reduce the company's funding – Batsheva, like every Israeli cultural body, receives millions in support from the public budget.

"Im Tirzu is an organization of loonies, to put it mildly. There are wonderful groups in Israel – such as Physicians for Human Rights, Combatants for Peace, Israel-Palestinian Bereaved Families for Peace, Standing Together, Zazim Community Action, Breaking the Silence, B'Tselem and many others – which I support. In my case, creative work is the principal way for me to express myself. If I were to feel that I was truly endangering the company or my family or myself [by speaking out], maybe I would reconsider. Maybe I'd feel afraid.

"I have nothing to lose, because it's my work that speaks, and by means of it I can continue to create and I will continue to create. I think that people who support and believe in me, realize that – even if they won't agree with my views. I've been in situations of that sort many times, in arguments with our executive board. Twenty years ago, I was quoted in Yedioth Ahronoth as saying that the IDF was committing war crimes 30 kilometers from us, referring to the West Bank. I was summoned to a board meeting, there was talk of firing me. It didn't upset anything. Just as 'Jubilee Bells' was a kind of incident that I thought was a storm in a teacup. It didn't rattle me. Maybe because I wanted to distance myself from it.

"The money the government allocates is not the government's money – the government will change and the money will still continue to come in, as it should in an orderly democratic regime. They can make cuts, perhaps, but the criteria have nothing to do with my political views. There are criteria related to quantity, quality, numbers and so forth. Among our private donors, who are very important to us, many might not be as extreme as I am [in my views], but they belong to the group I called 'the builders.' They feel that they belong to me, and I belong to them. I might argue with them, but we agree more than we disagree."

Would you say that the IDF is committing war crimes?

"I wouldn't use that expression today, because it's a legal term. What is happening now is a total mistake. What is happening is cruel, inhuman: millions of refugees on the brink of hunger, without a roof over their heads; mothers who have nothing to eat and can't breast-feed infants; thousands of people, including children, buried, dead and dying beneath the rubble after being bombed by the IDF, which is deliberately killing without ascertaining exactly who the victim is.

"Tens of thousands of wounded people dying, hospitals in ruins. A severe shortage of medication. Tens of thousands of orphaned children and bereaved parents who are part of a dreadful tragedy that was not mandated by reality. Cut off from water, from electricity. The destruction will not bring back the victims of October 7. In my view it desecrates their memory and also reduces the prospect of bringing the hostages back healthy, if at all. What difference does it make whether we call it war crimes or crimes against humanity or 'the devil's balls,' if we don't understand and don't internalize how cruel and mistaken the army's operation in Gaza is?"

You're in an odd position in which you are severely critical of the government's policy, and therefore are attacked here at home, while abroad you're seen as being on the Israeli front line and are attacked there as well, from the other direction.

"Overall, the protest against Israel is not antisemitic, but pro-Palestinian. There is also stupidity and ignorance, but most of the protesters abroad are appalled by the scenes being played out in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and they are also aware that Israel has a far-right, corrupt government.

"I was at a demonstration in Milan in which thousands of people stood for two hours, and you felt a prayer for peace in the air that was far from militant. There were Arabs and Christian clergy around us, and local people. It was a prayer for peace. The heart of those people lay not in hatred but in a desire for peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, based on the belief that most human beings everywhere want to live securely alongside their neighbors, find meaning and economic security, and see their children grow up and succeed in life."

I think that most of those who say they have "sobered up" are referring to the understanding that in Gaza terrorism is supported by the population – in other words that your conception is incorrect.

"There is a difference between the discourse about different nations and the discourse about jihadists, Hamas and Hezbollah personnel. There are more than a billion and a half Muslims in the world. Talking about all of them in the same way is Islamophobic. Hamas and Islamic Jihad are enemies of our civilization, but it's easy to see that the greatest threat to them is a political settlement – that's clear. Using different types of power, such as diplomacy, will diminish their power.

"How is it that a groundbreaking, high-tech country resorts to 1948 methods to fight Hamas? What sense does it make? I'm not talking about developing new means of warfare. The solution must be serious, and the ideas we know and are working with are old ones. But for new ideas to evolve, it's necessary to give up old ones, which is sometimes hard for people. We can and must find a way to weaken them [Hamas]. The solution is not liquidation but neutralization. In a law-abiding country you punish criminals, you don't take revenge on them – and that's a big difference. In punishing a criminal you remove him from the society he endangered and harmed. With revenge you often harm innocent people. Most of those who are talking about disillusionment are actually suffering from temporary blindness."

On the other hand, what mental resources can be marshalled by those who were harmed, or by families of those who were harmed, for them to be able to pursue peace and restraint?

"There is this expression, 'In their death they bequeathed us life.' What is happening now is that in their death they are bequeathing us more dead. 'And when all this is over, again we are three: the next war, you and the picture of me,' as Hanoch Levin wrote in 1968. It's almost boring to think how little we've learned. But I feel, exceptionally, that there is a new power arising here, that there is a group of builders. The destruction must be prevented, there must be a barrier to it. That is the only hope."

The most critical work Naharin has created confronts reality in its post-October 7 version. Not only are the performers infusing it with new meanings and heft; its target audience is also different now.

In the meantime, Naharin may decide to channel his frustration into the dance studio. Even though he had not planned to create a new work so soon, he's contemplating that idea now. And just as recent years were filled with works that seemed to be snapshots of an emotional state with intriguing ramifications, now too it's intriguing to wonder what the current period will engender for Naharin – even if in the meantime it appears as though the ultimate work for the present era was created five years ago.

In any event, he is not talking about retiring. And when he does, it's not clear who will step into his shoes. The disadvantage of the dominance of Naharin lies in that dominance itself. Meaning, one would be hard-pressed to think of a local creator of dance who hasn't been influenced by him, whose language of movement doesn't intersect in some way with Gaga or evoke Naharin's aesthetic vision. The greatest of these individuals, from Sharon Eyal to Hofesh Shechter, have established acclaimed international dance companies of their own. Still, the question – of the successor – is asked from time to time.

"I don't think about that," Naharin says. "I am constantly divided between what I know and what I discover about the people I work with – I don't hide anything. There are presently many people, talented creators who danced in the company, who are succeeding abroad. I don't call them successors. They are good, important creative artists, and they have their own path, and our encounter was meaningful on that path.

"Beyond this, I meet very talented people every day, many of them people I work with. I don't have the feeling that I am more important than them. We have an agreement, in our contract it is I who create dances for them. That doesn't make me more important or smarter. That's barely the case, it's even the opposite. It puts me in my place – and that's a place I want to be in."

HUNGER

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Gazans waiting for flour at a UNRWA depot in Deir al-Balah, last month. "Hunger is a very extreme term," says Minister Zohar. "That's not the situation in Gaza."

Senior figures in the UN, and not only the UN, are talking about hunger.

"Maybe they are referring to the northern Strip, where the situation is in fact tougher, because the supplies don't reach there, and rightly so. Whoever is there needs to go down to the southern part of the Strip. They will not have a shortage of food and water there."

Who is responsible, in your opinion, for the basic sustenance of the residents of Gaza?

"Until not long ago it was the Hamas terrorist organization. We saw how much they cared about their citizens. The only thing that interested them was to destroy Israel. From the moment Hamas is not present, like in the northern Strip, every person is responsible for himself, and those who will go south will meet up with the international bodies there."

But who is responsible?

"According to the information I have received, in the southern part of the Strip, Hamas is still dealing with certain matters relating to civilian needs. When we finish annihilating the organization, we will have to hand over the baton of civilian administration to a particular body, whose identity we don't yet know."

* * *

Hello to attorney Oded Feller, head of the legal department at the Association for Civil Rights in Israel. The UN is reporting severe hunger in the Gaza Strip. Where are the civil organizations in this story?

"ACRI was among those who approached President Biden, together with other organizations, to address issues relating to human rights [in Gaza]. We realized that here in Israel no one is paying attention to these things. We think that the American involvement in this war is critical. The subject is indeed on the American agenda."

What about petitioning the High Court of Justice?

"That doesn't stand a chance; there is no one to talk to. We appealed to them several times on the most basic issues involving human rights, and they threw us out, tarred and feathered. They don't agree to intervene in anything. This isn't the first war in which there has been no point in approaching the High Court, for the simple reason that it does not intervene. It's not willing to discuss the matter. Worse: Not only do you not achieve any positive result, you get a judgment that legitimizes things."

* * *

Hello to MK Zeev Elkin from the National Unity Party, a member of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee. Unlike your coalition colleagues, you think that Israel should assume responsibility for civilian life in the Gaza Strip. Please explain.

"Israel is trying to reduce as much as possible its engagement with civilian issues in Gaza, for fear that in the end it will end up being responsible for them. But with all due respect to fear, that is a shortsighted approach. We must give consideration to all of the most basic issues and think how we prevent humanitarian disasters. We are obliged to be in that picture. It's impossible to be a player who wants to change the diplomatic-political reality in the Strip, and on the other hand behaves like someone who threw the keys into the sea and has no connection. That doesn't work. It makes no sense to operate in Gaza and on the other hand not to address the civilian issue, and let Hamas manage it. That is a major mistake. I've been saying that since the second day of the war."

Is there hunger in Gaza?

"There isn't just one Gaza today. There are many 'Gazas.' There is a dramatic difference between the north and the south. There are 200,000 Gazans in the north, and hardly any aid has reached there, and the situation there is a lot tougher. In the south, aid has entered in very large quantities. The problem is who gets the aid and where it goes. Are there people there who aren't succeeding in obtaining means of sustenance? I believe there are. Especially in the north. Is that the general situation in all of Gaza? No. In any event, the major obstacle is the Rafah crossing. Israel is not limiting the amount of aid."

The question is whether Israel is responsible now for the condition of the civilians in Gaza.

"The State of Israel is trying to behave as though it's not. I think that is a serious mistake. Not only in terms of international law, and not only in terms of morality and values, but also in terms of achieving the war's aims. In the end, the goal is diplomatic-political in nature: for Hamas not to rule in Gaza any longer. People's basic existence is a critical issue when it comes to achieving that goal. Take, for example, a fisherman in Gaza. Until October 7, he was dependent on Hamas for providing 20 percent of his needs. Now he's sheltering, and in most of the places of shelter, especially those belonging to UNRWA, the managers are Hamas people. The manager of the shelter decides how much food and water the man will receive, so his dependence on Hamas has risen to 100 percent. From this point of view, Hamas' control of the population has become stronger since the war started."

And Israel is not in the game.

"We are not dealing at all with the aspects of civilian life there. We are agreeing to allow aid in under international pressure and we are not involved in the question of who is distributing it, whom it is being distributed to and how it is being distributed. In this way we are strengthening Hamas' control over the population. I have been arguing for a long time that this approach must be changed radically. We need to create an effective mechanism to manage civilian life already at this stage, not in the distant future, and [to ensure that] this mechanism will not rest on Hamas personnel."

Do you feel compassion for the non-combatants in Gaza?

"What you're asking is not easy [to answer]. When I think of that fisherman – maybe his son was one of the Nukhba terrorists who infiltrated our communities? It's a complex issue. A large part of the [Gazan] population cooperated with Hamas and also rejoiced and celebrated after the massacre. But in the end, in the territories under our control, what happens there is our responsibility. It doesn't matter how much anger and alienation I feel with respect to the population, in the end we will remain with them, whether we want to or not. It's impossible to evade the issue of what happens with them. It has to disturb you, also in terms of the responsibility involved. It's on us."

Haaretz approached war cabinet ministers Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot with a request to address the issue of hunger in Gaza. Neither of them responded.

NO LAND

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per gallon. (Palestinians use the term "gallon" to refer to a quantity of 16 liters.) Imran says he lost the produce of the 230 olive trees he couldn't get to, whose potential yield would have totaled about 150 gallons of oil. This year they were able to harvest only the trees close to home. Every year each has a harvest that totals 3.5 to 4 tons of olives, whereas this year the yield will be under a ton for each farmer. Each of them estimates that he will lose close to 100,000 shekels in income (about $27,000) because of the unpicked olives.

Their troubles started in 2000, with the eruption of the second intifada, although things worsened in 2011. One day that year, settlers axed 117 ancient olive trees in Burin. The villagers filed a complaint with the police, who told them they were lying and shelved the complaint. In 2018, Zaben was attacked while plowing. Three days later, 120 of his trees were felled. The violence recurred yearly as the harvest approached.

The settlers would roll burning tires into the groves to set the trees ablaze and throw stones at the people doing the harvesting from the top of the mountain. The delight of the harvest season faded. At the same time, the order to coordinate olive harvesting days with the army came into effect. Every year, the village council submitted the harvesters' requests to the Coordination and Liaison Administration, and the army set three days for the harvest.

The two farmers say that if a terrorist attack took place anywhere in the West Bank, the settlers took revenge on them during the harvest, despite the coordination with the army. In fact, they say it's been years since they actually had three days to pick olives. One day, two at most, and the settlers would put an end to the work. Because of the danger, they also stopped bringing women and children to help with the harvest.

The latest incident occurred last year, when 22 olive trees were set afire and another 24 were axed. They have photographs of settlers in their groves, wearing white Shabbat shirts, in some cases accompanied by teens and women, cutting down trees. In June of last year, 180 trees of Burin were set on fire or cut down. They saw settlers pouring gasoline on the trees and torching them. Along the way, the settlers also burned a tractor that was hooked up to a wagon holding 11 sacks of freshly picked olives, and also a private car.

Last year they were given a reduced allotment of two days for the olive harvest. They came to the groves like thieves in the night, they recall, in order to complete the work before being attacked and before the coordination permits expired. At that time they came with the whole village for protection, in case any of them were attacked. And now, this year, they did not pick even one olive from the land on the mountain.

They say, sadly, that this was actually a good year in terms of the crop. But it became the worst year ever, what they describe as the year of "our destruction." They submitted requests to the village council several times. The council passed them on to the authorities, but the reply was consistently negative.

The IDF Spokesperson's Unit provided the following comment to Haaretz: "The IDF and within it the Civil Administration took the necessary actions so that the harvest would be carried out by the Palestinian population in Judea and Samaria, while safeguarding the residents' security. Against the background of the war, the forces conducted security coordination, particularly in the harvesting areas close to settlements, roads and centers of friction. These measures include, among other elements, coordination and close guarding by the security forces, while making it possible for the Palestinian population to harvest olives in all the areas where this can be done, in accordance with the limitations of the security situation."

"We pray to God that he will compensate us," Zaben says.

Now they are looking ahead. Will they be allowed to plow in February? And what will happen in April, with the second plowing? Without plowing, weeds will spread through the groves, destroying the good earth.