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The parents and boyfriend of Shani Kupervaser, 27, a recent graduate of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, watching as her coffin is covered during her funeral on Friday in Haifa, Israel.

On the Front Lines, an Israeli University Grieves and Readies for War

At Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, dorms turned into barracks and medical students manned emergency rooms. Dozens from the university community were killed in the Hamas attacks.

By [Jeffrey Gettleman](#)
Photographs by [Tamir Kalifa](#)

Jeffrey Gettleman reported from Be'er Sheva, Israel, and Tamir Kalifa took photographs in several locations in southern Israel.

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There is a rule at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, in southern Israel, that a management professor shared this week.

“When rockets are fired from Gaza, and you need to find shelter, people in Tel Aviv have a few minutes,” said the professor, Hila Riemer. “Here, we have one.”

[Ben-Gurion University](#), one of Israel’s top research institutions, is that close to Gaza — 25 miles away.

When the unprecedented bloodshed exploded out of Gaza last weekend and Hamas gunmen slaughtered more than 1,300 Israelis, the entire country was shaken to its core and this university was immediately sucked into the conflict.

Dorms were turned into de facto army barracks. Medical students with almost no clinical experience were drafted into the emergency room to plug holes in people. Literature majors and computer scientists rapidly joined an aid operation to box up food, coffee, clothes and (of course) cigarettes and send them to soldiers and civilians in the battlezone.

Virtually overnight, this institution of higher learning, known for its medical school, its neurology department and its cutting-edge climate science, transformed itself into a back office for war.

But Ben-Gurion University has borne its proximity to the violence at an unbearable cost. Dozens of students, professors and members of the wider university community were massacred that day. Many lived in the kibbutzim that were invaded. Others were at the rave party near Gaza that turned into a slaughterhouse. Some are among the 150 people that Hamas marched off to captivity in Gaza, leaving this community in a state of suspended shock.

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Now that tens of thousands of Israeli soldiers are on the precipice of a retaliatory invasion of Gaza, after the Israeli air force has flattened entire city blocks and sent

hundreds of thousands of people fleeing, this campus, with its boxy modern buildings and freshly trimmed trees, is gearing up for another round of devastating aftershocks.

Like practically every other person in Israel, Mr. Chamovitz remembers exactly where he was, what he was doing and the specific words of that first text message he received on the morning of Oct. 7, when the violence erupted.

“Small-arms fire,” a friend wrote from a nearby kibbutz. “Sounds like an infantry battle.”

Classes at the university were supposed to start this Sunday. The 20,000 students were just beginning to come back to the main campus in Be’er Sheva, a large, newish-feeling town in southern Israel.

But the alarm messages never stopped. They only grew grimmer.

By midday on Oct. 7, Ben-Gurion’s med students were called up to Soroka Medical Center, a major trauma hospital affiliated with the university.

“I’d never seen a gunshot wound before,” said Gal Saar, a third-year student.

He then saw many.



Roni Jedwab, right, and Gal Saar, center, medical students at Ben-Gurion, speak to Liron Simchon, a nurse, during their shift at Soroka Medical Center in Be’er Sheva.



A relief hub in Be'er Sheva, Israel, where many Ben-Gurion students are volunteering.

It wasn't simply the volume of casualties that overwhelmed the hospital — more than 700 wounded in 24 hours. It was the severity of the wounds.

“Civilians don't wear body armor. They're not soldiers. Our teams were getting people with several gunshot wounds to the torso,” said [Dr. Shlomi Codish, the hospital's director general](#). “We don't usually see that.”

Mr. Saar, 25, said that many soldiers died in front of him. “You see it, you smell it, you hear it,” he said.

After he shared what he experienced, he grew quiet and stared at the floor.

Another medical student said that one soldier was spurting so much blood from a wound under his arm that the student quickly grabbed a wad of gauze or tissue — he doesn't remember which — and stuffed it in the wound and held it in there for an hour until the soldier could be whisked to an operating room.

The university's administration had to make several quick wartime decisions. Classes would be suspended for several weeks, probably longer. Dorm rooms would be repurposed to house reservists. A database would be built to track the community's losses.

“On Sunday, I did something I thought I'd never have to do: I made a mourning protocol,” Mr. Chamovitz said. He changed other things, too, right away. “I don't usually have these,” he said, pointing to two flags propped up behind his chair, an orange one for the university and a blue and white one for Israel. “But it's for Zoom calls. It's needed now.”

Like many others, he had grown almost numb to the dangers brewing in Gaza. Hamas launches deadly rockets at Be'er Sheva all the time. Mr. Chamovitz proudly keeps a piece of one — a long, twisted chunk of metal — in his office.

“I didn’t have an answer for Gaza,” he said. “Gaza is an intractable problem.”

But, he added, “I never thought there could be terrorists running in the streets.”



Among the objects displayed in the office of the university president is a fragment of a rocket that fell in a parking lot of the campus in Be'er Sheva in 2009.



Mr. Chamovitz and his assistant, Nirit Segal, looking at death announcements as they determine which senior university officials will attend funerals or shiva for members of their community.

The university prides itself on the closeness of its community and being a “meeting point” for different views. Many Arab-Israelis study here, and last year, Mr. Chamovitz received violent threats after allowing [Arab students to hold a pro-Palestinian rally](#) on campus.

He said that it was really important right now to “maintain our shared society,” and that he worried about all of the raw feelings coursing through Israel.

Arab students are bracing for the worst. Wattan Madi, a political science and linguistics major and a student leader in the Arab community, said that in the past few days, she had been attacked online and called a “terrorist supporter.” She dreads going back to class.

“I can understand the pain,” she said. “Israelis are terrified with all that happened. But this doesn’t give them any legitimacy to call me a terrorist.”

Every day another Ben-Gurion student, another professor, another member of the wider community is slipped into the ground. On Friday, a bright sunny morning, it was Shani Kupervaser, a recent economics graduate.

She had just landed a job at a top accounting firm. Her boyfriend, Ohad Malul, said she had always been seeking justice. But what Mr. Malul will miss most, he said, was the way she smiled at him alone. “I don’t need anything more,” he said.



Maya Livne, left, comforting her mother, Merav Livne, after five close relatives were killed by Hamas at Kibbutz Nahal Oz. Among them was Maya Livne's aunt, Yasmin Livne-Zohar, who was working on a Ph.D. at Ben-Gurion University.



A photo of Noa Argamani with her parents, Yakov and Liora, at their home in Be'er Sheva. Ms. Argamani, a university student, is believed to be among those taken captive by Hamas.

The university's death toll is a moving target. On Thursday, it was 31. On Friday, it was 46. As recovery crews comb through the wreckage of the assaulted kibbutzim and experts continue to analyze DNA from remains so mutilated or charred they are nearly impossible to identify, the university finds out about more deaths in its ranks.

Dr. Codish, the hospital director, is readying the hospital for the next wave. He has ordered more mobile X-ray machines, more ventilators, more beds and syringes, and all types of new equipment.

“What will come is significant military activity,” he said, referring to the enormous buildup around Gaza. “Last Saturday taught us that whatever we thought we were prepared for, we need to be prepared for much more.”

One scenario he wasn't expecting was a Hamas gunman entering his hospital — as a patient. On Wednesday, Israeli forces apprehended several Hamas members who had infiltrated near Be'er Sheva, showing how fragile things remain in Israel and how inextricably linked the university is to Gaza.

The hospital treated one badly wounded Hamas member before sending him on to a military hospital.

“It's not so simple to treat casualties and attackers in the same facility,” Dr. Codish said. “But we are humans. We have to look at our values and not lose them along the way.”



At the funeral Friday of Ms. Kupervaser, the Ben-Gurion graduate who had just landed a job at an accounting firm.

Adam Sella and Tamir Kalifa contributed reporting.

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