

Who will we be, if and when this long war comes to an end?

By Ron Kronish

I RECENTLY read David Grossman's latest book of his essays and speeches titled *The Thinking Heart*, which was published in October 2024, a year after the great tragedy of the massacres and kidnappings of Israeli citizens and foreign nationals on October 7, 2023. Some of Grossman's fiction and nonfiction books have had a great impact on my thinking over the years, especially two of them: *The Yellow Wind*, an impassioned account of what he observed on the West Bank in early 1987 – not only the misery of the Palestinian refugees and their deep-seated hatred of the Israelis but also the cost of occupation for both occupier and occupied; and *Sleeping on a Wire: Conversations with Palestinians in Israel*, which dealt deeply with the Palestinian Arab citizens of the State of Israel and the relationship of the Jewish majority to them.

The Thinking Heart is similarly influential for my thinking about Israel today and for the future. Most of Grossman's essays and speeches contained in this small but eloquent book were written before that infamous date, but they are all relevant and poignant for our times. In the preface to the book, Grossman tells us what these essays are about:

"The essays collected here chronicle the thoughts and emotions of one person whose entire life has been spent in and between wars. A person who has never known a single day of full, stable peace in his country, and perhaps that is precisely why he has spent many decades fighting for peace."

Indeed, for decades Grossman has been one of the leading voices for peace between Israel and the Palestinians, which is undoubtedly why I and so many other people in Israel and around the world admire him so much. He has never given up on the hope for peace in Israel, despite all the challenges and the obstacles involved. As such, he has been a moral conscience for Israel for a long



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A Gazan youth eats cooked rice from a charity kitchen in Khan Yunis in late August.

time, a fact that comes through loud and clear in this book. He advocates strongly for peace in this book:

"Israel must achieve stability and acceptance with its neighbors as quickly as possible. In other words, Israel must strive immediately for peaceful relations with those of its neighbors who are willing. Yes, this includes Iran, even if the prospects for this are slim. Peace is the foremost national priority for Israel, as it is for many Arab states. Peace must be the primary element in Israel's security policy, for it is a condition no less critical to the state's survival than its military might... In other words, when Israel takes any step towards peace, it does so not 'for the Palestinians,' but rather, to improve its own condition and increase its chances of living a full, secure life in this fickle, violent Middle East."

I find Grossman's approach to the essen-

tial importance of peace in our lives very powerful, especially in these times of the forever wars being pursued by the current extremist government of Israel. It is more important than ever, despite the euphoria of the recent military strikes in Iran by the Israeli Air Force and the American Air Force, and especially because of the persistence of the war of annihilation in Gaza. War cannot be the only policy of this country. It is a risky, dangerous, destructive and death-affirming policy. It is destroying the moral fabric of our existence, as Grossman points out repeatedly and eloquently throughout this book. Like all other previous wars, this one will end one day, too, and we have to prepare now for "the day after."

Grossman takes the name for this book from a diary of a Jewish Dutch woman who lived in Amsterdam during World War II and was murdered at Auschwitz. Etty

Hillesum wrote:

“At night, as I lay in the camp on my plank bed, surrounded by women and girls gently snoring, dreaming aloud, quietly sobbing and tossing and turning, women and girls who often told me during the day, ‘We don’t want to think, we don’t want to feel; otherwise, we are sure to go out of our minds,’ I was sometimes filled with an infinite tenderness...and I prayed, ‘Let me be the thinking heart of these barracks’...the thinking heart of a whole concentration camp.”

Grossman related this story in a speech he gave on accepting the Erasmus Prize in Amsterdam on November 29, 2022. In his speech, he pledged to continue to be a thinking heart, a task that he has assumed and done rather well for decades as one of Israel’s leading authors and peace activists.

For me, the most impactful essay in this book was one written in the midst of the first year of the Israel-Hamas war, on March 1, 2024, and originally published in *The New York Times*. In this piercing essay, Grossman raises many profound questions, which have been on my mind for many months, and on the minds of many other people in Israel and abroad:

“Who will we be – Israelis and Gazans – when this long, cruel war comes to an end? Not only will the memory of the atrocities inflicted by the two nations upon each other stand between us for many years, but, as is clear to us all, as soon as Hamas gets the chance, it will swiftly implement the goal clearly stated in its charter, namely, the religious duty to destroy Israel. How, then, can we sign a peace treaty with such an enemy? And yet, what choice do we have?”

“The Palestinians will hold their own reckoning. I, as an Israeli, ask what sort of people will we be when the war ends. Where will we direct our guilt – if we are courageous to feel it – for what we have inflicted on innocent Palestinians? For the thousands of children we have killed. For the families we have destroyed.

“And how will we learn – so that we are never again surprised – to live a full life on the knife’s edge? But who, in fact, wants to live their life and raise their children on the knife’s edge? And what price will we pay for living in constant watchfulness and suspicion, in perpetual fear? Who among us will decide that they do not want to – or



A woman poses with a sign denouncing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, and National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, and another calling upon then-US president Joe Biden to not support Netanyahu; at a demonstration in Tel Aviv in 2024.

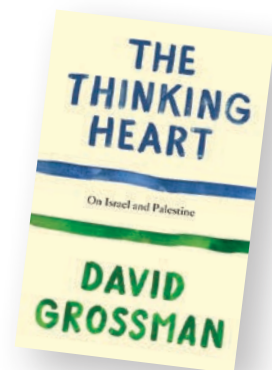
cannot – live the life of an eternal soldier, a Spartan?”

All of these question that Grossman raises are deeply troubling and profoundly existential. There are no simple answers to any of them. But I would argue that he has hit the nails on the heads – i.e., these are precisely the questions on the minds of most of the sane, rational, intelligent, and caring people of Israel (and abroad) right now (who I still would like to believe are the majority of Israeli citizens, but I am no longer sure).

One thing is for sure: The continuation of the Netanyahu/Smotrich/Ben-Gvir/Deri coalition of ultra-“nationalist” and ultra-“Orthodox” anti-modern and anti-democratic Jews will lead us to the abyss. These extremist politicians and their political parties have no reasonable solutions or even directions for leading Israel to a better path for all of its citizens. They have no viable answers to all the central questions of our existence that Grossman raises in his book and has been raising for decades. Instead, they promise us endless war, continued settlement expansion, no peace with the Palestinians, and a less democratic system of government in Israel, if not a dictatorship.

Rather, what we need is new leadership – cultural, religious, and political – who will confront all the questions that Gross-

man raises in this book with commitment, dedication, and a genuine desire to create a just and fair society in Israel. None of the questions that he has raised have easy answers, but we cannot afford to ignore them or sweep them under the rug any longer. Instead, we must come to grips with the kind of country we want to be and can be, using all the creative resources and talents at our disposal. Hopefully, this new challenging book by David Grossman will help us to do this now and in the years ahead. ■



The Thinking Heart: On Israel and Palestine

By David Grossman
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112 pages; \$12