

## I am an Israeli Yogini

“I am an Israeli Yogini.” This statement has folded within it a charged complexity. Unfortunately, the title Israeli is not a neutral one. For some, it brings connotations of war, violence, bombs, occupation, terror, victims, and holocaust. For others it brings up intense beauty, holy land, rich history, and magic.

This article is not intended to describe yet again the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, take sides, or justify one over the other. It is not intended to broadcast for support or apologize. This article's intention is to share my experience as an Israeli who lives and teaches the way of Yoga.

### Does ahimsa mean that when my life is being threatened I give it up for the sake of nonviolence?

Sitting at my desk, with an open window to the beautiful garden of my apartment in Tel Aviv and the morning sounds of birds, I could think that all is well in this world. But all is terribly not well. Today is the fourteenth day of the current war in Gaza and the south of Israel. An hour and half south of where I sit, noises of constant explosions are overcoming the sounds of the birds. This is the reality of war. Many, on both sides, are suffering immensely. My heart is crying with the people in Gaza. My heart is also crying with my girlfriend Tal in Sderot, who just gave birth to a second child and is raising her in the shelter, after raising her first child, who is 7 now, in the same place.

I grew up on a kibbutz in the north part of Israel, right on the Lebanese border.

The familiar background sounds of my childhood were those of birds, and of helicopters, and explosions of bombs. Among my first memories are those of collecting flowers and snails in the fields by my home and others of hearing the whistle of approaching rockets as Mom covers me with her body beside the closest wall she can find. I don't remember myself as a child questioning any of it; there was fear, of course, but it was part of the reality in which I grew up. Despite this challenging existence, my parents raised me to respect all beings by teaching me to “love thy neighbor as thyself,” stick to the truth, avoid violence, and be compassionate.

My questions began later on when I grew up. When I was 21, my first love—a beautiful, gentle, and sensitive being, who was at the same time a tough, strong, brave commander in the Israeli army—was killed in Lebanon fighting terrorists, very close to where I grew up. Besides being devastated, I became very angry. I began doubting everything that tied me to this land and its complex history and *karma* of everlasting violence and death. My pain was so intense, I wanted out.

I took off and traveled for a year and half in the Far East, where I took my first steps on the path of Yoga. And then I went the farthest I could go—to the other side of the world—and lived in America for seven years. At first, the distance from Israel was healing and liberating.

In America I became a Yoga teacher and a Body Mind Centering® Practitioner. The process of becoming an embodied, aware being was and still is the most healing path I could choose. It was through making peace within that I could begin to make peace with that which was around me and to accept my identi-

ty and *karma*. It was through the deepening of *satya* (truth) in Yoga that I realized that there is no place far enough to hide from myself, or my fears, or traumas. Despite my honest efforts to make America my home, it wasn't and will never be. I returned home to Israel.

And my home remains a very charged and complex land. To be present here offers endless moments of challenge on spiritual and humanistic levels. As an Israeli Yogini, I am questioning what is the meaning of *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and how do I teach it to my students? Does *ahimsa* mean that when my life is being threatened I give it up for the sake of nonviolence? Or do I fight back and practice nonviolence towards myself? How do I practice *aparigraha* (not grasping) when my homeland is desired by someone else, and I have no other place to go? And what if I believe that there must be ways other than war to resolve conflicts but also realize from experience that sometimes there seems to be absolutely no other way? How do I continue to live my life, teach Yoga, laugh, love, eat, and enjoy this abundance around me and at the same time feel the pain of so many suffering and dying beings at this very moment because of the war? How do I make sense of having conflicting feelings of guilt and mercy, fear for my life and desire to survive, and anger and hope all in the same breath?

There are no easy answers and there is never a way to make sense of war. Especially in times like this, the practice helps me to find the ground again; *Atha Yoga-Anusasanam*. Right now is the time for Yoga, for being with what is. What I am practicing and teaching is to simply observe all that is with the least amount of judgment or criticism I can muster. I practice allowing myself to experience the complexity as is, without running away to India, or America, or the moon. I do not expect my Yoga practice to become a vacation from my reality but instead a sane place to return to and observe my feelings and experiences from. It is through becoming aware of what it is that I truly feel and experience that I can learn to relate to it and respond intelligently. In raising awareness within myself and





## Wage Peace by Mary Oliver

Wage peace with your breath.  
Breathe in fireman and rubble,  
breathe out whole buildings  
and flocks of redwing blackbirds.  
Breathe in terrorists and breathe out sleep-  
ing children  
and freshly mown fields.  
Breathe in confusion and breathe out  
maple trees.  
Breathe in the fallen  
and breathe out lifelong friendship intact.  
Wage peace with your listening:  
hearing sirens, pray loud.

in others, *ahimsa* becomes something we feel from inside rather than an abstract concept.

As part of my practice, I made up an imaginary friend in Gaza whom I call Aziza. She is the same age as me, and when I sit for meditation I use her image for my visualizations. At first I visualized myself knocking on Aziza's door with fruits from my garden, and we sat on her balcony and shared stories about our lives. But then being a bit more realistic I backed up some and now simply visualize Aziza living a peaceful life in Gaza—taking her children to the park or the beach, developing her career, maybe completing a degree in psychology; and I visualize myself on the other side of the border doing the same—raising children with no fear, continuing to teach and deepen my practice. Sometimes I get ambitious and visualize us meeting and talking over a cup of tea somewhere in the world.

I must believe this is possible—otherwise, why bother living?

Again and again I appreciate how strong life is and how strong the desire to live is. I am grateful for this power, and for the tools Yoga provides us with to transform the most painful, challenging moments into meaningful realizations and growth.

I read the following poem by Mary Oliver to ground myself in times like this, reminding me of the preciousness of life and of the simplicity by which peace is really made.

Remember your tools:  
flower seeds, clothes pins, clean rivers.  
Make soup.  
Play music, learn the words for thank you  
in three languages.  
Learn to knit, and make a hat.  
Think of chaos as dancing  
raspberries,  
Imagine grief as the outbreath of beauty  
or the gesture of fish.  
Swim for the other side.  
Wage peace.  
Never has the world seemed so fresh and  
precious.  
Have a cup of tea and rejoice.  
Act as if armistice has already arrived.  
Don't wait another minute.

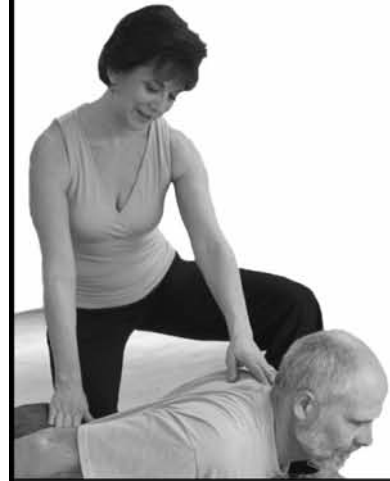
## YTT

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