

How to Remain a Humanist after a Massacre in 17 Steps

a play by Maya Arad Yasur

translated from Hebrew by Shir Freibach

introduction by Sharon Aronson-Lehavi

Introduction

Maya Arad Yasur is an Israeli playwright and dramaturg. Her plays have been translated, published, and produced in Europe, the US, and Israel. They include *Suspended* (2010), *God Waits at the Station* (2014), *Amsterdam* (2018), *Bomb: Variations on Refusal* (2020), *Exciteers* (2020), *Triage* (2023), and *How to Remain a Humanist after a Massacre in 17 Steps* (2023). Yasur's political drama explores the moral dilemmas of the ways identities are constructed within complex historical and contemporary contexts. Her dramatic rhythm and writing style portray the fragments of life experiences, thoughts, emotions, concerns, and intuitions of her characters, many of them women. Her feminist-informed dramatic language uses undertones, understatements, and subtle humor, which in response to severe and traumatic political events acquires an unsettling sense of urgency.

Yasur wrote *How to Remain a Humanist after a Massacre in 17 Steps* 10 days after 7 October 2023. The protagonist, a woman, a mother, and a writer, asks herself the titular question of the play. In 17 short scenes she alludes to experiences that were part of the physical and psychic reality produced by the 7 October massacre. The two prologs of the play reflect the impossibility of locating one linear starting point for the overwhelmingly chaotic times and events. However, beyond capturing trauma while experiencing it, the drama of Yasur's piece is located in the crisis of her protagonist's worldview, which has been shattered by trauma and atrocity: her belief in humanist values, the *raison d'être* for creating activist political theatre.

“How to,” as in the title of the play, is both the beginning of a question and, conversely, the beginning of an instruction manual, hence the list of “do’s” and “don’ts” in the 17 scenes of the play. The character’s internal conflict—her *psychomachia*—is between instinctive and cultivated thought, between despair and hope, between rage and compassion. In spite of the fear of the collapse of her values (“how to” with a question mark), she is determined that her humanist ideals must prevail (“how to” as a list of actions). The urgency to fiercely protect one’s children is at the heart of her struggle to save her humanity, values, and ideology, and is what leads her to cling to faith in “the simple truth: there are mothers like you across the fence as well.”

The first production of the play, directed by German-based theatre artist Sapir Heller, premiered in November 2023 at the Landestheater Württemberg-Hohenzollern in Tübingen, Germany. In Heller’s version, a single actress struggles throughout the text by performing a long and exhausting squat, challenging the limits of her body and of metaphor. Heller’s staging of the play was performed in more than 15 theatres in Germany and Austria, including the Münchner Volkstheater (Munich), the Schauspiel Stuttgart, the Schauspiel Frankfurt, and at the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin in June 2024. An Israeli version of Heller’s staging was presented at the Jaffa Theatre (Tel Aviv-Jaffa) and performed by Michal Weinberg, coupled with Caryl Churchill’s *Seven Jewish Children* (2009), which, according to Yasur, resonated in her writing of this work (see Anderman 2024). Additional productions were seen at Staatsschauspiel Dresden, Germany

(directed by Lily Sykes and coupled with Izzeldin Abuelaish's *I Shall Not Hate*); Voices Festival, Washington, DC (staged reading); the Interplay Jewish Theatre, Cleveland (staged reading performed by Derrid Ring, coupled with Anat Gov's *Ob, God*, 14 April 2024); the University of Colorado, Boulder; and more. To date, Yasur's play has been translated into English, German, French, Swedish, and Polish, and has been published in German in *Theater Heute*, as well as in the Swedish magazine on art and culture *Cora*, in Hebrew in *Haaretz*

Newspaper, and is about to be published in Dutch with *Die Nieuwe Toneelbibliotheek*.

Reference

Anderman, Nirit. 2024. "How do you remain humanistic after October 7? This Israeli playwright tries to find out." *Haaretz*, 17 January. www.haaretz.com/life/2024-01-17/ty-article-magazine/premium/how-to-remain-humanistic-after-a-massacre-this-israeli-playwright-tries-to-find-out/0000018d-17be-d695-a3dd-57bf0c370000

—Sharon Aronson-Lehavi

Note from the Playwright

I am very happy for every opportunity to stage *How to Remain a Humanist after a Massacre in 17 Steps*. Because it has been staged on different occasions and in different places by now, one thing I learned that I should do, because I don't have much control, is ask the organizers of any production or staged reading to be thoughtful about the context in which the play is presented. I don't want the play to serve as a fig leaf for a pro-Palestinian event using my play to claim that the event is "balanced." The opposite has also happened and upset me. *How to Remain a Humanist* was staged at an event about the Holocaust that recalled Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass, 9–10 November 1938), implying that 7 October 2023 was equivalent

to the European persecution of Jews—as if there is no state and an army to defend us; as if the Israeli reaction to the brutal attack did not kill tens of thousands of Gazans, including children. It is important to me, at this point in the Gaza war (August 2024), and especially at US universities, to make sure that my play is not presented in a one-sided context, but rather presented only in contexts informed by transitional justice, bringing together people of both sides to acknowledge the pain of the other, as a crucial step on the way to healing. That's what I set out to do with my writing. In short, I don't ask what other plays will be presented next to mine, or who will be the speakers and what will they speak about. I just want to trust that the overall purpose is in line with what *How to Remain a Humanist after a Massacre in 17 Steps* seeks to do.

Maya Arad Yasur is an international playwright based in Tel-Aviv. Her plays, dealing mostly with questions of identity, exile, and war through a dissection of narrative mechanisms, have been produced and published in more than 13 languages. Her play Amsterdam (2018) had more than 20 productions worldwide. She is the recipient of the Berliner Theatertreffen's Stückemarkt prize for Amsterdam, the International Theatre Institute award for Suspended (2011), the Habima award for God Waits at the Station (2014), and the city of Tel-Aviv Rosenblum Award. Other plays: Ten Minutes from Home (2015), Bomb—Variations on Refusal (2020), Exiteers (2020), and Triage (2023). <https://www.iprltd.co.uk/>

Shir Freibach is an award-winning literary translator, theatre director, dramaturg, and playwright. Her over 40 theatre translations to date have been staged internationally, including in the United States, United Kingdom, Israel, Kenya, and the Philippines <http://www.shirfreibach.co.uk/>.

Sharon Aronson-Lehavi (Tel Aviv University) is Associate Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies and former Chair of the Department of Theatre Art. Her recent book, Performing Religion on the Secular Stage, was published with Routledge in 2023. sharonlehavi@tauex.tau.ac.il

Prologue #1¹

6:30am

A woman is in bed,
asleep.

The dog is barking.

Why?

He's probably hearing
something from afar.

A siren intensifies like
the trickling of a first
rain that all at once
turns into a flood.

The Flood.

She jumps out of
bed, runs to the next
room, tries to wake the
children, they are not
waking up. Not awake
enough to get up and run. She transfers one
to the bed of the other, and lies over them as a
human shield.

The dog calms down.

She swears and prays.

Something like: "God protect my children from
those fuckers."

The dog is barking again. He's probably
hearing the gate opening.

A few seconds later there are loud bangs
on the door. Loud bangs as if someone is
looking for shelter. From the first rain that
became a flood.

Woman—"It's open!!!!"

The dog is barking.

The door is reverberating from the force of
the fists.

The siren goes down and up.

"Open up! Open, it's me!"

It's the voice of the neighbor.

Woman—"It's open!!!!"

"Open up, it's me!"



Figure 1. *Wie man nach einem Massaker*, directed by Lily Sykes, with Kriemhild Hamann (above), Karina Plachetka, and Nadja Stübiger. Schauspiel Dresden, 28 February 2024. (Photo by Sebastian Hoppe)

She will not get up. She is the human shield of
her children. That is her role in the world.

There is no neighbor in the world that she will
abandon her children for, right?

Why is this neighbor placing her in this
dilemma anyway?

All the years of their upbringing prepared her
for this moment.

Is this a calling?

This is a hermetic point in time.

This is biology. No one can trump biology.

She will not get up now even if God reveals
himself to her and asks her to sacrifice her
children for him. And even then, she will laugh.
They are not Isaac.

"Open the door, it's me!"

"But the door *is* open!"

Why isn't she opening it?

Can she even hear her shouting?

How can you hear anything when outside the
sirens are wailing like jackals.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

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Figure 2. *Wie man nach einem Massaker humanistisch bleibt in 17 Schritten*, directed by Lily Sykes, with Kriemhild Hamann, Karina Plachetka, Nadja Stübiger, and Kriemhild Hamann. Schauspiel Dresden, 28 February 2024. (Photo by Sebastian Hoppe)

Open it! Open it already! Just press down on the handle and open it!

Why are you shouting like this, Mom?

Breaking news:

Heavy barrages of missiles in the south and center of the country.

Following the barrages: increased readiness of the air force and the southern command center.

The forecast: a slight drop in temperature.

Everything's fine my sweet boy.

We have a strong army. Will it win?

We have an Iron Dome. Does it surround the sky?

Across the border there are people who simply want to live in peace as well.

Do not forget that, my sweet boy.

Prologue #2

Where's the army?

Where's the army?

The people are abandoned there!

Call Ilanit!

Armed terrorists are wandering about in our neighborhoods and the residents have locked themselves up in shelters, too afraid to go out.

May God keep our Ilanit safe.

She's not answering her phone.

A voice message: Ilanit, are you okay?

Are you here?

Ilanit?

Thank God, she is typing.

There are terrorists here, she writes.

Where?

Outside.

And you're in the shelter?

Yes.

All 3 of you are in the safe room?

Yes, and my mother, too.

Is there someone in your house?

She's not answering.

She's not answering, it's been 3 minutes.

She's not answering, it's been 4 minutes.
She's not answering, it's been 5 minutes.
Ilanit?

How to Remain a Humanist after a Massacre in 17 Steps

1. Turn the TV off. Switch off all media and every social network designed to radicalize your feelings out of capitalist motives. Do not open videos that your friends sent you privately. If they sent something that shocked their souls, they were not your friends to begin with. If you've seen some extremely graphic footage of women being raped, elderly women being abducted, or burnt bodies, you will collapse internally but you must remind yourself: there are mothers on the other side of the fence as well.

2. Keep up to date. Ignorance is not a humanist principle and there is no point in pretending that inhumane things don't happen every day. Every budding humanist knows that the world is not a candy store. Expand your knowledge, read, listen, but only to nonvisual media. War porn tickles the goddess of vengeance in her armpits, in her feet, and in her curves—and from there the road to stop being a humanist is very short.

3. Do not listen to male commentators. Do not listen to male commentators with a military background. Do not listen to male commentators with a military background and political ambitions. Do not listen to male commentators with military backgrounds, political ambitions, and silver forelocks combed sideways in a way that accentuates the mysterious glint in the corners of their eyes. The glint in their eyes is a reflection of the blades of swords, not of love, of Narcissus reflected in the lake in the moonlight, not of your heartbeats. No, those are not the eyes that have seen everything, the eyes that know everything, the eyes that understand everything—no. Those are the last eyes you will see as a humanist. Do not forget: there are mothers on the other side of the fence as well.

4. Speak to your friend whose son was abducted, whose mother was burnt alive, whose sister-in-law was brutally raped. You have to. You want to. She's your friend. She

needs you. You will think about her from morning till night. You'll be tormented, you won't sleep at night. Don't ask her to see the mothers who are across the fence; she's incapable of that and shouldn't have to. If she succeeds, she is not human—and you believe in the human. You will hang up the phone and feel emotionally and physically drained. You'll want to murder anyone who is remotely connected to the person who did this to her. You will hang up the phone and hear his voice clearly, that of the antihumanist lurking within you, calling you to smash, destroy, demolish every road, every building, every person, every dog, who has an arm and a leg in the atrocities you've heard about and if you followed instructions one and two, luckily you did not see. And you will fail to realize that you have to come to understand that there are innocent people there, that there are people there whom the terrorists themselves are using as human shields; and you will fail to hear words like "human rights" and "laws of war." At that moment you will only care about her, your friend, whose childhood landscapes are smeared with blood, semen, and the stench of burnt human cadavers. This cannot happen again, you will think. Everything must be done so it will never happen again. Everything. So it will never happen again. To any girl and any mother on either side of any fence.

5. Eat pizzas and pasta, chocolate, lots of chocolate, drink alcohol, go back to smoking. Shag like an animal—it is human. Sleep for 24 hours on sedatives, do hard drugs, do light drugs, anesthetize, sanitize, scroll, punch the wall, but do not forget: there are mothers on the other side as well.

6. Don't turn to God. If there were a God and if God wanted you to be a humanist, he would not have allowed the human animals who came from across the fence to shoot toddlers. Even if there is no God, there are mothers on the other side of the fence.

7. Call your friends on the other side of the fence, they are humanists as well, and they too believe that people on both sides just want to live in peace. You would want them to tell you that it's incomprehensible what happened there, that the rapists, the killers, the slitters, the torturers, the kidnappers—they don't

represent them, no; you'd want them to call them animals, to say it's a crime against humanity; you'd want them to say: I'm so sorry you had to go through that, and I wish the world would settle the score with them; you'd want them to say, I wish we could turn back the clock and together make sure it doesn't happen. Take into account that perhaps they will not tell you exactly what you wish to hear because the terrorists are listening in on them, because the terrorists are threatening them, because the terrorists will fucking fuck the fuck out of their fuckin' mothers if they knew that they are making contact with the enemy. Take into account that maybe they won't even reply to you at all. You won't know if that's because they died, because your army bombed the building where they live, or because they are running with their babies and hastily packed suitcases, piled up on dusty baby buggies, along gravel humanitarian corridors—after all there are mothers on the other side of the fence as well.

8. Call your mother to ask how she is, she is also a mother. Everyone is inwardly crushed like gravel, and everyone needs to know that they're not alone. Take into account that she may tell you that they must be wiped out, until the very last one of them, until the last hostage returns home. You have to remember: she is no longer a humanist. She did not abide by the previous seven instructions, but you are on step eight; you should know by now how to defend against the nonhumanist and keep thinking that there are mothers on the other side of the fence as well.

9. You will sometimes feel the cynicism and the chill in the sentence: there are mothers on the other side of the fence as well. Those mothers gave birth to the animals, a voice that sounds exactly like yours will tell you. But you know that this cannot be. You know what it is to be a mother. You already know that it is pure biology: your cub must survive. You know that it's not true that she raised him to hate; you know it's not true that she sent him to rape; that it is impossible that there's a mother in this world who wishes for her son to become an animal, and die. And you will say to yourself: it cannot be, after all there are mothers on the other side of the fence as well.

10. Look for small human stories. One of them, a bicycle shop owner, gave out bicycles

with helmets and colorful bells as a gift to children who survived the massacre. He said: I have no other country, and it warmed your heart. He said: we grew up here on your side of the fence and here we will go on raising our children, and you felt that there is hope for peace. And he said: and if a missile hits my home, my child will be treated by one of your doctors. And you feel that it's all meaningless, that on the other side of the fence there are mothers, and fathers, human beings as well, and they only wish to live. And someone will post this online: that one of them donated 50 bicycles to the victims of the terrible massacre! And all your people will call out: you are the human spirit at its best! And all your people will call out: protect those of them who really want peace! And all your people will call out: the bicycle shop owner gives hope for coexistence! And all your people will call out: we will buy bicycles only from you! And you will think, how good it could be if there was no fence at all. But then unidentified armed men will come and torch his shop and you will think that there is no hope for us and for those who are on the other side of the fence.

11. You are primed to deal with the next stage. Ready? There are mothers on your side of the fence whose children are on the other side the fence. You'll take a moment to digest: the mothers are on this side, and the children are on the other side. They are not sleeping in cribs. And you will ask yourself: how do their mothers sleep at night? And at that moment you yourself will stop sleeping. You will read about an autistic girl who was kidnapped, whose mother is hoping that she retreats into herself and is not crying. You will figure out why that is. You will try not to think about that girl but you will never manage to get her out of your head. Sooner or later you'll come to the thought: What if it was your son who was across the fence, while you're here safe and sound? And what would you have done if, and how would you have slept when, and how you would not have cared anymore who else, besides your son, is on the other side of the fence.

12. Protect your children from too much information. Don't let them watch the news or hear the generals, the president of the United

States, or the prime minister addressing the nation. It is not your children they are thinking about when they're writing their speeches. But if perchance it happens that the children are sitting in the car with their father for five minutes, just five minutes, on the way home from a friend's house, and in those five minutes he manages to destroy the entire defensive shield against too much information you have constructed

around them for days on end, because he must, he simply must listen on the radio to the speech of the Chief of the General Staff who says: "We will dismantle them until we will bring all the kidnapped victims back home," and at bedtime your children will suddenly ask you, in that soft voice they have when you're putting them to sleep, a question that will surprise you, because you thought that the defensive shield against too much information, which took all your strength to construct around them, was working: "Mommy, is it true that they kidnapped babies?" And they will ask: "What's kidnapped?" And they will ask: "What are they doing to them?" Get ready: upon hearing those questions you will want to kill. First and foremost, their father. Then the Chief of the General Staff and then once more the human animals who kidnapped and burned and raped. You will want to kill no matter who. You will want to kill no matter how. You will want to kill no matter what they might do to you. You will want to make someone feel what you felt the moment you discovered that your children's souls are stained with the blood of too much information about evil. That the cloak of innocence in which you wrapped their hearts is torn to pieces. You will want to go on a mass-murdering spree. But you won't. You will look carefully at those children and you will tell them something like: Yes. They took children. It's the first time this has happened



Figure 3. Choir production of *How to Remain a Humanist* directed by Tina Brüggemann. Head of choir: Thomas Haller. Theater Aalen, Germany. (Photo courtesy of Maya Arad Yasur)

and it will never happen again. And you will tell them: It happened by the border and will never happen to us here. And you will tell them: Our army is strong. And they'll tell you: Right, it will dismantle them. And you will flinch and whisper: but there are mothers on the other side of the fence as well.

13. Volunteer. Volunteer to sort out clothes for donation, to donate food, to speak with childless elderly people, to look after children of essential workers, to adopt abandoned dogs, to translate communication materials, to transport provisions for the refugees of the massacre, to attend funerals of people who did not have relatives. Volunteer. Volunteer to do anything. Volunteer any time. Any place. And when you'll be asked to write eulogies for 70 funerals because there is no one to write them, because all of the dead people's



Figure 4. *How to Remain a Humanist*, directed by Sapir Heller, featuring Michal Weinberg. Jaffa Theatre, January 2024. (Photo © Raday Rubinstein)



Figure 5. *How to Remain a Humanist*, directed by Sapir Heller, performed by Sarah Grunert. Schauspiel Frankfurt, January 2024. (Photo by Florian Dürkopp)

relatives are also dead or are in trauma and are not up to the task, you'll get cold feet. You will say to yourself: I can't. May someone help us with all this death. And you will not say: there are mothers across the fence as well. Forgive yourself. Tell yourself that a humanist is also allowed to lose the humanism for a moment and not think about the mothers across the fence. Forgive yourself. Move on to the next step.

14. Do not get into arguments about our responsibility for the mothers who are across the fence. Neither you nor your opponent are in a decision-making position and it does not matter and will not help a mother on your side of the fence or a mother who is across the fence who wins the argument. Best case scenario is

you will convince them—so what? Worst case...you will cease to be a humanist.

15. Do not speak with humanists from Europe. It's easy to be a humanist when you observe events from a safe distance. Best case scenario they will convince you but only until you speak with your opponent from step 14. Worst case, you will be so outraged that you'll cease to be a humanist.

16. And in any case, and whatever happens, memorize, write yourself a note on the fridge, write with a pen in a diary, with a lipstick on a mirror, with paint spray on a wall in the street the simple truth: there are mothers like you across the fence as well.

17. Good luck.