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Yali Nativ & Iris Lana

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A Dance Scholar in a State of Emergency

Idit Suslik

Episode 53

Transcript

From the series

Embodied Contacts

Dance in the aftermath of October 7th and the 2023 war

With

Dr. Idit Suslik

Independent scholar, lecturer, and writer. Chair of the Israeli Society for Dance

Research, Activist

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Iris: Hi Yali.

Yali: Hi Iris.

Iris: As part of a series of conversations about dance following October 7th and

the war, we're here at the Mandel Culture Center in Jaffa, at the Yasmeen Godder

Studio.

We are with Dr. Idit Suslik, a Kibbutzim College of Education lecturer, Chair of the

Israeli Society for Dance Research, and an independent dance researcher.

Yali: Hello, Idit

Iris: Hi, Idit. How was your life affected as a researcher, lecturer, and activist in

the field of dance?

Idit: That's a huge question, because I think that the first thing that happened

was that everything stopped. Everything stopped. And I think, looking back, that

2

pretty quickly I went into action. Meaning, I started responding. I clearly remember it in terms of the dates.

I became obsessed with numbers, by the way, since October 7th. Because I'm very active in the fight to bring back the hostages, and numbers have become an issue. The number of days they're there, the number of hostages, and specific dates. And I remember that on October 14th, Avichai Brodutch from Kfar Aza just sat outside the Kirya (IDF HQ in Tel Aviv), because he decided he wasn't going to move from there until his wife, Hagar, and their three children were returned. And when I heard this was happening, I saw it on Facebook, someone posted a photo: "Avichai Brodutch at this moment is sitting outside the Kirya." I just took myself and went there. I just went there. And I was there for a few hours. And a few days later, I already participated in the first activity that was initiated by Michal Vaknin, Eiv Kristal, and Adva Weinstein (art activists). They called it *I'm Here. Where Are They?* And actually, from that moment on, I feel like I'm in some kind of inertia of being in the street, or being in places that are significant in the context of the 7th of October, or more specifically in the context of the hostages, and to talk about it, to lecture about it, bring it to the classrooms I teach.

Yali: Let's go back to the performative action of Michal Vaknin, Adva Weinstein, and Eiv Kristal. Can you tell us about it?

Idit: Yes, basically, their idea was very simple. They decided they wanted to turn a number; at the time, there were 241 hostages, and they decided they wanted to turn the number into a visual quantity. And their suggestion was that people would stand in a line along Kaplan Street, all the way down. There wasn't Hostage Square yet, so actually, all the protest activity was happening there. And there was dramaturgical thinking on their part, because actually, each one of the people standing in that line held a sign that said: "I'm here. Where....?" with the picture. And the choices they made were also related to the visual dimension. That is, mothers who came with babies were holding a picture of Shiri Bibas with Kfir.

They paired families; at the time, there were entire families of hostages. So they paired people with pictures and created clusters of families. They took people with similar physical attributes, beards, glasses, and hair color. It was so tangible, what they created. When I spoke to them afterwards, Michal said to me: "That's what we wanted, we wanted to translate the figure of a number". Because they felt that no one understood what 241 (people) meant, it was very hard to grasp. And when you see that this number actually stretches out as an entire line of people along Kaplan St., all of Kaplan, suddenly it becomes kind of a wow moment, and people's reactions were very strong.

Yali: Whose picture did you hold?

Idit: At some point, I decided to hold Moran Stella Yanai, also because of the connection with Lea (Yanai), her sister, and the feeling that...

Yali: She's part of our community, in the Israeli Ballet (company).

Idit: And this is what I could maybe do, with this small thing of helping Lea. And somehow, I'll say that I have a kind of chronicle of adopting hostages ever since. That is, during various stages, I naturally became connected to certain hostages, some of whom I know through connections of colleagues or friends of friends, and such. And some are simply hostages who touched my heart for reasons of life itself, of being close to my parents' age. And this age group of elderly people who are in captivity for me... it touched on something. And they were mostly the people I held.

Iris: You basically go to Hostage Square and other places that are also relevant, almost every day now.

Idit: In the beginning, I was at Kaplan, and then this performance of *I'm Here.*Where Are They? moved to Hostage Square, when the Hostage Families

Headquarters was established, and moved its center of activities and essentially
took this square (by Tel Aviv Museum), and turned it into a kind of a site, on

which there is also a lot to say in the context of public space that becomes a performative space, with lots of happenings.

Iris: It must be said that it's between the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and Tel Aviv's central library, Beit Ariela.

Idit: And there were suddenly many installations there, of various kinds, that filled the square. And I would go to the rallies that took place there once a week on Saturdays. And at some point, in November artist) Merav Svirsky's action began. She is Itai's sister, who was kidnapped from Kibbutz Be'eri and murdered on the 99th day (mistakenly by the Israeli army).

Yali: What was her action?

Idit: You know how all of these things work on WhatsApp groups, and at some point, a text appears saying something like: "This time a message, not from us about our action, but an action for our colleague whose brother was kidnapped in Gaza. Whoever is interested should contact us privately." And I remember that it was something that happened right then and there. It was a Friday, and the message that went out was: Today at 13:30 at the Tel Aviv Museum square, an action by Merav Svirsky. And I said, "I'm coming to this thing." And I also started attending her actions almost consistently. At some point, she also gave it a name; she called it *Pause Action*. Her goal was basically to raise awareness of the fact that something was starting to normalize, and suddenly things felt not urgent in some kind of way. And she wanted to scream without screaming. Her action was based more or less on the same mechanism as I'm Here, Where Are They?, but she took it to her own places, of a group of people dressed in white, holding a very large sign with text, that is interesting to see how it evolved over this period, because it started from something like, "Stop everything, bring them all back," or "Stop everything, until they are all back." And fast forward to many months later, in the end, I think that in the last action, it was after Itai was murdered, the writing was: "Time is killing them". And she basically took the idea of a group of

people with white shirts, which suddenly became something very distinct, very prominent in the public space, and decided to ignite it in a very slow motion, moving through public spaces, and we actually left Hostage Square at some point. We moved to central intersections in Tel Aviv, such as Azrieli, to Sderot Chen, Habimah Theatre. On rainy days, we did it in the middle of Dizengoff Center Mall. And we would walk slowly, real slow. And each of us, who wasn't holding the big sign, held a picture of a hostage saying: "What did you do today to save..." And the idea was to do it for two hours in silence. Now, as it turns out, silence breaks people. People cried. I found myself crying a lot, I feel like it's rising in me right now. I was crying a lot during that action because there was something in that silence, that people were watching. The silence made me better understand how horrible this situation is, and to be more aware of people's reactions.

Yali: People are the audience? Or people, not the audience?

Idit: It's people who pass by, some of whom... whoever encounters this, some start crying, others ask if they can join us, or ask if they can give a hug.

Yali: Weren't there any negative reactions?

Idit: There was one reaction at the Dizengoff Center Mall, which I think might have been on the hundredth day. The day after, there was already this caption on the news: "Concern for the fate of two hostages, Yossi Sharabi and Itai Svirsky." And this woman came and started yelling at us, she was asking us, "Why are you demonstrating here?", "Why don't you go to demonstrate in front of the Shin Bet (Israeli FBI)?", "Why don't you go to demonstrate in front of the Mossad?", "Obviously, you know that those Kibbutzniks are actually the ones who gave Hamas all the information; it happened because of them." And I remember... The whole idea is that this is a silent action, and I remember that I was listening to her, and tears just started falling, and falling. And it's this mall! She went to the upper level, and from there, we were standing below, she continued yelling at us:

"Why don't you just get out of here, but we want Bibi!" "Why are you here? Why are you against him?" That was hard.

There was a point for me when I felt that something in the rallies wasn't working for me anymore. It was in March, just when this kind of reaching out video came out from Einav Zangauker (mother of Matan). By then, she had already been, for several weeks, at Begin Gate. And she called people: "Just come to support us". And I said, "I'm going over there." And this was basically a small group of hostage families, who were very declarative in their opposition to the politicization the government was doing. Because the hostages are not a political issue, but the lack of handling it is totally political. And I got there, and found myself going more and more. From once a week, it became twice, to three, four times a week.

And for many, many months, I'm there every evening. I feel that I can't move on knowing that there are people who were kidnapped from a party, in their pajamas, barefoot. And that we must bring them back. The option of not bringing them back in terms of what it means about this place, and what it says about us as a society, and that we accept it, is heartbreaking for me. And I really need hope. I need to know that this place has a chance.

What's interesting about Begin, beyond the fact that I found myself suddenly able to shout, be furious, and cry. I think that terminologically, there's a very big difference between a rally and a protest. And there's really something at the Begin demonstrations, because they're truly protests! We do treat them as a solidarity watch with the families, but it's a protest in every way! We block roads. The police help us block them for about ten minutes, and we talk to the people who come there, and we talk with them. I always make sure to hold a picture of a hostage and walk between the cars, and make people look.

And for me, the experience always feels like flattening. Like Baudrillard's Simulacra. I feel that people are sitting in their cars in their indifference, looking

at these pictures and seeing a two-dimensional image, and they don't think that this person is a human being. In general, my experience of this event is constantly internal and external. Meaning, I participated in the first performative acts because I felt that that's what I needed to do. First of all, just collegially. A kind of commitment to colleagues, a civic commitment. But I knew very early on, I felt it, that I'm researching something here, and that I had no chance to deeply investigate if I didn't participate. And because these actions were performed in silence, I also had a lot of time to reflect, to think about what I see, to observe people's reactions to what they see, and I started to put it in writing. About a week after October 7^{th,} I opened a file on my desktop and called it "War". I started collecting materials. This is the second time I've done it as a researcher. The first time...

Yali: And what do you actually research in these situations?

Idit: For a long time, I've been saying, as if jokingly, but it's not a joke, that I'm researching disasters. The first time I had this kind of reaction was during COVID. Shortly after, I opened a "Pandemic" file on my desktop. And I started collecting materials from everything I saw.

I collected things from very serious companies or artists' repertoire, to popular social media reactions. The same thing happened to me with October 7th, first of all, because everything was closed, so many artists posted their works. Zoya Cherkassky-Nnadi with her Guernica series, which was initially posted on Facebook. Same with Engelmayer, who initially posted sketches, very, very immediate, and then started developing his action called *The Daily Postcard*. And he suddenly became a kind of Wailing Wall who receives requests from people like, "Someone from my community or someone from my kibbutz was murdered on the 7th of October, and they really liked rhinos, can you please draw him?" Because his name on Facebook is "Shoshka" (female), the character, his creative alter-ego - "Can you please draw him with rhinos?" And this thing of his has been somehow

institutionalized in this action. So I collected it. And I collected animations that Osi Wald posted, also, from a very intuitive place of hers. Things that she felt, as an animator, things she felt she was creating simply as a kind of release of her own. So I collected and hoarded everything and started updating my "Art and Society" course with these materials.

Iris: At Hakibbuzim College.

Idit: Right. And I've been teaching this course for many years, and it is a political course by definition, where the materials are updated, certainly the political units. And I make sure to update it in real time, hardcore. The day after the "Umbrella Protest", that protest I missed, was just protesting about democracy and not people's lives. I immediately showed the first responses from graphic designers. And I realized that I'm actually investigating mainly the visual culture of this event, which is so hard to grasp, yet has a visual culture, which I understand, in terms of materiality. In terms of space and time, and duration, and absence, and... Works that look at the sound of this event. Works that take catastrophic materials and try to create something, maybe different. A lot of focus on the Earth. The Earth underwent such destruction on that day.

Yali: What do you see in the dance field?

Idit: There's something very interesting in dance now. And in culture, too, in general. I think that after the initial shock and paralysis, it was necessary to understand this and figure out how to deal with it and respond to this situation. So firstly, there was... I think there might have been a kind of grace, when everything was closed, and only in December things suddenly opened. And then there was an explosion of all the events that were postponed since October and took place on the same last weekend of the calendar year in December (2023).

Iris: Budgets....

Idit: Right. Because everything depends on budgets that must be used. And I wonder how they didn't understand there, at the Ministry of Culture, that in a

place like Israel, the concept of the calendar year can't work, because there are wars, and military operations, and all different kinds of things. So actually, many of the festivals that started happening and took place on that weekend...

Iris: December '23.

ldit: Yes. Right. And literally it was something like December 28th, 29th, 30th, we're talking about the eleventh hour.

Yali: Yes, that's when we did Amos Hetz.

Idit: Right.

Yali: And there was the Diver Festival.

Idit: Diver and the Tmuna Festival. At the Tmuna Festival, Niv Sheinfeld and Oren Laor, who are the curators, run the dance program at Tmuna, and they're the curators of a platform they initiated called "Shorties" – evenings of short dance works. And in the festival programme, they included *Big Mouth*, their work from 2009, which premiered on "Curtain Up", a work they created in collaboration with Keren Levi. And *Big Mouth* is a very political work, and to see it now, during this time, I remember I just sat there and sobbed, watching the three of them, Niv, Oren and Carmel, doing this endless walking, dressed in blue and white, walking non-stop, walking and walking and walking, and a few days beforehand, Bibi made a statement declaring the war will not stop, and that we'll continue fighting and they have one option, either surrender or die, something horrible like that. And I remember seeing that image, of the walking, I couldn't stop crying. I mean, something in the situation became a very concrete prism for interpreting everything, and I hear it from friends and colleagues who go to shows now.

Yali: Everything you see, everything.

Idit: Someone recently saw *The Hole* (by Ohad Naharin), she said, "I can't, it reminds me of the tunnels in Gaza." Iris Erez presented *The War Within* at the Kelim Festival, a work she created with Elad Vazana, her partner. A work that actually emerged from his PTSD – a different war.

Iris: Shell shock.

Yali: Everything.

Idit: Everything. There's something in very immediate reactions, which, in my view, is connected to our encounter as viewers, with what's happening – that our prism has been corrupted/undermined/unable to detach from the event. And the more time goes by, the reactions become more deliberate and structured.

Yali: You're talking about the reactions of the artists.

Idit: The reactions of the artists and festivals, too, to events. Suddenly, you can think about how one can curate an event at this time that speaks to the moment. What kind of curation, what kind of dramaturgy do you create? So Erez Maayan Shalev and Itai Doron thought about that in the context of the A-Genre Festival, with all of the committees of inquiry they created. And the Israel Festival, which they called "The Pit", and the decision that the Israel Festival will open in the Gaza Envelope, and the Israel Festival is collaborating with artists and organizations from the Envelope. And Yair Vardi's Medarom Festival. The Medarom Festival was explicitly a collaboration with the Welfare Department of the Ofakim Municipality, which reached out to the Festival to take part in the rehabilitation process.

Iris: The commemoration.

Idit: Right, the commemoration process. And I think there's something very inspiring in choosing artists and cultural figures to think about how to respond to this event as it unfolds. I am dealing quite a bit with the question of what's harder? To respond immediately, or to respond almost a year after this horror? On the one hand, I think that the artists I talk to, I meet quite a few, because they too are regulars at Begin. We're quite busy with this question of normalization. And then many ask: "Ok, so if we create now, are we part of this normalization? Should we continue? Is it right to keep on going?" By the way, it was important for me to be at the Israel Festival and to see how it felt. It was important to go to Medarom and to experience part of the festival. Just this

October, I went to Sderot to Irad Ben Gal's festival. He was the artistic director of "Festival and Its Fracture." And of course, seeing the festival in Sderot, it's about little things. It's Irad welcoming the audience and saying: "We're very excited that you're here, just a few technical things: here, when we have a Red Alert, we really say the words, you'll hear Red Alert, it's not just a siren". These little nuances are just part of it. And for me, as a viewer/researcher/lecturer, who wants to bring her students the most up-to-date events, it was important to embody the experience. Which, for me, by the way, is inseparable from why I'm in the street every day, and why I went to Nir Oz. Because I wanted to see it with my own eyes, not through mediation. And not to go on a disaster tour, but to go with activists. The Pink Front activists and others from Begin. I must say something about this, apropos the Israel Festival. About a week before I went to Nir Oz, I went to the Israel Festival and I saw a work by Volker Gerling, an artist, the only international artist who came to the Festival with an amazing piece called *Portraits* in Motion. It's a practice that he has been doing for 15-20 years. He travels and takes stills of people. He walks through places and documents people with an analog camera. And he creates a kind of flip box, creating a basic analog animation. And one of the things that he said about the piece created especially for the Festival, because that's his practice, that's his craft - he creates something new for each specific context. And for the Israel Festival, because of the situation, he couldn't walk around here. So he came for two very condensed 10-day visits and met all kinds of different people in various places. And at some point, he said: "I feel that I don't know this place deeply because my feet haven't walked here." And when I walked into Nir Oz, I understood what he meant. Because I walked the paths of this hell. And suddenly, I didn't see it in a picture, I didn't see it on the news, and it was important to me to connect all those places. To be on the street and research, and teach. And within all of this, gradually, I probably realized that I think I'm searching for some kind of research-based activism.

I think activism is a very obligating title, which I think that lately I understood I might have earned. In April this year, I presented the beginning of my research on artistic responses to October 7th at the Israeli Association for Theatre and Performance Studies conference. I presented three case studies among several I'm already following. Sharon Aronson Lehavi said to me, "You know, what you're doing is amazing". And I told her that I feel an obligation to follow the artists and creators who are my colleagues and friends. I don't take it for granted that they're out there in the streets or working on their canvas, or whatever, trying to find ways to speak about this horrible thing that we're going through. And to find artistic ways to do it - Choreographic, dramaturgical, and visual. And I feel that I have a duty as a researcher to give it a place and to amplify it because it's an important act. And it's an act that will be remembered. So she said to me: "So you need to talk about it! This artivism isn't only theirs, it's yours." In the context of A-Genre Festival, through the works of Dafna Kron, I came across a concept by a Cuban artist, Tania Bruguera, who talks about "political timing-specific art", which is a take-off on site-specific art. And the political timing, the notion of the politically time-specific art, she talks about it in the context of, after all, we keep thinking about the site, and what the site is, as though, how does one engage with the site and its layers of meaning? She says, there's also the time - the timing of the specific political event, which is also a kind of catalyst for creating art or an activist action, which is a site in itself. And many of the works that I'm currently looking at are exactly that. Tania Bruguera talks about the urgency of artists to act. Wow, so Michal, Adva, and Eiv, that was the peak of urgency! Merav, also because she was fighting for her brother's life! And I feel that in my research, I detect that same urgency, because I must do it.

Iris: Tell us about your work on Snapshot (Tmunat Matzav) at the Tmuna Theatre.

Idit: Speaking of urgency, Snapshot is a project that's been running for three years now. It was initiated by Erez Maayan Shalev when he became the co-artistic director of the Tmuna Theatre. Erez and I are colleagues and friends, and we've already collaborated on various projects related to the written word in relation to the Intimadance Festivals, which he directed artistically with Anat Katz. And Erez came to me with an idea. He said, "There's a wall at Tmuna above the person sitting at the reception, and it's empty and kind of an ugly space and needs to be revived and turned into a gem. And I want your words there. What do you feel like writing?" And I said, "Why don't we write, I don't know, a text that somehow speaks to the situation?" So he said, "Yes, a short text, 400–500 words, where you express your input on something that's, say, really urgent or burning". So I said to him "You know what, let's call it a Snapshot (Tmun(a)t Matzav), as if the eye of the picture (Tmuna in Hebrew) is present". I told him, "That represents me."

And indeed, every start of a calendar year, we change the format a bit. At first, it was just text, and then came the idea of an inspiration board, of lots of citations and a central visual image. And for the current year, we decided that we'd spread it out. Give it some air, fewer quotes, and more room for my words. And it's still essentially a monthly word that I choose. Let's say that at the beginning, it was always something idiotic.

Iris: We are missing here a description of how it looks, it's covering the entire length of the wall...

Idit: Yes, it's shaped like an old parchment scroll, right?

Yali: It's brown parchment.

Iris: Three meters high and text. It has this one word.

ldit: And below it says Dr. ldit Suslik and the month and the year, of course.

Iris: And it rolls down...

Idit: Right, and the edges are frayed, which is really beautiful, a brilliant idea of Erez, and the text is in the middle.

Iris: So, how did it start? What were the first words? And what are the words today?

Idit: So actually, the first word, because I'm very connected... I would really like to resonate with the intersection between art, culture, and society, or reality. So I'm a sponge, I'm SpongeBob. I hear a lot, I read a lot, I'm constantly in a kind of attentiveness, open channels to see what's happening. So the first word, which started in December '22, was Meta. And not because of Meta, the company, because it was exactly when Mark Zuckerberg turned Facebook into Meta. From 2022, the words started to be, naturally, more political, and it was connected; it was about things connected to commemoration, suddenly, there was talk around Memorial Day, or Holocaust Remembrance Day. Words from people, idiotic or inspiring, always provoke me. I mean, it can be something appalling, like, oh, of course, one of the words was brothers, in reference to Itamar Ben Gvir, who said, "we are brothers". And I took it, and the whole Snapshot became a kind of my scream, with a ton of quotes, speaking about what is the essence of Brotherhood, what is the demagogy that stands behind 'brothers' as Itamar Ben Gvir promotes it. So that was 2022. In 2023, which was marked from the start by the protest against the judicial reform, I started feeling that this wall is literally my graffiti wall, only that it is a very educated wall. I brought many quotes from all different kinds of sources, but it was kind of like Fury, In Flames, everything was like that, and always in the context of significant milestones, related to Tmuna (the theater), to Tmuna's festivals. So, for example, Intimadance was themed around... Niv Sheinfeld and Oren Laor, who were artistic directors, spoke about passion, determination, and Hutzpah. And they talked about how they were seeking bodies that were on fire, so the Snapshot word was In Flames. And then came October. Now I must describe to you the moment of what happened in the

transition from September 2023 to October 2023. In September, I decided that the word would be **Utopia**. Yes. I said to myself, for just one moment...

Iris: The last moment.

Idit: Yes. I decided I wanted to summon something good. September, the High Holidays, let's summon utopia. And a week before was the A-Genre Festival, which was called *Imagine for a Moment* – Imagine art, imagine an institution, imagine a country. So I said, ok, the term Utopia can resonate and echo with the festival. And the image turned out amazing. Honestly, it was amazing.

And then October happened. And in October, November, and December, obviously, the theatre was closed. The Snapshots of these months went up at the end of December. And when I thought about what to do with it, there was a very intense conversation between Erez and me, about how do you speak about a reality which cannot be described in words? I ran out of words. And Erez said, "Fine, let's have a blackboard". I told him, "But that's not my language, I'm a person of words. I must insist on words even when there are none. I must find them because that's who I am". And in the end, the snapshots of October, November, and December were Horror, Speechlessness, and Anticipation. For Horror and Speechlessness, there's only the word at the top, empty space-October 2023-Dr. Idit Suslik. And only in December, as an act of hope, the only thing I wrote was a short poem I always add at the end of each Snapshot. And it's just a few lines, most of it is blank, but I wanted there to be a beginning of something, a kind of filling, so that at least I would have words. And throughout the entire current cycle of 2024, I brought myself. I brought myself into the struggle to return the hostages. And all the words I put on that wall, literally, it became my Wailing Wall. All the words were related to the situation. But words that... I mean, the word in such a format cannot be too literal. It's this ongoing conversation with Erez, when I do share with him what I want to choose. I tell him, "It can't be 'War', it can't be 'Death', it can't be 'Failure'. It has to be a word that

is a bit more complex, that will speak with an emotional frequency, or to the

subtext. So yes, I chose **Abandonment** and not Abandoning because I didn't want

to go with the literal. But I did want to talk about the fact that human life has

truly become devalued and neglected here. And it came to me after the last six

bodies (of the hostages) were returned at the beginning of September. And when

I found out that some of the founders of Nir Oz were no longer alive (in captivity)

in June, I chose Life, because I wanted to write about them. I wanted to write

about life, about the sacredness of life. November's Snapshot is Despair, and it

turned out to be one of my most optimistic ones. It has quotes that talk about the

inseparable bond between despair and hope. And in the artist's statement, the

closing of everything I wrote, speaks to this: that there is still one more word to

be written in the cycle of 2024, and for me, we must all do everything we can to

ensure that this word is **Hope**, so that I can hang this word on the wall.

Yali: Thank you, Idit.

Idit: Thank you for this conversation

Iris: From despair to hope

Idit: Yes

Yali: Thank you.

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Featuring

Idit Suslik

From the series

Embodied Contacts

Dance in the aftermath of October 7th and the 2023 war

In collaboration with the Cultural Diplomacy Bureau, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

17

Photos: Yair Meyuhas; Gadi Dagon; Askaf; Natasha Shakhnes; Tamar Lamm; Erez

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Animation: Osi Wald – Purim, they are not Home

Video: Oded Ronen

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Lyrics by Ehud Manor. Piano: Gal Peiser.

Recording of Protests on Begin Road in Tel Aviv calling for the return of the

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Godder Dance Company

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