

Authority Work as Memorial to the Victims of October 7th and the Swords of Iron War at the National Library of Israel

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“Over these I weep. My eye, my eye, endlessly sheds water; for consolation is far from me” (Lamentations 1:16)

On the 7th of October 2023, Hamas terrorists staged the deadliest attack against Jews since the Holocaust. Within days, the National Library of Israel (NLI), acting as an international memory institution of the Jewish people, began collecting materials associated with the attack and the ensuing war for a memorial project named Bearing Witness.¹ Later the war extended to additional fronts, most notably in the north against Hezbollah, against the Houthi movement in Yemen, and against Iran, and was officially named the Swords of Iron War. Consequently, documenting these fronts was added to the NLI mandate. To date, over 20 terabytes of material have been collected. To support the future cataloging of this material, the NLI cataloging section began gathering information to create authority records memorializing the fallen.

The NLI cataloging section is composed of five departments: Arabic cataloging, foreign language cataloging, Hebrew cataloging, indexing/RAMBI (Index of Articles on Jewish Studies), and metadata. The section employs over 40 staff members and handles descriptive cataloging, subject analysis, and quality control on upwards of 7,000 titles per month along with the creation of 100–150 authority records per workday and the administration of Mazal, the collaborative Israeli national authority file.²

Mazal was established in 2014 on the foundation of the NLI local database. It serves over 30 academic, public, and special libraries in Israel and functions as a reference file for Judaica collections worldwide. Mazal includes approximately four million personal, corporate, and family names, geographical headings, topical subjects, work and expression records, and genre terms. Being a multilingual database, Mazal provides headings in scripts appropriate to each of Israel’s four cataloging languages: Arabic, English, Hebrew, and Russian.

Mazal began contributing to the Bearing Witness project in late December 2023, at the request of

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1. <https://www.nli.org.il/en/at-your-service/who-we-are/projects/october-7>.

2. <https://www.nli.org.il/en/research-and-teach/catalogs/authorities>.

the then division head of NLI technical services. An initial list of the murdered and fallen from October 7th onwards was obtained from the Israeli media channel Mako (Keshet 12),³ a channel that has been providing names and photographs for a Memorial Wall in the NLI building.⁴

Within days of receiving the initial list, the cataloging section realized that this component of Mazal required two new policies, since the fallen list would lamentably continue to grow. We discovered that about 12 percent of the strings (first names in combination with last names) already existed in the authority file: some of them were the same person—e.g., Hayim Katsman and Bilha Yinon, while others, like Nira Ronen, were not. As a result, we decided that instead of creating placeholder records to be enhanced later in the Bearing Witness project, we should create these name authorities to the same standards as any other in Mazal. The other policy decision we made was related to the Bearing Witness mandate to focus on the circumstances of death of each named individual. Instead of following that mandate, we resolved to conform to our standing policy about creator files and describe the person as they lived with minimal focus on their death. The information we decided to primarily include consisted of the date and place of birth, names of parents, siblings, partners and children, profession, and last place of residence. Unlike traditional authority records, the Bearing Witness records all bear at least one extended note with details of the person's death where known.

As this section of the authority file is being developed in the midst of an ongoing crisis, questions of policy continue to arise and are vetted in real-time. Decisions are recorded for future reference.

The earliest lists of names were subject to errors due to incomplete information and inaccuracies in reporting, which the NLI team was expected to investigate. Given the emotional load involved, and since the cataloging section was given neither a budget nor a workload reduction in support of this project, only four catalogers worked on the authority records:

- The Cataloging Section Head: created policy, served as liaison to other NLI departments and other memorial projects, and created authority records of all types;
- The Foreign Languages Cataloging Team Leader: focused on authority records for fallen soldiers;
- The Hebrew Cataloging Team Leader: added Cyrillic headings to victims of Soviet, Russian or Ukrainian descent;
- The Cataloging Specialist of the Arabic Cataloging Team: enhanced records of Bedouin and Druze victims.

Other members of the cataloging section, as well as members of the NLI technical services division, did limited amounts of work on the project.

The initial list of victims and fallen soldiers was uploaded to a Google sheet, and columns were

3. <https://www.mako.co.il>.

4. <https://www.nli.org.il/en/visit/exhibitions-and-displays/displays/7-october-victims>.

added for the MARC21 fields that the team wished to add, including fields 046 f and g for dates of birth and death and field 035 for permanent IDs (PIDs) in public digital memorial projects that provided PIDs for individuals.⁵

The first two massive datasets, prepared in early 2024 and in May 2024 for Israel’s Memorial Day, were formatted and uploaded by the cataloging section’s metadata team. Following those uploads, it was decided that new authority records would be added manually, directly in Alma, in the false hope that there would be just a few more names to add. Alongside the dead, authority records were later created for released and rescued hostages and for hostages declared dead. Authority records for hostages still presumed to be alive are created on the basis of literary warrant⁶ or as their fate becomes clear; it was judged to be too much of an emotional strain for the team to investigate the lives of the hostages and then have to close off their dates if worst came to worst.

Our team members often used music as a tool to express feelings and to provide comfort. We have created an open Spotify playlist of these songs, and we invite our readers to take a listen.⁷

DEFINING THE CORPUS

In clarifying the accuracy of the initial lists and as events unfolded in Israel and abroad, it became necessary for the administrators of Mazal and the authority team to define who would become part of the authority list category group and who would be excluded. The earliest and easiest decision was that anyone killed between October 7th to October 9th, including foreign workers and tourists, and anyone recognized by the IDF as a fallen soldier would be included. Civilian victims killed after the initial wave would only be included if they were killed as a result of paramilitary activity (primarily missiles or fallout from interceptions). Civilians killed by lone offender terrorists (regardless of their claimed affiliation to a known terror organization), whether murdered in Israel or abroad, were not included in the corpus. Other security forces killed in the line of duty, such as Shira Haya Suslik who served in the Israel Border Police and was killed in a terrorist attack in Beer Sheva (October 2024), were included in the database, as were other police personnel, fire fighters, counterterror unit members, and local rapid response team members. Survivors who later committed suicide were not included in the corpus. These four Israelis who were killed in Gaza before October 7th are included in the database: the fallen soldiers Hadar Goldin and Oron Shaul, and the civilians Avera Mengistu and Hisham Shaaban Al-Sayed.

In April 2024, NLI joined a group of volunteer initiatives investigating the stories and details of

5. “Death locations of 1204 murdered and fallen during the Hamas attack on Israel between 7–9.10.2023,” edited by Sagi Or, Keren Yalin-Mor and Yuval Harpaz: https://yuval-harpaz.github.io/alarms/oct_7_9_eng.html; “Mapping the Massacre”: <https://oct7map.com>; “Memories in the Public Sphere,” Yael Netzer, Keren Shuster: <https://undusting.org/wallsOf710/s/remembering/item-set/2078>; and the National Insurance database of civilian victims of terror, <https://laad.btl.gov.il/Web/He/HaravotBarzelWar/Default.aspx>, all accessed December 10, 2024.

6. <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/literary-warrant.html#:~:text=n.,A%20written%20requirement>.

7. <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6sXKQKqmGj8fEIKZKS596l?si=L9fKMNC0T8CaHVILizjbXw>.

the fallen, working together to create the One Source of Truth database. This database, which will be donated to NLI in 2025, helped create order out of the chaos. Using official and informal connections, volunteer teams verified the names of each victim in both Hebrew and English, their country of birth, place of residence, location of the event which caused the fatality, place of death⁸, date of birth, date of fatal event, and date of death. Over a dozen names reported during the early days of disarray were disproved, and a handful of officially recognized victims of terrorism from December 2023 are on hold until a connection to October 7th and/or the war can be established.

THE WORKFLOW

The initial list of names was batch loaded to a Google sheet, and names (without qualifiers or dates) were tested against the existing database to locate duplicates. Official government bodies, municipalities, and local councils expected to have information on the victims were contacted but did not always cooperate or sometimes requested that the source of information not be revealed. We learned that much of the official information was stored in text strings that could not be data-mined for sharing purposes.

The IDF official response was both positive and helpful. It assigned a dedicated liaison to the library who worked with the team to create accurate NLI authority records and offer periodical updates. The information provided was extremely useful, but it is not available on the IDF memorial pages,⁹ and the general public has no direct access to the metadata.

Since the NLI authority database follows international librarianship standards and allows for easy distribution and documented ability for incorporation into other knowledge bases, we decided early on that we would be the public face of this information and extended our Creative Commons CC0 license¹⁰ to include the authority records for the fallen. Individual information access requests could not always be accommodated; several requests were made for category-based retrievals in advance of the High Holidays, but NLI did not have the staff available to tailor specific subgroupings. As of December 2024, the national authority database Mazal is freely available to the public, and anyone can collect information and MARC21 records from the NLI page. A librarian view is available within the Alma Community Zone and on a Primo discovery layer.¹¹ All Mazal name authority records, including the names of the fallen, are routinely sent to the Virtual International Authority File.¹²

8. On October 7th, many civilians were wounded in one place and died in another as they tried to reach safety. As the IDF's ability to airlift wounded soldiers off the battleground increased, more fallen soldiers died in Israeli hospitals of wounds suffered in Gaza or Lebanon.

9. <https://www.idf.il/%D7%A0%D7%95%D7%A4%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%9D/%D7%97%D7%9C%D7%9C%D7%99-%D7%94%D7%9E%D7%9C%D7%97%D7%9E%D7%94/>

10. <https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/deed.en>.

11. https://merhav.nli.org.il/primo-explore/search?vid=AUTH&lang=iw_IL.

12. <https://viaf.org>.

The small team creating the authority records relied heavily on open-source information found online on news sites and information provided by families. The source of each piece of encoded information was meticulously documented in the 667 and 670 note fields, with direct links where applicable. In addition, the authority team took on the maintenance of the NLI Memorial Wall and by doing so, was provided access to family and friends of the fallen. When responding to their requests for changes to the wall, they were queried about missing authority data; this source was also duly recorded in the 670 note fields.

Since most memorials were initiated by close family members, it was difficult to document information about nuclear families who were wiped out (six members of the Kedem-Siman Tov family, four members of the Kapshiter family, five members of the Kutz family). Similar information gaps were found when attempting to document the lives of older singles and of family groups such as the Katz/ Asher/ Mozes families who were murdered or kidnapped from Kibbutz Nir Oz.

An important source of information were the memorial stickers which are the most prominent signs of public mourning after October 7th. Created by families, friends, and organizations, these stickers feature pictures of the victims and a quote summing up their life and worldview. Biographical information is often included, particularly preferred names and years of birth. Initiatives such as the Memories in the Public Sphere digital project (see footnote 7) provided photographs of these stickers, and individuals who visited memorial sites such as the grounds of the Nova music festival posted photographs of stickers to social media. Authority project team members also photographed stickers in the public sphere as they encountered them in their daily life. Gravestones for soldiers served as another important early source of information. In February 2024, graves in the Mount Herzl National Military Cemetery were photographed for that purpose, and later the phone app *Netive zikaron* (Remembrance Paths) provided access to photographs of all relevant graves in Israeli military cemeteries. The national insurance website provided similar access to the majority of civilian graves.

THE FACES

The first military casualty of October 7th was the Nahal Brigade commander Colonel Yehonatan Steinberg. The 700th fallen soldier, paratrooper Sergeant Amit Tsadikov, was killed just over ten months later on August 24, 2024. It took less than three months for another hundred soldiers to fall; the 800th soldier, reservist First Sergeant Roi Sasson, was killed on November 19.

The last civilian whose status was unclear was Bilha Yinon of Netiv HaAsara. Her house was burned down by Hamas terrorists. She and her husband were believed to be inside the house, but only the husband's DNA was found. The family sat shiva for Bilha, but the IDF would not definitively declare her dead until August 2024, when archeological teams finally uncovered evidence that she had been murdered on October 7th.

The youngest victim was Na‘amna Abu Rashad. Her parents were on the way to the hospital for her birth when terrorists shot and injured her mother; the baby died 14 hours after birth of wounds sustained *in utero*.

On and on they continued to come, day after day, name after name, face after face, over 1,800 stories to research and to record. Lieutenant Colonel Tomer Grinberg, killed in Gaza in December after having saved the freshly orphaned Berdichevsky twins in Kfar Aza. Staff Sergeant Yedidya Azugi, killed in Gaza in May after surviving the horrors of Sderot on October 7th, the day he and his brother answered six-year-old Romi Swisa’s plaintive cry, “are you with Israel?” and rescued her and her three-year-old sister Lia from the car in which her parents were murdered along with Amer Odeh Abu Sabila, a Bedouin contractor who had tried to rescue them.

The names and stories are more than metadata to the authority team members; they have become part of the fabric of everyday life. We remember dates of birth, places of death, family ties, who went to school or youth group with whom, and nicknames given by parents and friends. The information we found about the lives cut short and the dreams that will never be realized have infiltrated our own lives and dreams.

WORKING WITH VICTIM FAMILIES

The authority team was further drawn into the stories as more divisions in the library became aware of our task and asked for assistance where our work intersected with theirs. NLI archivists turned to us for help in creating authority records, the public relations department asked for lists of victims whose works are included in the NLI collections, and our digital services team asked for help maintaining the Memorial Wall, since we knew so much about the people behind the names. The NLI Visitor Center asked us to offer lectures about our work and to help train the library’s tour guides. Most importantly, as visitors began to fill the library’s public space, including internal refugees from the north and south of Israel, the tour guides began to give our contact information to friends and families of the fallen. Some of them wished to share how much seeing their loved one’s name in the national library meant to them; others wanted to enhance the information on the Memorial Wall or change the picture of their loved one; while some were looking for additional ways to memorialize the fallen within the mandate of the library.

We found ourselves dealing with requests to add information that was out of scope within the framework of an authority record¹³ or to remove information publicly available on other platforms. These requests involved us in the conflict between the Israeli government-issued mandate to document the war and family requests to control the narrative or entirely remove their loved ones from the record. Having no training in grief counseling, we found ourselves in long, tearful conversations with mothers and grandmothers experiencing unbearable pain. We had to try to walk a fine

13. Examples include one mother’s request to switch out authority data for the full eulogy read at her son’s funeral and another’s to ensure that in a browse list her son’s name would appear next to those of the three friends murdered with him at the Nova music festival.

line between professionalism and compassion without the comfort of support from colleagues in the library world, who could not understand the strain we were under.

THE EMOTIONAL TOLL

The field of library and information science is increasingly recognizing the emotional toll on library workers. Our authority project highlighted this cost in many ways. Initially, the information that the memorial project catalogers urgently needed was received in a consolidated form. We operated on autopilot, treating the information merely as data. Working collectively on a large volume of data allowed us to separate our emotions from the work until the moment when the impact of our efforts became personal and tangible.

Such moments occurred when we unexpectedly met the grandmother of Libby Cohen Meguri or when we realized that Eliyahu Meir Ohana was the brother of a former library colleague. It became shockingly personal when we had to update information about someone we knew, like Ze'ev "Zabo" Ehrlich or the brothers Ariel and Roy Guri, or when finding shared connections between ourselves and the fallen.

The difficulty intensified when the automatic loading ended. We knew that as long as the fighting continued losses would accumulate but hoped that their pace would only justify creating a few new individual authority records. We never imagined that from mid-May through December 2024, we would need to create nearly 250 new authority records. We had also not taken into account the emotional cost of enhancing the bulk of the automatically loaded records as higher quality information became available.

Our alertness and focus on continually seeking information to create and enhance authority records sometimes shocked those around us. Hearing a new casualty announcement on the news triggered a moment of regret and mourning in the average Israeli. For us, it was a call to action, a race to capture information about the fallen before families could lock down or amend social media, a drive to document all the details of the life lived before it would be consigned to the cold earth. Within hours, if not minutes, there would be a new record in our database separating the name from similar ones and linking it within the net of complex relationships extant amongst our people, as reflected in the catalogs of Israeli libraries.

The emotional toll does not end when a record is saved in the system. We continually scan news sources, social media, and multi-platform messaging systems for updated or missing information. As families work through their grief, as municipalities decide how to memorialize their dead, and as survivors process their trauma, new information about the death of a person, and more importantly their life, is being revealed. As this information becomes public, we go back to update the records. We also regularly test for missing information, such as identifiers, dates and place of birth, and parents' names. Another factor we had not initially taken into account was the toll of returning to these authority records over and over, with no end in sight, while actively seeking out information and passively encountering this information in so many everyday situations.

Some of those who joined the initial four authority team members quickly dropped out of the project. Others, overwhelmed by the volume of records, limited their work to specific names. The Russian-born librarian adding Cyrillic script names, for example, originally planned to add this information for all victims but has only updated the names of those from former Soviet backgrounds or from associated countries like Ukraine. One recent addition to the team volunteers with Zaka Search and Rescue¹⁴ and had spent considerable time in the kibbutzim and the Nova grounds, handling the bodies of the murdered. He was instructed to only work on authority files of those killed in 2024 so he would not encounter a name whose body he had handled. All the original team members worked on this project during working hours and volunteered their time on nights and weekends while coping with the same trauma as the rest of the country and being worried about siblings, children, and friends in the thick of battle. Our work underscores the importance of meticulous documentation to honor the memory of each individual while confronting the profound grief and chaos of the war's aftermath on our nation and on ourselves.

As a result of our work on this project, a shared language of pain developed among the team members. We created a safe space where we could share our shock, sadness, and frustration over the tragic fate that knocked on so many doors. It became clear that our daily sharing and listening were a crucial part of our own processing. Though we are neither medical professionals nor trained psychologists, we realized that our strength lies in being there for each other, to listen and to talk. Even when consultations were professional, the topics were emotionally complex, and we often found ourselves in conversations where the professional and personal intertwined.

So many faces and names, so much longing for people we did not know and unfortunately will never get to meet. There is also a lurking fear lest we forget someone, lest the information we provide is not accurate or adequate.

We are librarians, repositories of information, keepers of memory, and we will carry with us these smiling faces and names for the rest of our lives, bearing living witness to 1,800 tragedies and taking the fallen with us into the rest of our lives.

May we be worthy of our task.

*The morning of Shemini Atzeret / when time stood still / foxes ravaged the vineyard / took the body, but not the spirit / and then, rising from the shock / we multiplied the good, increased the grace / the iron and the sword / and prayers in the synagogue / until all the tears of pain / which cracked open the heart / will be seen to not be in vain.*¹⁵

14. <https://zakaworld.org>.

15. "Blooming for Their Return," by Yishai Ribo and Maor Shoshan, is a single written and composed in response to the war (released March 2024, included in Ribo's album, *Sof ḥamah la-vo*).