

WEEKEND

Fired up at 50

Mili Avital has done Hollywood and American TV for decades, happily stayed home to raise kids and is now in town directing a play, originally staged in New York, about the often amusing differences between Israeli and American cultures. Plus, after a long hiatus from acting, she's got a new gig

Hagit Ginzburg

Mili Avital likes things to be exact. She doesn't call this perfectionism, but rather a meticulous attention to details. And thus, on a recent Friday, she could be found moving purposefully and thoughtfully through the corridors backstage at Hall 4 at Tel Aviv's Habima Theater. Every few minutes, as she walked toward the stage, the actor-director remembered yet another thing that could be tweaked in "Next Stop: A Comedy of Misconnections" – the play she created together with fellow Israeli actors Noga Milstein and Ben Perry.

After being performed originally in New York in recent years, "Next Stop" is now onstage in Israel, also in English, and will run until June. At the premiere that evening, the audience included Avital's friends, among them Channel 12 news anchor Yonit Levi and actors Dana Ivgy, Keren Mor and Menashe Noy. The next day, Avital was still surprised that they had shown up. "You invite people, you hope they will come but I didn't believe anyone would make the effort," she says. "I was really moved by their show of support."

It isn't so surprising that people went out in the evening for you.

"Of course it is. I know very well how difficult it is to get out of the house after you've come home and put the kids to bed, and then go out – especially to the theater! – after throwing on a jacket, and all for some little play. There is a crew here that works so hard, they really deserve all the credit. But it can't be taken for granted that these people came."

This is fringe theater, as far away from Hollywood as you can imagine, but nevertheless Avital is devoted to this project and to her role as director. This is her first stint as a theater director; previously she had directed only a short film, "I Think Myself I Am All the Time Younger," which was screened at the Tribeca Festival in 2004.

In the past few years, the play was performed only a few times. "There was a big Broadway producer who expressed interest in it, but then the coronavirus came along and cut that off," Avital relates. "Noga went back to live in Israel and suggested that we put the play on here. We found all kinds of creative solutions for doing trans-Atlantic work. We even did the lighting design

to make a living. So everything is done on the fly, although actually everything also turns out to be more creative that way. But my entry into this whole project was aimed at professionalizing it. You can't just do whatever you want, there are rules."

What connects 50-year-old Avital – one of our veteran emissaries to Hollywood, who won the Ophir Award (the Israeli equivalent of an Oscar), moved to America in 1993, starred in films like "Stargate" and "Kissing a Fool," and made guest appearances on TV shows including "Law and Order: Special Victims Unit" – to a fringe play that is popular with audiences of high-tech people, among others?

It turns out that she didn't really have plan, and moreover hadn't exactly dreamed of directing, even though as a girl she would pester her friends until they agreed to participate in her invented stage versions of children's books she had read.

"One day, I took my son to Hebrew school and Noga was teaching there," she recalls. "She came up to me and told me she was an actor who had moved to New York because she wanted to put on a play there, and asked for my phone number. A lot of people contact me because they think I have some kind of key for fulfilling their dreams. It started with her asking me to work with her on a few scenes and then she asked me to come watch the auditions. And the whole time I was in the midst of leaving Manhattan and moving to upstate New York.

Avital's husband, screenwriter Charles Randolph (whose credits include "The Big Short" and "Bombshell"), she recalled, "had just won an Oscar. I answered Noga nicely and cautiously, while saying to myself, 'She's an Israeli, she's inexperienced and she's

Milstein: 'One day Mili is at the Oscars, and the next day at a rehearsal for "Next Stop," she comes back from a food break and declares: "I invited two people from the ramen place to the show today because we need to fill an auditorium.'"

It was as Israeli as could be: On the one hand, it was done with such talent, and yet on the other, I said to myself: 'God, what a mess.' Their talent astounded me so much that I was convinced I had to join them. Because really, I didn't want to get into this. There was no rational reason for me to throw myself into off-Broadway theater just when I had left the city and was very busy with this change in our lives."

Avital's initial work on the play, based on ideas thought up by Milstein, who was born in Miami but grew up in Israel, began in 2016.

Avital: "At first I was interested in becoming involved in terms of the writing of the play, because Noga had the perspective of the Israeli who had just landed in New York, but I had the perspective of an Israeli who's lived in America for 30 years and has a very intimate experience with American culture. I told Noga she should think again about whether she really wanted me to get into this with her, because if I were to become a partner and deal with her and Ben's writing – it would not be to help them but rather to create something new together, and as director I would change a lot of things. She would have to accept my choices. She immediately said 'yes,' but I told her to think about it again. I am also very aware of what happens when my name gets attached to things: The fact is that this article is about me, even though she and Ben are the creators and actors. It could get messy. Anyway, she called back and said she still wanted to do it."

'Changing the hard disk'

Isn't it strange to direct instead of being onstage?

"When I see Ben and Noga performing, I just think about how courageous they are. I wouldn't trade places with them."

But you've acted in the theater before.

"True, my first role was at the Cameri Theater when I was 17, and the high point of my life was when I played Cordelia in a production of 'King Lear' in Los Angeles. Shakespeare in English! But today I would have to change the hard disk in my brain to do that. In my natural state I prefer to organize other people, it's great for me. It is also fun to be an actor who is directing actors, because I am familiar with their process and I can see where it's possible to make one choice or another. The disadvantage for directors who aren't actors is that they don't always know how to talk to actors. I have worked with enough directors who have said things like, 'Do the same thing but be more yourself.' You hear that and you want to die."

When Milstein and Perry arrived at Avital's home to work with her, they rushed to take a photo of Randolph's Oscar statuette.

"Mili is a perfect director," says Perry, 40. "She is larger than life, not only when you hear her stories – you can ask her where her daughter is and she will say, 'Uhh, she's with Charles at Demi Moore's in L.A.' – but mainly in the way she is so grounded, connected to herself and her surroundings, so devoted to this thing we have created. It's always exciting when I think about this, because it's something you can't take for granted."

For her part, Milstein, 38, relates that "Mili adopted me in every possible way: When the ceiling collapsed in my home, literally, she let me stay at her place. She helped me get my first [writing] job in New York. For two years she read all the drafts I wrote and introduced me at all the presentations I gave."

Then came the year of "rewriting a play, establishing an American company and a new brand and so on," Milstein continues. "In short, a year of production. And it was only after three years that Avital was at long last the director I'd been waiting for. I never found anyone who understood me and various situations so precisely, so delicately, and with an ability to lead them the way she does."

"Mili is an integral part of my life. Mostly we think in the same way, and feel as if we are in some sort of movie where we're running an operations room with aims, targets and military slang. I learned American-ness from her and she learned – or got ruined by – Israeliness from me. One day she's at the Oscars, and the next day at a rehearsal for 'Next Stop,' she comes back from a food break and declares: 'I invited two people from the ramen place to the show today because we need to fill the auditorium.'"

The play at Habima is performed in English, but an English that most Israelis will have little trouble understanding. "I would sometimes put in



Avital. "For years I've experienced the nuances of communication, not only of language. When it comes to language, too, you have to understand metaphors, context – I still don't feel I'm completely getting it."

Photo: Adi Orani; makeup: Galit Wertheim; hair: Kobi Kalderon; styling: Aviv Kfir; clothing: Cos

words in English and then Noga and Ben would say to me, 'No, that sounds too complicated,'" says Avital. In the show, Milstein and Perry play 20 different characters in amusing sketches rife with clashes between American and Israeli cultures and behavior. Israeli rock musician Yoni Bloch, now a startup entrepreneur in New York (Avital: "He opens the door to me wearing shorts and the first thing he says to me is: 'Yo, I had a poster of you on my wall when I was young'"), wrote two songs for the show, together with Barak Feldman and Omri Anghel.

Cinderella story

Avital now looks at Israelis from "an American perspective. Today with digital nomadism, everyone can work anywhere, so everyone feels like they can integrate everywhere. What I have experienced is a sort of practical immigration. My husband is an American, I work with Americans, my friends are Americans, my children go to American schools. I am not with Israelis there at all. In a very intentional way, I haven't gotten mixed up with that, out of a desire to investigate [local] culture. 'Next Stop' is on this seam, between Israelis and Americans."

Are you talking about how Israelis typically behave?

"It is manifested in everything. You can spot an Israeli from kilometers away, even in New York. It is beyond the issue of manners, it is a certain blind spot that Israelis have. I have spent hours attempting to understand where the blind spot is. After all, Israelis are creative, quick, direct – so why doesn't everything come together for them? And then I realized that the generation that is coming to the United States now – they are very intelligent; it's not the generation of cab drivers who moved to America and didn't know English. They are geniuses, especially in high-tech, but they are also idiots, because they haven't experienced American culture in an intimate way. I allow myself to say this because I've already experienced the test of fire. I made the same mistakes."

Explain.

"I'll give you an example. In Israel, when you enter a room, you immediately know who the boss is. It can be seen in their body language. With the Americans, it's the other way around – the most important person in the room will be the quietest. The way one signals power in the United States is the complete opposite of the way a person does it in Israel. I have had auditions where I spent the whole time conversing with the assistant director thinking that he was the director, and only

in retrospect did I discover my mistake. And I have arrived on sets where I didn't understand why the assistant was giving me instructions, and then realized that he was the director. For so many years I have been personally experiencing the nuances of communication, not only of language.

"When it comes to language, too, you have to understand metaphors, analogies, context – I still don't feel that I'm completely getting it. Israelis think they have grown up on American culture, and maybe that's truer now than in the past. But they don't share the everyday experiences, on different levels. It's exactly the same as an American coming here and thinking you are a typical Israeli, but that's not really what you are. Maybe you are a Tel Aviv person. There are such specific nuances in both the cultures."

So Americans don't understand Israelis either?

"They don't understand – mainly, the levels of anxiety from within which they [Israelis] have grown up. Israelis act out of a need to survive, from a lack of trust in the person facing them, always with the thought that they are being messed with or that they themselves aren't important to the other side. The Americans are the other way around: They simply exist, without existential anxiety. I, for example, can phone Charles and if he doesn't answer, I'll call again and again."

"Why is this Israeli? Because [there's an attitude that] my time is more important than yours and this is urgent for me. The American will call once and if you haven't answered, a week later he'll send you an e-mail and write 'I'm just following up.' Why? Because he first has to convey that he trusts you. The moment this trust is broken, the relationship is over. These are such delicate things. And I am saying this after years during which I'm still making the same mistakes. I still can write an email to my son's teacher

and think it is very polite, but then I show it to Charles and he asks why I am being so aggressive."

Jerusalem-born Avital left Israel in the early 1990s. Much has been written about the Cinderella story of the beautiful, aspiring actor who went abroad to study acting, worked as a waitress and was discovered by an agent who sent her to what became her first Hollywood role, in the 1994 sci-fi film "Stargate." That opened the door and led to a host of other roles in American films and television series – while Avital also developed her cinematic career back in Israel ("Colombian Love," "Noodle," "Prisoners of War").

For some years she has been acting less, while bringing up Benjamin, now 15, and Fanny, 11. When asked if she feels she has missed out on anything, she stresses that she made a rational decision to cut back on acting: "This has not been a step backward, it was a very conscious thing. It was a combination of several things – I started terribly young, went straight into the role of the love interest, but there is an age when things change for female actors. Then you need to start trying hard again, to get roles of more mature women. I had gotten to a place where that didn't really interest me. I felt I had seen Hollywood from inside, I understand what it is and also knew its less good sides."

Like what, for example?

"Like the fact that an actor has to wait in line all the time, to try out for roles. Auditions are a nightmare for me. I'm not good at them, I don't have the technique. In an industry that requires presentation – because after all, an audition is a presentation – it wasn't my strong suit. In the United States, coming to an audition means acting the way they [the directors] want to see it in the film; it isn't the start of the process. They want to see the final result, and in my opinion, such a result sometimes takes time to achieve."

"I mainly felt it [acting] didn't interest me anymore, that's the truth. In your 20s, you aspire to find yourself, and from the moment you've done that, you start looking at the price it is exacting from you. At a certain stage I wanted a partner, I wanted to be a mother, and then – at least that's how it was at the time – you discover that when you get engaged and get on the track of establishing a family, people automatically assume you are taking a step backward in your career. People lose interest. For me, it has worked out because I didn't want just to have kids: I wanted to be a mother, to raise whole human beings, not just check something off, and I have had the privilege of doing this. So I made choices."

"Have I sacrificed things? Of course.



Noga Milstein and Ben Perry in "Next Stop." They play 20 different characters.

Rafi Delouza

on Zoom – you know what a nightmare that is for a director?"

But now Avital is here, in the same space with the actors and the lighting technician, and she is taking advantage of every moment to fine-tune the production. In between, she is taking calls from the graphic artist about the play's poster and logo.

"I can't think 'fringe.' I need everything to be just right. Tight. Stylized," she says. "Yesterday there were things that didn't work the way I wanted them to, but that's part of the theater and part of life. You have to go with the flow, learn from your mistakes. That's how you get more professional all the time. When it works, there's no need to do more – but to reach that level, you have to work very hard."

And you don't see that as perfectionism?

"It's apparently an American standard. My standards at work are quite clear and it makes no difference that I am an Israeli who has worked a lot in Israel, my standards were still shaped in the United States. There, when they say 'rehearsal at 3 P.M.,' they start on the dot, but in Israel everyone in this field has to work on 18 things at once

also putting on a play? Really, no way.' I thought that the whole reputation I was trying to build for myself would be destroyed [by becoming involved]. But nothing got in Noga's way, she's really determined. I said to myself that in the end she will succeed in putting on her play. Do you know how many people have told me that they dream about putting on a play in New York? But this girl didn't give up."

"I read the material she had written and really laughed, because it was something I'd been thinking about for many years: the seam line between Israelis and Americans. In the end she also got me to come see the play she was putting together with Ben, and I was thinking: 'Wow, she isn't letting up on me.'"

Afterward, Avital realized that she did want to take part in the production of the play, whose story revolves around the relationship between an Israeli start-up guy named Hazan who lands in New York and dreams of making an exit, and a half-American, half-Israeli actress named Maya who dreams of starrng on Broadway.

"It was amazing, the audience howled with laughter. I was in shock.

There is no woman who has had children and hasn't sacrificed something; there is no woman who has made a career and hasn't sacrificed things. It works in both directions. I didn't want a life in which I don't put my kids to bed. It is clear to me that if I had wanted to be a good theater actor, for example – and I really love theater – I would've had to invest those 10,000 hours" (an allusion to a book by Malcolm Gladwell, who writes that that is the number of hours needed to fully master a particular skill).

"Anyone who wants to be good at something has to invest those hours, in motherhood as well. I had all kinds of offers I could have accepted for roles in film or the theater, but I said, 'No, I need time to ripen.' I feel I have had that and strangely enough it was a time when I wasn't working. Life is all about ripening."

Feminist mom

So actually, you have given up your career and ambitions as an actor.

"I am the daughter of a bra-burning feminist mother, a graduate of Bezalel [Academy of the Arts, in Jerusalem] in the 1970s. I am the first baby born [to a student] at Bezalel – right in the middle of my mother's studies; they diapered me in drawing classes and in the academy's carpentry shop. My father cleaned the house and mother traveled abroad a lot for work." (Today her father lectures in visual communications and her mother is an industrial designer.)

'A young actress who looks good is constantly in a battlefield,' Avital says. 'In every film, all the time, with everyone. Not that this is my attitude, it is the culture we all grew up in – in Israel, for sure, particularly, but also in the United States.'

"I was brought up to believe that a woman builds her life with her own hands, makes her choices, builds her home. I have no fear of making choices, one way or the other. There is no conflict – home or work. It is a privilege that women have: both giving birth and having a career. And I am doing what my mother did. This is solely my choice and my responsibility. I am proud of the decisions I have made in my life. There are many women of my generation, famous female American actors, who live alone and that isn't what I wanted. What is expected of me doesn't interest me much."

And when you see [Israeli-born actor] Gal Gadot's successes today, for example, don't you have any regrets?

"I don't envy Gal Gadot – do you know how hard it is to raise three daughters while you are making a movie?" she laughs. "It's a coincidence that you asked, because I was just thinking about Gal in the context of her accent. She has made the Israeli accent into something sexy. When I arrived in the United States, they told me that first of all I had to get rid of the accent, then to change my name and get a blow-dry. And because I am a sucker for languages and accents, I delved into the whole thing – like the differences among various accents in different parts of America – and today I can do any American accent you can think of. It's just a pity that this is no longer of any significance. It's phenomenal what Gal has done for Israeli actors."

Do you sometimes wonder what would have happened had you remained in Israel? Maybe you would have become the "queen mother" of Israeli cinema or theater?



Gal Gadot. "Has made the Israeli accent into something sexy." Chris Pizzello/AP

"Not really. I think that I arrived in United States at a very young age and an important part of my development happened in New York. I'll always feel that part of me is here, but I never had a dream of being a 'mother' of theater and cinema in Israel. I love art: I am like a devoutly religious person and my religion is art. When I arrived in New York I felt that the emotional distance people would give you when you don't really interest them suits me exactly. It was in fact very easy for me to get used to that distance. In Israel, if there was criticism of me, it was always about how I am a bit distant. I am very warm, but I also need my space: Call before you show up and don't step into my personal space. I live in my world and it is a place I defend because from within it, I create."

"In Israel there is great creativity, but excessive creativity is liable to mess up boundaries when it comes to precise work. A [high] standard demands precision. I remember clearly to this day how Jim Jarmusch was so precise about the details of every flower I held in my hand [in the 1995 film he directed, "Dead Man"]. In the American system, when everyone is doing their job and maintaining boundaries, a high level of professionalism is created. This is what attracted me to the American industry. It suits my personality. Apparently because of this I married my husband. We can talk about the particular octave of an actor's voice, or the semantic context of a word, or the turning point in a scene. Long conversations. That's our day-to-day thing."

'Stories I won't tell'

In the context of her involvement in "Next Stop" in Tel Aviv, Avital found herself pounding the pavement to raise money for the production from the CEOs of local banks and high-tech companies. "Noga told me we needed money, so I said okay, we'll go out and raise it."

Did that embarrass you?
"No, because I am very goal-oriented. I see the show and nothing else interests me. I am like a religious person, I only see the temple. Do I care what needs to be sacrificed? I just need to get the show staged; the temple must be built. A lot of investors say to me, 'We invest but only in projects of a million dollars and up.' One day I met with the CEO of Bank Leumi in New York, who found the last window of time for me at something like 6 P.M. It was after a day when everyone told me 'No,' and I sat in his office like an idiot with tears in my eyes and I said: 'Okay, don't give to the theater, but in the end you will come and see yourselves – it is a story about you.' He financed three performances."

Does your name also open doors in high tech?

"It turns out that it does, and this is wonderful. My name is apparently identified with something I don't fully understand but it works, and that's what is important. What interests me is theater, and if this is what I need to do to open the door, then yallah, come on in, folks!"

It has been eight years since Avital's

last acting role, in the Israeli TV series "Landing on Their Feet," alongside Shani Cohen. She doesn't remember the last time she acted in an American movie – "a hundred years ago, I think" – but now a new opportunity has landed on her: Italian director Guido Chiesa has cast her in the leading role, co-starring with Israeli actor Moni Moshonov, in a film adaptation of Meir Shalev's book "Four Meals." Three weeks of filming in Sicily are already behind her when we meet, and there is another week, in Israel, to go.

I don't do auditions, as I've said, so I wasn't looking for this. To this day I don't know why Guido Chiesa gave me the role, nor do I have any intention of finding out," she laughs. "I think he offered it to me because he had worked with Jim Jarmusch, and maybe saw me in 'Dead Man' with Johnny Depp, who incidentally even then wasn't sane – something no one else knew then, just me." (She adamantly refuses to expand on this intriguing remark.)

Does it feel different acting in a film at the age of 50?

"Sure. There is something that is very different between being a woman of 20 and a woman of 50. The surroundings naturally react differently, and therefore the roles are also different. I really prefer the age of 50 over any other. It is an amazing peak from which you can look out over the whole world. At 50, being sexy is something that gives me confidence and a fun feeling. There isn't a moment where I feel 'I also need to be careful about things.' I don't need to be careful anymore and anyway no one is looking."

When you were younger, did you need to be careful?

"Let's say that I don't feel like prey anymore. That was the atmosphere in the world then. Fortunately for me, I worked with amazing people and had many formative experiences, like with Robert Benton" – the director of the 2003 film "The Human Stain," in which she acted – "but when you are young girl who arrives in Hollywood, you can't create with the same freedom men have, at least that is the way it was. First I had to make sure I was physically safe. And that was one of the reasons that at a certain stage, I said, 'Okay, I'm fed up. I will also be happy not to be in this battlefield all day long.'"

"A young actress who looks good is constantly in a battlefield. In every film, all the time, with everyone. Not that this is my attitude, it is the culture we all grew up in – in Israel, for sure, particularly, but also in the United States. There are also stories I will never tell the press because I want both to preserve the honor of the men who were involved, and I think that from their perspective their intention wasn't all that terrible. Still, the effect on a young woman is hard. Today as a mature individual, not only am I no longer prey, I also have a feeling of power. There is something that balances out, between the inside and the outside, as you get older and it's very liberating. When you're younger there is a kind of feeling that 'I've made it to here and just need to get out safely.'"

In recent years Avital has been active on behalf of women's rights and



Avital and her husband Charles Randolph.

Chris Pizzello/Invision/AP



Mili Avital with David Schwimmer, left, and Jason Lee in "Kissing a Fool" (1998).

Largo Entertainment / Rick Lashbrook Films

she is currently working in partnership with the Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel toward establishing regulations relating to sexual harassment in the local film and television industry: "It is based on the Time's Up model in the United States, but adapted to Israeli culture, with the same simple logic of how to work as an actress or an actor without having to escape by the skin of your teeth," she says.

In a column she published in these pages in October 2018 ("Why Didn't I Report It? Because I Wanted to Forget What Happened to Me"), Avital described a sexual assault she experienced as a teenager.

"Even today when I know I did nothing wrong, I feel very embarrassed by this public exposure," she wrote then.

"But I feel I must sacrifice my comfort. Because like other men and women who have endured traumatic experiences, I will always have a certain sense of regret – for the experiences I didn't have and the dreams I failed to realize because of all the energy that had to be devoted to coping emotionally rather than concentrating on creative activity. But this is the truth: You can't run a marathon while trying to hide a fracture."

Today she prefers not to return to that incident. "It would be chauvinistic to keep thinking of me as a girl victim of 17," she says. At the same time, she acknowledges the influence of the MeToo movement, and is grateful for its existence.

"There has been a very big change

in the way people are dealing with everything having to do with bedroom scenes and physical proximity [on the set]," she explains. "Americans are a bit fanatical about these things, so there is of course very meticulous preservation of boundaries, in a way that is suited to American culture but not necessarily to Israeli culture. It's not that something [like that] isn't needed here too. There's a kind of change that is happening in a natural way because we all understand that something is not right."

The current political climate here in Israel and in the world also disturbs her – whether it's the new government in Jerusalem, the rise of antisemitism in the United States, Kanye West's remarks.

Avital: "I don't live in the media, I live in the macro. I will say, though, that ignorance is a dangerous thing. The more megaphones there are in the hands of ignorant people, the more antisemitism there is in the world, for example. But I don't think we are heading toward some sort of total devastation."

Are you worried that in light of all that is happening in Israel, the women's struggle of recent years will go down the drain?

"Not at all, and you know why? Because I am 50 years old, I am an observer. Do you know what power those women [MeToo activists and feminists] have? They are moving mountains and there is no way they can't beat this. It's like Plato's cave; when you emerge from a cave your eyes need to adapt to the light and that process is a long one, whether it's cultural or political. As with my own life, I believe in taking one step back so that there can be two steps forward."

DEAD

Continued from page 10

on January 16, suspects threw stones and hurled devices and Molotov cocktails at the forces, who responded with crowd dispersal means and with gunfire. After the activity, the death was reported of the minor Omar Khmour. The circumstances of his death are being clarified."

The soldiers left in a hurry, and local residents bundled Omar into a private car that rushed him to Al-Husseini Hospital in Beit Jala. Unequipped to deal with such a terrible head wound, the hospital staff summoned a Red Crescent ambulance to take the dying boy to the hospital of the Arab Society for Rehabilitation in Bethlehem.

Only at 5:30 in the morning did Khaled receive a call stating his son had been wounded. He rushed to the hospital, where he was told that Omar was in critical condition. "Your son lost his brain," the physicians explained, adding that there was no longer any hope and all that remained was to pray. Khaled managed to see his son before he died – his eyes were open but he was unresponsive. The

boy died the next day, Tuesday, at 1:30 P.M.

"He was a dream child. A dream, a dream," Khaled says now, his eyes moist.

He has a story to tell us. Near where he works in Bayit Vegan is a school. One time, some pupils threw stones at him. Khaled told his employer, who didn't lift a finger, and then went to the school and spoke with the teachers. "I didn't hit the boy who threw stones at me, I only wanted to get the teachers to speak to him. He was a child, so I didn't do anything to him."

Omar's friends are now congregating in the yard of the house. Quiet, shy boys and girls. There's a whole generation of children in the camp who have been affected by Omar's killing, his father says. "They can't sleep and they don't want to play," he says, adding that they will likely carry the shock and the pain for years.

One friend, 13-year-old Karawan, with braces on her teeth and a captivating smile, says that on the day before he died Omar threw eggs at her. He ambushed her as she came out of school – it was her birthday. She and her friend Mira, also 13, come here every day to comfort Omar's bereaved mother. Karawan tells us that she was also startled out of her sleep that same



A banner in a Deheisheh alley with photos of Omar Khmour and PFLP leader Abu Ali Mustafa, whom Israel assassinated in 2001.

Alex Levac

night by the soldiers' shooting. Shortly afterward she saw on Telegram that Omar had been shot and taken to the hospital. Since then she has visited his grave every day.

Bashir arrives carrying his schoolbag. He's 14, a student in the Russian school in Bethlehem, part of a cultural complex in the city bearing Vladimir Putin's name.

"I miss him," says the boy, who's wearing a sweatshirt with a picture of his dead friend on it. "We ask God to give him new life."

Bashir says he knew all four of those who were killed in the camp in recent months – and gives their names. He will keep visiting Omar's grave every day, he says. How could it be otherwise?

FACING

Continued from page 7

in the front row and said that the overhaul plan is "very hard to digest, on the brink of fantasy. Something we've seen in countries that we tend to ridicule."

The guests rose to welcome Israel's former president, Reuven Rivlin, and again in honor of former attorney general Avichai Mendelblit. Dan Meridor, a former justice minister and longtime Likud stalwart, who arrived a little later, said he felt "like we are facing a catastrophe. They are changing the country radically. I never imagined we would come to this pass."

The tone of the event was elevated, with in-depth, complex discussions marked by originality, serving as a reminder of what public discourse can be like. The overall sense of pessimism was mixed with optimism generated by the political activity. The event clearly stirred hope in the audience, despite their limited numbers.

Among those participating in the event was Prof. Yedidya Stern, from Bar-Ilan's law faculty. "At the moment," he said, "we are at the opening of a titanic round of arm wrestling

between a group espousing extreme views in Israeli society, and a majority of that society which isn't there, in my opinion. That makes me think: In political science we know that if a group representing 3.5 percent of society is determined in its opposition – usually in a nonviolent form – there is no record anywhere of the majority succeeding in advancing its worldview. In Israel that adds up to fewer than 400,000 people, a mythological number from earlier contexts [referring to a 1982 demonstration against the Lebanon War].

"We are not talking about one or two demonstrations but about determined activity over time. If 3.5 percent of Israeli society will carry on with that over time, and express resolute opposition to this plan by nonviolent means, it's very likely that the overhaul will not go through in its current form. Second, I think that Israel's business sector hasn't yet had its say, but I assume it will yet wake up, and that will be a good thing."

How do you feel at this stage of the arm-wrestling contest?

Stern: "Many of my law-professor friends have declared [that we are at the brink of the] 'end of democracy' at least 200 times in the past 20 years. This is the first time I think so, too."