Speech Standing Together Isabel

Thank you all for coming out today and standing together in memory of all civilian victims in Israel and Palestine, and peace and humanity. I think I speak for many people here if I say that these past two weeks have been completely devastating. For many of us, they have been devastating not only because we, or our friends, might have lost friends or family to terror and war, but also because many of us have lost spaces to grieve for all civilian victims, whether they are Israeli or Palestinian. It feels like it has become a controversial position to feel empathy for all victims of violence, even if they belong to the "other side". It has become a controversial position to stand against the killing of innocent people and to call for an end to war. And it has become even more controversial to speak out against the occupation and for the necessity for a just peace in Israel and Palestine.

In these past weeks I have often been thinking about how my father explained the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to me when I was eighteen years old. He called it a "war of narratives", that are completely incompatible with one another. I experienced this incompatibility myself, growing up with one narrative and then learning about the existence of another. I was raised in a socialist-Zionist youth movement, not because my family was particularly Zionist, but because this was the only option for a secular Jewish life in Vienna, also as a result of the destruction of Jewish life in the city through the Nazi regime. Until I was 18 I had never even heard of the word "occupation." When I came to Israel-Palestine for a gap year, I started to first understand that me and the other young people in my community had not been told the whole story. When I returned from an organized tour by Breaking the Silence in Hebron in 2013, I called my parents in tears and asked them "why didn't you tell me"? Since then I have been an activist against the occupation and for justice, equal rights and peace for all in Israel and Palestine.

This past decade has also been both a gratifying but also sometimes painful process of learning to shift between narratives. It has been a process of unlearning – unlearning many of the narratives I had grown up with, unlearning my own biases and internalized racism; and at the same time a process of

learning – learning to listen and to accept other people's narratives, and learning to coexist between different narratives. I worked to carve out a space for being Jewish that allows for solidarity with Palestinians – being part of a Jewish community while at the same time challenging the ethno-nationalist tendencies in it, and being part of a wider non-Jewish left that would accept Israelis right to live in safety, peace and self-determination, and that would stand against all forms of antisemitism or Jew-hatred while working to achieve a just and peaceful future for all. This work required moving between worlds, carefully choosing words, and also involved me sometimes getting burned in the process. But I kept persisting as something that I believed was deeply worthwhile.

On October 7th, since the massacre by Hamas of Israeli civilians in the border region of the Gaza strip, it felt like all the achievements of my work of the past ten years just shattered to pieces. It felt that any channels of mediation that I had built suddenly collapsed, any sympathetic ears had suddenly stopped listening. Some non-Jewish activists I had considered allies in the fight for Palestinian freedom refused to find words of grief for the 1400 Israeli civilians killed by Hamas, sometimes even legitimizing this brutal violence as necessary resistance. Some Jewish people from my community, who had until then never been virulent, were suddenly calling for revenge against innocent civilians and for the criminalization of any Palestine solidarity activism. I felt like I was being ripped apart, between grief for the people killed and kidnapped by Hamas, people that were sometimes distant relatives or could also have been close friends or family, and the grief for the innocent people killed in Gaza by Israel's indiscriminate bombings, never to be seen or acknowledged by any other name than "collateral damage". It was because of this feeling of falling apart that I decided to organize a vigil that was about standing together, as difficult as it might seem.

But how can we stand together in such times, when any dialogue or mutual acceptance seems impossible? It is naïve to believe that we could fully get rid of the deep trenches that make Jewish and Palestinian people seem so far apart as never before. But what we can do is build bridges across them, bridges of understanding that allow for different narratives, histories and traumas to

coexist. We must understand that the horrific accounts of the massacre remind Jewish people worldwide of the trauma of centuries of antisemitic violence in Europe and its genocidal culmination in the Shoah. We must understand that images of a hundred thousand Gazan people leaving their homes reminds Palestinians worldwide of the mass displacement and ethnic cleansing that they had lived through since the beginning of the Nakba, the catastrophe, through the founding of the State of Israel. Understanding that for Jews living in Vienna, living in fear of antisemitic attacks reminds them of the destruction of Jewish life in this city during the Nazi regime. Understanding that for Palestinians living in Vienna, seeing the Israeli flag on the roof of the chancellor's office while being criminalized as Hamas supporters for wanting to grieve for their relatives and friends killed in Gaza reminds them of the decades of neglection and repression and of their people's individual and collective rights in Israel and the world.

Understanding is not the same as becoming the same. It does not require fully accepting someone else's narrative and giving up one's own. It simply means letting these different realities coexist, and finding possibilities for building bridges across them. I do believe that we need to do everything we can to prevent ourselves being driven apart any further, and to firmly stand together against the killing of innocent people, war, occupation, mass killings and mass expulsions, and to continue, even in the worst of times, to stand together for peace, justice and security for all people living in Israel and Palestine.

I want to end with a quote by Israeli activist Sahar Vardi, that resonated deeply with me. She writes „We, the left, are often accused of dual loyalty. And on days like this I really feel it." And later: "[…] Loyalty may not be the right word. It's dual pain, dual heartbreak, care, love. It is to hold everyone's humanity. And it's hard. It's so hard to have humanity here. It's exhausting, and it feels like time after time the world is just asking you to let go. It's so much easier to "choose a side" - it almost doesn't matter which side. Just choose, and stick to it, and at least reduce the amount of pain you hold. And at least feel part of a group and less alone in all this. As if that's really an option. As if we don't understand that our pains are intertwined."