

# The Return of the Empty Chair: “Bringing Back the Colour” Exhibition Review

Senate Building, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

November 2023

Initiator and artist: Eli Rabzin

Curator: Marganit (Niti) Caspo

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The events of 7 October 2024, or the “Black Sabbath,” left the State of Israel in immense pain, shock, and fear, not only because over 1,400 people were brutally murdered by the terrorist organization Hamas during these events,

but also because 253 Israeli and foreign citizens (who were in Israel at the time) were kidnapped to Gaza. During the Swords of Iron War that broke out immediately after the “Black Sabbath” events, diverse social and cultural initiatives began to emerge, many of which were intended to raise awareness of the suffering of the hostages in Gaza and to call for their immediate release.

One of these initiatives is the “Shabbat Table” installation set up by the hostages’ families at the site that became the stronghold of the struggle for their return, “the hostages’ square” next to the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. This installation was organized as one of the symbols of the Jewish family – a traditional Shabbat table, upon which were placed a white tablecloth, a set of dishes, a Shabbat Hala, candles, and flowers. Over 200 empty chairs were placed on both sides of the table, matching the number of hostages held by Hamas at the time [Figure 1]. Standing empty and silent on both sides of the Shabbat table,



Figure 1. The “Sabbath Table” next to the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Photo: Yahav Trudler. Courtesy of the photographer.

the chairs, including children's chairs, produced a clear sense of absence: the physical absence of the hostages, the longing and worries for them, and above all, the huge anticipation for their return. Immediately after its creation, many variations on the "Shabbat Table" installation were erected in kibbutzim, moshavim, and cities throughout Israel, as well as in various cities around the world, including New York, London, Paris, Rome, and Berlin.

In these installations, empty chairs were placed on both sides of the table as a visual representation of the hostages' absence and the void left by their traumatic disappearance. Similar aspects are reflected in "Bringing Back the Colour," an interactive exhibition at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, which offers another variation on the theme of the empty chair. As part of this exhibition, 245 grey chairs were placed in rows in the university's Senate Building – 215 adult chairs and thirty children's chairs, each representing one

**Figure 2.** Installation of the "Bringing Back the Colour" exhibition, Senate Building, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. November 2023. Photo: Eli Rabzin.



**Figure 3.** View of the "Bringing Back the Colour" exhibition, Senate Building, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. November 2023. Photo: Eli Rabzin.



of the hostages held captive by the terrorist organizations [Figure 2]. While in the “Shabbat Table” installations, the chairs remain as they are, in “Bringing Back the Colour,” the grey chairs are painted and illustrated each time one of the hostages is released [Figure 3].

The addition of colours to the grey chairs is a visual expression of happiness on the release of one or more hostages from captivity. The purpose of the installation, as described by its initiator and performer Eli Rabzin, is “to restore hope for the return of the hostages to us and to celebrate each and every release.”<sup>1</sup> There are gouache paints and brushes next to each chair, as if leaving no choice but for them to be painted. The chairs can be painted by anyone who wishes to do so: students, deans, faculty members, lecturers, and other university officials, as well as the university’s president. Each of them may paint the chair according to their views and ideas; some only add colour abstractly; some paint the chairs according to a specific pattern [Figure 4].



Figure 4. Chairs at the “Bringing Back the Colour” exhibition, Senate Building, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. November 2023. Photo: Eli Rabzin.

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1 Eli Rabzin in the text accompanying the exhibition.



Several chairs have been inscribed with texts borrowed from the Bible or Hebrew culture that had a unique meaning at the time, such as "So good you came home," "I have no other country," "Your children shall return to their country," "Restrain your voice from weeping," "Tikva" ["Hope"], and more [Figures 5–6]. Several other chairs are marked with a black diagonal ribbon: these chairs symbolize those hostages who will not return alive from captivity. Five chairs are marked with the Ben-Gurion University logo, indicating the university's students who are hostages; one of these is marked with a black ribbon. Four black rectangular screens have been placed behind the chairs indicating the time that has passed since the kidnapping: days, hours, minutes, and seconds. The chairs themselves seem silent. Yet placed together in rows, side by side, a kind of inaudible outcry arises – that of the hostages.

Figure 5. A chair at the "Bringing Back the Colour" exhibition, Senate Building, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. November 2023. Photo: Tehila Sade.



Figure 6. A chair at the "Bringing Back the Colour" exhibition, Senate Building, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. November 2023. Photo: Tehila Sade.



Through the empty chairs, the exhibition's initiator is corresponding with the long-lasting tradition of the empty chair in twentieth-century art. In this period, the empty chair became one of the common art objects to embody, mediate, and realize the absence of the subject. The chair, the same tool designed to support the body while painting the portrait, has over the years become the portrait itself, which is able to convey the subject precisely in its physical absence.<sup>2</sup> In fact, since the inception of modern art, empty chairs have featured prominently in the works of various artists such as Vincent van Gogh, Marcel Duchamp, Henri Matisse, Egon Schiele, Pablo Picasso, and Joseph Kosuth. These artists appropriated the object of the empty chair from its everyday realm and turned

2 Tomasz Jirsa, "Portrait of Absence: The Aesthetic Mediality of Empty Chairs," *ZMK Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung* 7, no. 2: *Medien der Natur* (2016): 13–28.

it not only into fertile ground for artistic exploration, but also into an object conveying absence, longing, and recollection.<sup>3</sup>

In this context, Mordechai Omer has written:

[The empty chair] offers a sense of traces, a kind of mould of the human figure, though it can never be used for a precise reconstruction of the body. Like the empty garment, which hints at memories, feelings, and thoughts about the body that wore it, the chair too is laden with allusions to its absent owner. In the three-dimensional language, the chair is perceived as a dais, a base for a sculpture that has become the sculpture itself, in the absence of the body that was supposed to inhabit [it].<sup>4</sup>

Such aspects also feature prominently at the memorial site of the Jewish ghetto in the Ghetto Heroes Square in Krakow, Poland. Designed by the Polish architects Piotr Lewicki and Kazimierz Latak and unveiled in 2005, the site consists of thirty-three empty iron chairs, slightly larger than usual, arranged

on a virtual grid measuring about five by five meters. Each chair symbolizes the lives of a thousand people and is fixed to the ground by a small metal platform that is slightly raised so that it looks as if it is floating above the ground [Figure 7].

In 1941, during the Second World War, the Podgier district was transformed into the Krakow Ghetto, and in 1942, Zgody Square became an *Umschlagplatz* [“deportation square”], where selections – which meant life or death for the residents of the ghetto – took place. Those who were chosen to leave the ghetto boarded trains and were mainly sent to Belzec, as well as to Plaszow and Auschwitz. Others did not make it to the trains at all; the elderly, the sick, and the young were often executed in the streets, in their homes, or even in the square itself. According to the architects of the monument, it was inspired by films and



Figure 7. The memorial site of the Krakow Ghetto, Krakow, Poland. Photo from 2011. Retrieved from [https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%92%D7%98%D7%95\\_%D7%A7%D7%A8%D7%A7%D7%95%D7%91](https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%92%D7%98%D7%95_%D7%A7%D7%A8%D7%A7%D7%95%D7%91), last accessed: Mar 14, 2024.

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- 3 Yosl Bergner, Avigdor Arikha, Liliane Klapisch, Meir Pichhadze, Micha Ullman, Pinchas Cohen Gan, Igaël Tumarkin, and Michael Gross are among the many Israeli artists who have addressed the empty chair theme, to mention only a few.
- 4 Mordechai Omer, *The Presence of the Absent: The Empty Chair in Israeli Art* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, Genia Schreiber University Gallery, 1991), 151.

photographs depicting the Jews carrying their possessions as they were forced to leave their homes for the ghettos and camps. After the Krakow Ghetto was liquidated by the Nazis, Zgody Square was described as being filled with huge piles of objects abandoned after their owners were taken to camps or killed. The designers of the memorial site reduced this image of the square full of abandoned items to a simple object – an empty chair – which symbolizes constant loss and absence and a square that has become painfully empty.

Unlike the chairs in Krakow's ghetto square, which remain empty and isolated, the colouring of the chairs in the "Bringing Back the Colour" exhibition celebrating the return of the hostages produces a kind of promise or hope for the return of all the hostages and a better present and future. This installation carries a complex set of embedded connotations and meanings: traditions of ceremonies (for example, the empty chair for the prophet Elijah on Passover night), studying, lecture halls in the academy, and fellowship, alongside absence and loss. The brushes and paint bottles placed next to the chairs constitute an initial appeal or invitation to the viewers, asking them to participate in the creation of the installation. The viewers' painting of the chairs calls for their involvement; first, it attracts them to give of themselves for the process of returning the colour – that is, life – to the chairs, and then it provides them with a kind of motivation to delve into the complex emotional process involved in participating in this task. The viewers may equally feel visual pleasure in the face of their work, yet given that the subject is innocent victims kidnapped by a murderous terrorist organization, it may be difficult to argue that this type of aesthetics can provide any kind of comfort.

Moreover, upon being painted, the chair is seemingly turned into an artwork by the person who paints it. For example, two chairs became a tribute to the work of the Israeli artist Michael Sgan-Cohen, whose twenty-fifth death anniversary was marked last February. As can be seen in **Figure 8**, the inscription "Here I am" [הנני] has been written on the chair. Written in black letters on a white background, this inscription is a tribute to Sgan-Cohen's 1978 work "Here I am" [הנני], in which he printed the Hebrew word הנני [*Hineni*, meaning "Here I am"] and added cantillation notes. This work, which is constituted only by the simple phrase "Here I am," has a distinct biblical charge, and from a semantic point of view, it is a combination of the words "here" and "I" – which, according to David Har, is an "existential-local expression that expresses readiness for a mission or determination to do something."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in the Bible, "I am" is linked to the speaker's presence, sometimes God (Gen 9:9), and sometimes man (for example, Abraham in Gen 22:1).

5 David Har, "Between Showing Up and Responding: On Michael Sgan-Cohen's 'I Am,'" *Studio* 122 (March–April 2001): 42–49.

Although *Hineni* ["I am"] signifies presence, Sgan-Cohen added a black frame around it, which transformed the work into a kind of obituary. In this respect, Yorick Verta suggested:

This is a printed work, the letters are printed, and it is framed like an obituary. An obituary that says: "I am"; an obituary that answers the question "Who passed away?" "Who is gone?" Yet this work is destabilizing, transforming the presence – "I am" – into an absence – "I am not."<sup>6</sup>

Verta suggests that by adding the black frame, instead of "I am," in the sense of "Here I am," Sgan-Cohen created – in the duality that so characterizes his work, as suggested by Emma Gashinski<sup>7</sup> – a phrase that indicates absence: "I am not."

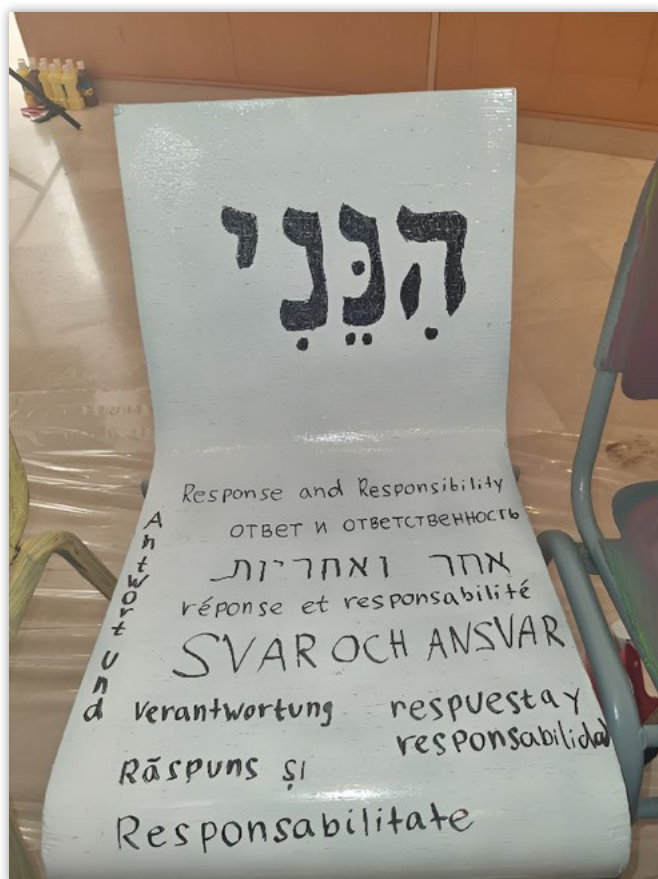


Figure 8. A chair at the "Bringing Back the Colour" exhibition, Senate Building, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. November 2023. Photo: Tehila Sade.

Those who painted this chair harnessed the double meaning of Sgan-Cohen's work by charging the chair, painted in honour of a person who has been released from captivity, with a message of simultaneous absence and presence. Yet the direct reference to Sgan-Cohen's work may not only divert the painting from the purpose for which it was created in the first place – celebrating a release from captivity – but also adds more layers to the ethical complexity and tangle and the objectification of the hostages. On the one hand, the initiator and performer of the exhibition aims to preserve the memory of the hostages and to celebrate their return through a gesture of colour. However, on the other, the absence of the hostages' names and the painting of the chairs according to the vision of each illustrator may also lead to their objectification.

6 Yorick Verta, "Study Drawing: A Conversation with Zeli Gurevich, Yoram (Yorick) Verta, Itamar Levy and Amitay Mendelson" [Hebrew], in *Chazon Michael – The Work of Michael Sgan-Cohen, 1976–1999*, ed. A. Mendelson (Jerusalem, 2004), 61–60.

7 E. Azriel Gashinsky, "A Split Identity – The Uncanny in Michael Segan-Cohen's Art" [Hebrew], *Bezael: Journal of Visual and Material Culture* 27 (March 2013), <https://journal.bezael.ac.il/he/protocol/article/3457>.



The empty chairs at the "Bringing Back the Colour" exhibition are inherently missing their subjects: without this lack or absence, the chairs could not actually be called "empty chairs." In fact, as Tomasz Jirsa argues in his article "Portrait of Absence: The Aesthetic Mediality of Empty Chairs," it is this very lack and absence that makes the chairs a kind of "substitute" for the absent subjects; it is precisely the physical absence of the subject that intensifies its presence, but this presence only takes place elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, through their stubborn persistence in the exhibition, the empty chairs indicate that the presence of the hostages does exist – but unfortunately, it does so in a completely different place to where it should be.

We wish for the immediate return of all the hostages.

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8 Jirsa, "Portrait of Absence," 23, 28.