

# Broken Spaces and Walled-off Realities

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## Abstract

This paper proposes a closer view into how space is structured with one single purpose: to exercise power, both in physical and structural, or rather physical–structural form, bending and twisting human behavior around it. Separation walls embody frustration that stems from unresolved traumas of the past that perpetuate the impotence to solve or re-solve these traumas. Individuals living in the shadows of such walls have incorporated the pain of these traumas into their identities, a pain that leads to an external expression of the incorporation that is then directed towards the wall changing its purpose, turning it into a canvas of creative capitulation<sup>1</sup> in front of the power represented by it. The artifacts that start populating and decorating such walls function as a form of aesthetic domestication, shifting impotence into potency, offering a new semiotic field for the definition of the term “aesthetic resistance.” The objects discussed in this paper include the Berlin Wall and the Israeli–Palestinian separation wall (as seen from Netiv HaAsara and Bethlehem). Walls are not specifically defined in this text. They can be metaphorical, and conventional (without material representation), they can be represented by differences that separate people, institutions, and political structures from each other. This text has not been written with the desire to offer a thorough academic introduction into “teichopolitics” (the politics of walls); instead, it provides a phenomenological “description” of a sort of different experiences regarding various ways of seeing, feeling, and understanding walls.

**Keywords:** teichopolitics, walls, separation, power, language, identity, ontology, Berlin Wall, Israel, Palestine, Derrida, otherness

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<sup>1</sup> In the way Camus’ Sisyphus embraces the absurdity of his own fate to transcend it into a joyous smile. A moral win, still in the presence of the rock, without which this moral win would not make sense. The walls conquered by artists, populated by murals and graffiti, are very similar to Sisyphus’ smile in the excruciating presence of the wall, without which this form of aesthetic resistance would not make sense.

In his 1995 movie, *Ulysses' Gaze*, Angelopoulos depicts an epic voyage of a filmmaker to find the earliest moving pictures shot in the Balkans. The aim of this journey takes him through a troubled part of South-Eastern Europe with a stop in the besieged Sarajevo. While the celluloid is being uncovered and developed, the city is slowly surrounded by fog. The curator of the film archive claims:

The fog, I sensed it. In this city, the fog is man's best friend. Does it sound strange? It's because it's the only time the city gets back to normal. Almost like it used to be. The snipers have zero visibility. Foggy days are festive days here, so let's celebrate. Besides, we have another cause for celebration. A film. A captive gaze, as you called it, from the early days of the century, set free at last at the end of the century. Isn't that an important event? Music. ...Oh, yes. A youth orchestra. .... Boys. Serbs, Croats, Muslims. They come out when there's a ceasefire. They go from place to place and make music in the city. How about it? Shall we go out too? (Levy as cited in Harris, n.d.)

Shall we go out too? The fog not only reduces visibility to zero but erases boundaries and allows for a non-local sensory experience by muffling visual spatial orientation. What walls separate the fog reunites. The movie features fog as a beautiful metaphor for the dissolution of boundaries. When separation lines designed by snipers' guns are temporarily immaterialized, the captives, the citizens of Sarajevo emerge from their shelters and perform and receive art. Reading Aleksandra Bilić's (n.d.) paper on theater performances during the siege, one cannot fail to notice the intricate and poetic relationship between walls and their dissolution, between their deconstruction and protective rebuilding, between their harsh reality when we bump into them and their sheltering nature protecting our illusions of normality. Walls are dissolved and re-erected, and walls are destroyed and repurposed together with the space they shape. Seen. Unseen.

Because the public were experiencing the same horrors as the performers and practitioners, theatre became an equal escape for both. However, actors felt that they had a duty to the public, to ensure that their hunger, fear, and the cold were forgotten during performances. (Bilić, n.d., p. 5)

What we call "aesthetic resistance" manages to help individuals survive inhuman conditions rehumanizing and reconquering the moral space that is held captive by fear and terror. Can one be deceived into normality by aesthetic experience amid horror and madness? Can this process still be called deception? Is the normality reinstated in the experience of art in such conditions indeed just an illusion?

Seen. Unseen.

### Figure 1

*Banksy: Window on the West Bank (2005)*



Source: "Banksy in Palestine." A field guide to Banksy's graffiti on the Separation Wall. University of Oregon.

Walls have always been used to keep things inside or to keep them out, and the dynamic of the opposites is translating itself in various forms. One of them is the dialectics of war/madness and the recreated normality, like in the case of performances in the fog of the besieged city of Sarajevo. Other forms might involve something that we call 'structural power.' Therefore, walls are power structures to structure power, and however ambigramatic this short definition might sound, it is not a tautology. Staying with the classical definition of Susan Strange, structural power is "the power to decide how things shall be done, the power to shape frameworks within which states relate to one another, relate to people or relate to corporate enterprises" (Heywood, 2014). What is important in this definition is "how things shall be done" (Heywood, 2014) and shaping "frameworks within which states relate to one another, relate to people or relate to corporate enterprises" (Heywood, 2014). In our case, this might mean anything from crossing a border separating two states to crossing checkpoints, filing a tax report, or following the procedures designed to cast your vote. It can also include cultural frameworks, the language that you can use, the way you can express yourself, the vocabulary that you are allowed to use, or the space that you share with its specific sphere of intimacy proper to the culture in which you find and define yourself.

Frameworks, of course, can be helpful, as they give shape to your various actions, or they can be restrictive, as they might limit the area of your liberties. It is relatively easy to manipulate this form of power as even small changes can lead to measurable consequences (introducing or removing terms or required data from request forms or polls, ID cards, passports, etc.). Many countries in the European Union have abolished the request for religious identification when filling out different request forms handed to the local government to get residence status or identification documents. It is not the case for Israel, for instance, where it seems to be the most natural question that regards one's religious identity in various official forms. There is, however, no possibility to declare oneself as being without religion or at least to identify as agnostic. The list of words at one's disposal—officially selected, provided, and legitimized—define “how things shall be done” (Heywood, 2014) and how one's self-identification shall be done, that is. In this respect, the concept of structural power becomes reminiscent of Austin's (1962) ideas in *How to do things with words*. Indeed, the question is how to do walls with words. Sometimes an individual's entire official/legal perceptibility depends on the vocabulary that allows officials to capture their identity. Think about individuals with multiple religious or cultural identities or individuals who do not wish to identify along these lines. Think about the natural smoothness of one's own national and linguistic identity and think about the reaction you might receive if, using the language that accompanies one from your birth, you reject the idea or the obligation to identify as belonging to the culture defined by that language. A good example could be the short BBC Studios (2008) satirical *Do you speak English?* that depicts a foreigner in a country asking a passerby whether they speak English, and, elaborately and eloquently, they deny speaking English, in English. This example implies that the absurdity of denying our linguistic identity using our mother tongue shows how we can bump into the walls within which our cultural space is defined. What protects us can imprison us, too. The language we speak, which we so kindly call the “mother tongue,” can alienate us, exclude, or imprison us—in other words, it may turn into impenetrable walls. What can one do when their own language becomes the language of the enemy when the language so dear speaks the words of an alienating power?

Our mother tongue is so naturally part of our identity that we think of it as our property, we own it, we speak through it, and we are what we are by owning it. The structures it offers, the ways we perform actions through it, and the linguistic walls that design the way we perform these actions are seen as ours, individually, and as a nation. These walls build our heritage, and we feel comfortable within these walls, as if, indeed, these walls were meant to protect us, create unity, and generate a shared “subject,” the person of the nation.

Keeping in. Keeping out.

Derrida's (1996/1998) *Monolingualism of the Other* is based on an experience that he had as a child during the Vichy regime in Algeria, in El Biar. Because of his Jewish identity, the young Derrida was expelled from the school, and his French citizenship has been suspended for two years. The language so self-understandably belonging to him starts speaking the words of exclusion. His own mother tongue becomes the language of the enemy. There are two important elements in this short work: one of them is about the understanding that the language we speak—even if that is the only language that we know—is not ours, it is not our language; the other is about the nature of language that allows us to produce humorous situations, similar to the already mentioned little BBC Studios (2008) show.

But above all, and this is the double edge of a sharp sword that I wished to confide to you almost without saying a word: I suffer and take pleasure in [jouis de] what I am telling you in our aforementioned common language: 'Yes, I only have one language, yet it is not mine.'...(this) sentence extirpates itself in a logical contradiction heightened by a performative or pragmatic contradiction. (Derrida, 1996/1998, p. 2–3)

This contradiction gives us an interesting perspective into understanding walls that are not physical, walls created by language, culture, or any tool that either expresses identity or helps us to express identities (not necessarily ours). If the only language I speak is not mine, is it possible that it belongs to somebody else? Or is it the case that this language does not belong to any of its speakers? If this is the case, then the ones who use the language to perform actions that affect one's identity ('You should never use this language, you are not worthy of it because you are...') are also not the owners of that language, and that means that the performative power of such linguistic actions (to devoid somebody of the right to speak their mother tongue using the very same tongue, or any other tongue for that matter) is zero. Therefore, whenever the language speaks the words of exclusion, the performative value of those actions is rather aesthetic; thus, the proper response to them should be aesthetic, too.

Keeping in. Keeping out.

What exactly is happening with performative or pragmatic contradiction when you utter the sentences 'Unicorns do not exist' and 'You (so and so person with undesirable lifestyle and/or value system, etc.) do not exist'? What we know in terms of coherence and meaning, signs and their objectual/ontological status, both sentences rely on negation of something that should not be. The sentence suggests the existence of the signifier, otherwise it makes no sense to deny existence from something that does not exist

(Parmenides has made this pretty clear already). But what would this denial of existence mean in the case of these two sentences? First of all, we have a gap (the opposite of a wall if you wish so, yet the function is pretty much the same): “You (It, that Thing) do (does) not exist” translates into “I (the one that tells you that you do not exist) exist” and that there is an ontological gap between “I” and “You” (or “It”). You are ontologically walled off. This is so if we disregard the performative contradiction of any such sentence. In other words, if we disregard the fact that none of the ‘I’s and ‘You’s possess the language, the language does not authorize any of its users to perform such actions (yet we always and often do so). Linguistic annihilation (the performative act of “I/You/It do(es) not exist”) does not make sense when the object does not exist (physically, anyway), and it also does not make sense when the object does exist (physically, anyway). Not to mention what Derrida suggests, namely, that we are not owners of the language; therefore, we will, in fact, not perform what we think we want to perform. However, this regards only and only the relationship of the one that denies the existence of objects, subjects, or their properties to these objects, subjects, or their properties. Does the fact that we do not have the authority to perform such actions mean that we cannot efficiently inflict harm using or abusing the language that we have yet we do not own? We can, of course, imagine Derrida saying: ‘I only have one language, yet it is not mine.’ Now imagine the political authority representing the Vichy government saying: “You only have one language, yet it is not yours.” The perspectives for an analysis are given by the personal pronouns. Young Derrida’s sentence comes with a deep philosophical recognition: “I do have this language, but I do not own it, just like I have or will have many other things that I do or will not own (my friends, my children, my family, my culture, etc.) I use it, it defines me as much as I, as a member of the speaking community, define it.” There is no ownership here. Whether there are other forms of ontological relationships than ownership, or the lack of it, is not so important in this case. Looking at the other sentence, that of the political authority behind the Vichy government: “[t]he language that you are using is my property, and I do not grant you usage anymore, you do not have the right to identify as a user of this language!” While the first sentence does not come with any form of “authority” (it establishes an “authority”-free relationship to and by the language), the second sentence is an act of power, ignorant of the ontological content of the first sentence, embodying a form of behavior that ‘grants’ and ‘revokes’ through the power vested in the speaker. Does the fact that this speaking authority abuses the language to perform something that they should not perform stop them from performing it? No. They break a space between a voice and a language, wall the voice off, and try to cancel it. Well, in this case, they suspended it, and by doing so,

they separate politics from the authentic ontological status of the objects to which they create a power relationship.<sup>2</sup> This separation is perhaps even more tragical than (and perhaps, it is the source of) the separation of politics from morality or ethics.

Now the question is what exactly is happening when the authority behaves this way? We established: (a) that power is ignorant of intricate ontological relationships and (b) that ignorance does not stop it from acting. Derrida is told that he is not a rightful owner of the French language, all this in a language, a French language of which the Vichy government is in fact not a rightful owner either. The gesture of revocation (or rightful ownership of language and citizenship) breaks the space between the voice and the language. Or does it? Will the voice stop speaking the language? Probably not. The broken space results in an emergent identity. In Derrida's case, that is the Franco-Maghrebian identity, a walled off identity in a broken space (Derrida, 1996/1998, p. 12). The voice keeps speaking the same language as before. The specific linguistic architecture proper to Maghrebian French becomes a form of linguistic resistance<sup>3</sup> to the French that speaks the words of exclusion. In a similar fashion to the French song by Rachid Taha in his *Voilà Voilà*.

It is no accident that walls are called artifacts. It requires skills, knowledge, understanding, and purpose to create them. They strangely have their special aesthetics, proper to the weight they carry both in a physical, political, or social sense. Therefore, it is an easily occurring question whether walls are social objects or rather political artefacts. One might wonder why this question is so relevant as there is an almost instantly arising answer that regards the status of the social as deeply political, offering a perspective from which the two (social and political) are virtually inseparable. However, when we place the question in the context of everyday experience, our common sense suggests that not all social objects are or should be considered political artifacts. Social objects (McDonald, n.d.) are objects that facilitate interpersonal contact and communication. They offer an external surface that catalyzes interaction: instead of a "talking to" (person-to-person direct communication), the social object generates a triangulation of the communicative space producing a "talking about." Political objects have a different purpose, and that is not the triangulation of communicative space or the facilitation of interpersonal interaction. This might be an effect of theirs, but not their purpose. Political artifacts are designed and built with the idea of embodying or representing political power, decision-making, and, quite often, execution of this decision. The political actions that are performed through concrete material structures and

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<sup>2</sup> This comes with the assumption that political power relationships always, or most of the times, come with the intention of distorting the ontological status of these 'objects' (I intentionally use the word *object* here because power relationships necessarily objectify—yet another assumption about how political structures handle and manage power).

<sup>3</sup> Linguistic resistance can be seen as a form of aesthetic resistance.



artifacts describe the area of “teichopolitics” (“teichos,” Greek for “wall”). Teichopolitics speaks the language of power in which the words build physical realities. The logic behind these structures is simple: some things should be kept inside while others should stay outside. The dialectics is a bit more complex, of course: in case of a prison, it is the outside world that it is protected and not the ones inside. In case of the walls of a fortress the situation is the opposite. It is also important to understand that walls have a practical purpose; however, that practical aspect is not free of moral considerations. Besides, what we mean by “practical” here goes back to the concept of Aristotelian “praxis” that is always linked to action to “prattein” (“to do”)<sup>4</sup>. It is important to state that these artifacts do things, and that means that—although their physical existence (weight and other dimensions) is important when defining them, this physical existence does not necessarily define their ontological status as that can change. This sentence suggests an intentional element in defining these artifacts’ ontological status, and indeed, this is the case. Think about the Wailing Wall or Western Wall (יִבְרֵעַמָּה לְתוֹכָהּ) in Jerusalem. Ignoring the historical complexity behind the structure itself (how much of it actually was being built as a part of the Second Temple), one might say that as a part of the Temple, its purpose was to keep the sacred separate from the mundane or secular. Its external side did not have any sacrality to it. This aspect, as an intentional relation, was generated much later as the temple was destroyed and only the wall remained. This piece of wall as an artifact does not separate now; on the contrary, it embodies the sacred, and as such, it connects the believers to God—and this sacred property irradiates to the foregrounds of the structure welcoming hundreds or sometimes thousands of prayers to reinforce the intentional content that repurposed this bit wall from a supportive architectural fragment into a highly important religious topos. The intentional content matters. It can turn a political object into a social object, too.

Just like in the case of the Western Wall, even the proximity of the wall projects the aura of the wall. Borders usually have a strip that is patrolled and controlled by border police. Depends on the side of the wall. Also, the wall is often not one structure but rather a mechanism with a complexity of technology and human workforce applied. This is particularly true for border fences and prison walls. The wall is never an object, it is an action, it performs, and the main aim of the action is to break space. Breaking is a brutal way to articulate. Think about one of recent history’s most notorious walls, the Berlin Wall. The photo from below will show the complexity behind the Wall’s reality and how much it is not only disruptive but, by being so, how it shapes the phenomenology of everyday life on both sides in the spaces that it penetrates and breaks.

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<sup>4</sup> See Note 1 to Book I (p. 196.) in C. D. C. Reeve’s comments to Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. Indianapolis/Cambridge, 2014.



**Figure 2**  
*The Berlin Wall Mural*



*Note.* Author: Thierry Noir. 1986.

I will not recall the history of the Wall, as it is not relevant here. What is relevant, however, is the structure itself. The Wall is not one wall. It closes in an intermediary space between the sides that it separates. The gravel, the dirt, the net fence, the next concrete wall on the other side, the soldiers patrolling, the workers building, arranging, bringing more dirt to the death strip are all part of the Wall. The Wall is an institution as much as it is the physical existence of its various parts. There is but one element of continuity in this picture and that is the sky. The same sky stretches over a broken space, or at least so it seems. In fact, even the sky was split and regulated according to the political structures that lied below. It is not difficult to guess which side is East, and which one is West. The western side is unguarded, unafraid of the proximity of the wall, it is an everyday reality that is walled off from the East. A man and his dog. There is something else to be seen here that is unseen from the Eastern side: it is the murals that ornate the Wall. Early works from Thierry Noir.

The murals are colorful, they cover the wall, and they do not only do that, but they also become a part of it. Noir has used the Wall as a canvas. As much as the Wall was political, Noir's action was political too.

Noir's objective was to perform one real revolutionary act: To paint the Berlin wall, to transform it, to make it ridiculous, and to help destroy it prompting its ultimate fall in 1989. Noir covered the Berlin Wall, more than 3 meters high, with bright, vivid colors, aiming not to embellish the wall but to demystify it. (Noir, n.d., para. 1)

The murals on the photo are from 1986; it took some more years for the wall to fall, but its demise started already when it was erected. Noir's action was an act of aesthetic resistance of "demystifying," turning the object into something relatable, in a way humanizing it, domesticating it, visually populating it, turning it from a political artifact into a social object that facilitates interaction and communication, in other words, connection. Noir's work is deeply philosophical: by painting the murals on the Berlin Wall, Noir reduces it from the political to a part of an everyday phenomenology, offering it a proper ontological status. Now, there is something very specific about the Berlin Wall: one could see paintings, graffiti, and murals only on one side of it. The humanizing gesture was walled off, closed out, and unseen for the Eastern eyes. Walls have two political sides, and if both of its sides were visible to the people living in the spaces broken up by the wall, the wall would render itself useless and become politically transparent. Aesthetic resistance makes sense until the object resisted is still political.

Seen. Unseen.

When one crosses into the West Bank, into Bethlehem through the checkpoint coming from Jerusalem, the first thing one notices is a Banksy Hotel, The Walled Off Hotel, right next to the very tall concrete wall that cuts a part of the West Bank off. The hotel itself functions as a hotel, but also as something else. It is a very special space offering an artistically altered British colonial atmosphere, a bar serving coffee and other drinks, including excellent mocktails. There is a harsh contradiction between the soft and cozy atmosphere from inside the hotel and its surroundings, the messy and often busy road, the checkpoint just a few meters further up, the separation wall, and an observation tower. The inside design contains works by Banksy and hosts two exhibition spaces. On the ground floor there is a museum with a Palestinian narrative of the history of the wall. On an upper floor, one will see art, paintings of Palestinian artists that relate to the politically very specific phenomenology of everyday life in the West Bank. And then the murals outside on the wall. And the graffiti, too.

### Figure 3

*Bethlehem Land*  
(Separation Wall, Betlehem)



Note. Photo taken by the author of the present paper.

### Figure 4

*Handala's Pietà*  
(Separation Wall, Betlehem)



Note. Photo taken by the author of the present paper.

This one I found particularly interesting. Bethlehem is a city with Christian significance and a somewhat solid, yet slowly declining, Christian population that stood at 16% in 2016. What you see is a very special Pietà. The Holy Mary is replaced by the Statue of Liberty and Christ is replaced by Handalah. On the left side, you can see two uninvited spectators, a black and a white dove. Handalah is a symbol of the Palestinian struggle. A boy whose face cannot be seen. Handalah is always depicted with his back to the viewer. He is supposed to reveal his face only when freedom is reached. Liberty cries over the dead body of Handalah. This mural is very strongly political. Does it make it less a part of an effort to domesticate the wall? Does it need to be seen by the other side as well? The mural speaks a language familiar to the people living on this side of the wall. Is this a message to the other side? Does it want to be a message to the other side? Hard to tell, but again, it speaks a language that embodies the political aspirations of the people living in the shadow of this wall, and that means that it is an act of domestication. Just like other purposes of the wall seen in the image from below.



**Figure 5**  
*Separation Wall  
at the Walled Off  
Hotel (Betlehem)*

Note. Photo taken  
by the author of  
the present paper.

The wall becomes a screen for a projector. Now, this is a strong moment of apolitical domestication. Reconquering and repurposing a power structure and turning it into an object of everyday life is an act of humanizing.

Seen. Unseen.

Netiv HaAsara (the name means the Path of the Ten, commemorating ten fallen soldiers who lost their lives in the 1967 war) was a settlement built in the Sinai Peninsula during its occupation by Israel after the Six-Day War in 1967. The peninsula was returned to Egypt in 1982, which resulted in the eradication of Israeli settlements including Netiv HaAsara. It was removed and rebuilt in the northern Negev area with the same name. Netiv HaAsara is a settlement right on the border with the Gaza Strip. Whenever there is a conflict that escalates, it is immediately affected, just like many other similarly positioned settlements. The locals have built an education center and have an art project. The education center tells visitors about the history of the place and about the aspirations for peace in the shadow of the wall, a wall that, in this case, functions as a protection structure. Like in the case of the Berlin Wall, this is not a single wall. It has two layers with a significantly large strip between them. The first outer structure walls off a Palestinian village in the Gaza Strip. This has a Hamas outpost observation tower on the other side.





**Figure 6**

*Hamas observation post  
(Netiv HaAsara)*

Note. Photo taken by the author of the present paper.

The inner wall hosts the project that often attracts visitors to the settlement. This project is called Netiv LeShalom (פיתוח – פתח לשלום – Path to Peace)<sup>5</sup> and, accordingly, the wall is called Path to Peace Wall. This project comes with a twist. The message on it, and anything placed on it, targets the other side. It is a message of peace to whoever sees it from the other side. Now, in the picture above, you can see the observation tower, an edifice of an official political eye. There is a viewer, and there is a receiver. As much as the eye is political, the message is political, too. The wall is also populated by tiny ceramic work, round little pieces with messages of peace turned towards Gaza and the people of it.

**Figure 7**

*Path to Peace project  
(Netiv HaAsara)*

Note. Photo taken by the author of the present paper.



<sup>5</sup> <https://www.pathtopeacewall.com/pathtopeace-activities>

But is the language the same? Is the language of peace the same? Is this an act of communication? Is the wall that protects the citizens of Netiv HaAsara domesticated by their project? Is this a form of aesthetic resistance? This wall is turned inside out.

Seen. Unseen

The last image that I will share here comes from Bethlehem. Interestingly enough, the name of the city in Arabic, although it sounds very similar to how it is pronounced in Hebrew, means "The House of Meat," in Hebrew, it is "The House of Bread"; in the end, both are related to food. This image is one of the innumerable painted or stenciled on the wall.



**Figure 8**

*Dialog—wall art  
(Separation Wall,  
Betlehem)*

Note. Photo taken by the author of the present paper.

It could be a wonderful message. Dialog. Written in three languages: Hebrew, Arabic, and English. It could be a message of translatable human desires to turn the wall into a social object that triangulates the space of communication and facilitates talks and interaction. If it were not for a piece of mistake: the Hebrew is written with a disregard to the correct order of writing from the right to the left. This way, what we get is "Golaid." Broken spaces, and broken languages. Does it matter after all? In theory, no Israeli is allowed to set foot beyond the checkpoint to see this mistake.

Seen. Unseen.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> All images, except for the one of the Berlin Wall and Banksy's West Bank Mural, are taken by the author of this text.

## Postscript

Today, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October, 2023, is a day of religious celebrations called Simchat Torah. At 6:30 in the morning, 50 years after the Yom Kippur War, almost to the day, walls that separate Israel from Gaza have become permeable again, with disastrous, unspeakable consequences.

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