Bound, gagged and starved: Released hostages report severe mistreatment by captors

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<https://www.timesofisrael.com/bound-gagged-and-starved-released-hostages-report-severe-mistreatment-by-captors/>

The mother of hostage Eliya Cohen said Sunday that her son had been held with returning hostages who were chained, gagged, burned with a searing hot object, hung by the feet and starved.

Sigi Cohen said the hostages testified that her son was being held in a tunnel, has been chained for the entire length of his captivity, gets little food or daylight, and suffers from an untreated bullet wound to the leg sustained during the Hamas onslaught of October 7, 2023.

Cohen’s comments came as the family of hostage Alon Ohel said they received a first sign of life from him. Ohel’s mother Idit said he was also bound, starved and untreated for shrapnel in his shoulder, arm and now-partially blinded eye.

“The hostages sleep on the floor and need to share a blanket,” Idit Ohel told Army Radio on Monday, as her hostage son marked his 24th birthday.

Meanwhile, Vicky Cohen, mother of 20-year-old captive soldier Nimrod Cohen, told Channel 12 Monday that a returning hostage had been held with her son for some six months. She said the hostage told her Nimrod was held in a tunnel for most of his captivity and was not bound, but appeared to be in poor physical and mental shape. Nimrod Cohen was said to trust that his family was doing everything to save him.

The new information followed the release Saturday of hostages Ohad Ben Ami, Eli Sharabi and Or Levy, who returned to Israel [dangerously emaciated](https://www.timesofisrael.com/reports-newly-freed-hostages-were-abused-now-suffer-malnutrition-heart-disorders/). They were said to have gone for days without food, and then only given a single rotten pita bread to share. Their captors would reportedly cover the hostages’ mouths in a thick cloth that made it difficult for them to breathe. Before their public handover ceremony, the hostages were paraded in front of cheering terrorists.

Eliya Cohen’s mother told the Israel Hayom newspaper that her son was held in the tunnels with Ben Ami, Sharabi and Levy, and that seeing them left her sleepless: “You understand they are suffering a holocaust.”

[Eliya Cohen](https://www.timesofisrael.com/taken-captive-eliya-cohen-dragged-from-a-pile-of-dead-bodies/), 27, is slated for release in the Gaza ceasefire and hostage release deal’s current, first phase, which includes women, children and civilian men over 50 or who are deemed especially unwell, in exchange for some 1,900 [Palestinian prisoners](https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-to-free-1904-palestinians-in-1st-stage-of-hostage-deal-including-killers/), including many serving life sentences for murdering Israelis. [Alon Ohel](https://www.timesofisrael.com/taken-captive-alon-ohel-pianists-family-recorded-song-for-him/) and [Nimrod Cohen](https://www.timesofisrael.com/taken-captive-nimrod-cohen-twin-sister-working-to-bring-him-home/) are slated for release only in the second phase.

The far-right flank of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s coalition has threatened to topple the government should Israel proceed to the second phase, when the war is meant to stop for good, and the premier is [said](https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-negotiators-arrive-in-doha-sources-say-its-just-for-show-pm-aims-to-brick-deal/) to be “signaling quite clearly that he does not want to move on” to it.

Netanyahu’s office said Saturday that it would not let the dire condition of Levy, Ben Ami and Sharabi “pass without a response,” provoking ire from activists who have long warned that hostages were being starved.

Idit Ohel told Army Radio: “We’ve been learning more and more details since Saturday and can no longer remain silent. The prime minister can’t say he didn’t know, can’t say he didn’t hear and wasn’t notified about the state of the hostages. Every day there is hell.”

Sigi Cohen, Eliya’s mother, told Kan public radio that the hostages’ emaciation had shattered the illusion that captives would return in relatively good shape.

Cohen slammed “heroes” in the government who oppose the hostage deal. “Hand over your own children” to Hamas, she said. “I’m unwilling to sacrifice my child.”

She also assailed the protracted hostage releases, likening the distinction between first- and second-phase hostages to Holocaust-era “selection” between Jews deemed fit for hard labor and those sent directly to the slaughter.

**‘They treated us like animals’**

One of the three civilian men released on Saturday — Ben Ami, Sharabi and Levy — said of his captors that “they treated us like animals,” according to Kan. The public broadcaster reported that the three had been separately interrogated and tortured by their captors. In the interrogations, the hostages reportedly sustained burns from a white-hot, unidentified object. At one point, the report said, one of the hostages collapsed, leading fellow captives to think he had died.

Channel 12 quoted Levy telling his family: “I was bound in a dark tunnel, without air, without light. I couldn’t stand or walk, and only toward the time of the release did the terrorists remove the chains and I learned to walk again.” According to the report, the hostages were held mostly in tunnels, and always in dark, unventilated spaces, and had to “convince their captors” to let them relieve themselves more than once a day.

Levy, a civilian, reportedly said Hamas interrogated him intensively, treating him as though he were a soldier. He was also said to have described mind games in which the captors would falsely tell hostages they were about to be released.

Channel 12 said Levy, Sharabi and Ben Ami were notified 10 days before their actual release. Levy was said to have asked that a different hostage be released instead of him.

According to Channel 13, the captors routinely exposed the hostages to Israeli politicians’ statements opposing the hostage deal, telling them that “they don’t want to get you out.” The captors used to eat in front of the hostages without giving them food, and occasionally forced them to choose which of them would eat.

The network reported that the hostages were barefoot the entire time, allowed to shower only once every few months, and were unable to distinguish between day and night. However, they were reportedly able to hold Sabbath services on Fridays. Or Levy’s brother Tal told the Haaretz newspaper that the hostages, who were entirely cut off from media, preserved their sanity by counting the days since their abduction on October 7, 2023, when thousands of Hamas-led terrorists stormed southern Israel to kill some 1,200 people and take 251 hostages, sparking the war in Gaza.

Seventy-three of the hostages remain in Gaza, including the bodies of at least 34 confirmed dead by the IDF. Hamas has so far released 21 hostages — civilians, soldiers, and Thai nationals — during the ceasefire that began in January. The terror group freed 105 civilians during a weeklong truce in late November 2023, and four hostages were released before that.

Eight hostages have been rescued by troops alive, and the bodies of 40 hostages have also been recovered, including three mistakenly killed by the Israeli military as they tried to escape their captors.

Hamas is also holding two Israeli civilians who entered the Strip in 2014 and 2015, as well as the body of an IDF soldier who was killed in 2014. The body of another IDF soldier, also killed in 2014, was recovered from Gaza in January.