My hell in the Gaza tunnels: British hostage Emily Damari tells of being held in a cage like an animal and how a surgeon called 'Dr Hamas' left her in constant pain - and demands: Now let my friends go

July 25, 2025

By [Andy Jehring](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/profile-3841/andrew-jehring.html)

The Daily Mail

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14940829/My-hell-Gaza-tunnels-British-hostage-Emily-Damari-tells-held-cage-like-animal-surgeon-called-Dr-Hamas-left-constant-pain-demands-let-friends-go.html>

For almost four months of her 471 days in captivity, Emily Damari was incarcerated in the [Hamas](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/hamas/index.html) terror tunnels under [Gaza](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/palestine/index.html), where the stench of human waste permeated the fetid wet air and the floor crawled with cockroaches.

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Throughout it all she was in constant, searing pain after gunmen shot off two of her fingers the day she was kidnapped on October 7, 2023, while the remains of another bullet was lodged in her right leg.

But there was something even worse than the hunger, the stench, the pain and the lice that infested their clothes and hair: the cages.

Describing for the first time the inhumane practice in which they were treated like animals, Emily says: 'Sometimes there would be up to six of us at a time, squeezed in a tiny cage just two metres by two metres.'

The 29-year-old was finally freed alongside 32 fellow hostages in a ceasefire deal in January and propelled to international fame after an image of her posing defiantly with her wounded hand went viral – a symbol of freedom and courage.

Ever since she has tried to rebuild her life as she undergoes multiple complex surgeries on her fingers and to remove the bullet from her leg.

But today, the only Israeli hostage with dual British citizenship bravely takes the Daily Mail back to her harrowing time in Gaza in a world exclusive newspaper interview from her new home near Tel Aviv, Israel.

The last place Emily wants to return to is the tunnels. But she reveals the full horrors of what she suffered there for one reason: while she got out, there are others who still remain.

These include her best friends, twin brothers Gali and Ziv Berman, 27, with whom she was snatched from their kibbutz, before being separated in the early days of captivity.

'They are probably in a cage,' Emily tells me. 'They are abusing them. There isn't a lot of water. It is probably unimaginably hot for them.'

Visibly angry, she adds: 'Come on already! What is taking so long?'

Some 50 hostages remain, of whom 20 are confirmed to be alive, including the twins, and Donald Trump, who helped secure Emily's release in January, said this week he should secure the release of ten more 'very shortly'.

But tonight Mr Trump has said Hamas don't want a deal and it appeared the latest Gaza ceasefire talks are on the verge of breaking down, with Washington accusing Hamas of not 'acting in good faith'.

Emily is urging the US President and her own Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu 'to do everything in your power to bring my Gali and Zivi home'.

She says: 'You saved my life, now you must do the same for the last 50 hostages. Only then can we start to heal.'

That Emily survived at all is in large part to her astonishing strength of character that meant she refused to be cowed in the face of the worst of humanity.

Today she reveals she grabbed the barrel of a Hamas terrorist's gun and pointed it at her own face, begging him to kill her rather than be taken hostage.

And how, on another occasion, she persuaded a guard to give her his weapon and debated killing her captors – knowing she too would be killed.

She also talks about having to hide the fact she is gay from her captors who said they would kill their own family members if they found out they were homosexual.

Emily credits her mother's British stoicism, manners, and sense of humour with making her 'resilient'.

Her Surrey born mother, Mandy, 64, was in southern Israel on a gap year in her 20s, when she met and fell in love with charismatic Yemeni-Israeli Avihay, now 66, from whom Emily says she has inherited her energy.

Emily enjoyed a '95 per cent perfect' childhood at the Kfar Aza kibbutz, though endured '5 per cent hell' from rockets and threats from neighbouring Gaza. Mandy taught at the nursery and Avihay coached football, with her three older siblings Sean, 32, Tom, 35, and Ben, 38. Proud of her Anglo roots, and football mad, she supports both Maccabi Tel Aviv and Tottenham Hotspur.

Then there were her 'other' brothers – Gali and Ziv. Life on the kibbutz meant they were rarely apart from the very first day they met at kindergarten.

'It was always us together,' she said. 'I love them both, and I miss them.'

Indeed, on October 6, 2023, Emily threw one of the barbecues she loved to host for her friends, attended by the twins.

Just hours later, at 6.30am, the rockets started and it soon became apparent terrorists were inside the kibbutz.

Emily, at home alone, was terrified.

'I sent Gali a message: 'I'm not ok.' I couldn't move because my body was just ice. I was shaking – it was insane.'

Such is their friendship Gali risked his life to sprint to be with her.

Three hours later they heard Arabic voices approaching.

Then, a window smashed. Within seconds about ten terrorists stormed into her room, where Emily and Gali were lying arm-in-arm face down on the bed praying, with Choocha her cockapoo between them.

'I hugged Gali and both of our faces were on the pillow,' Emily said. 'Then they shot my left hand.'

Seconds later they shot Choocha dead, the same bullet smacking into the back of her right leg.

The terrorists dragged them outside and made them sit on a sofa while they tried to find her car to take them into Gaza.

'I just sat there and I said, 'Oh my God, what are they doing to us?'

She saw Ziv marched out of his apartment blindfolded; her peaceful kibbutz had 'become hell'. 'There was fire all around, doors open, everyone dead,' she said.

'We saw RPGs. We saw submachine guns. They were so happy in what they were doing.'

One of the terrorists turned to Emily, who was bleeding heavily and in shock, and said he was going to take her to hospital.

'I understood this was not going to be an Israeli hospital so I told them, 'No, no, no, shoot me!' I didn't want to be kidnapped, I would prefer to die. I took his gun, put it to my head and said: 'Shoot me! Shoot me!'

'Then someone put his gun on Gali's head, so I immediately said, 'No, no, don't kill him.'

On arrival in Gaza, Gali was separated from them. She has not seen him since.

While Emily and Ziv were kept together, within minutes Emily was driven to Al-Shifa Hospital after the terrorists informed her she was worth more to them alive than dead.

She was in a hospital room surrounded by 15 fanatics armed with Kalashnikovs when a tall bespectacled doctor entered and, with a smirk, addressed Emily: 'Hi, I'm Dr Hamas.'

Dr Hamas amputated her damaged fingers under general anaesthetic then stitched the nerves in her hand together. Whether he did so intentionally, or through incompetence, she will never know. But it left her in excruciating pain.

Returned to Ziv and other hostages in the house of a Hamas member, his wife and their six children – including a 14-year-old who carried a gun – the weeks that followed were hellish. Emily says she only had the clothes she'd been kidnapped in and was allowed to shower just once, leaving her caked in grime.

Their stay in this house was terminated when it was hit by a bomb and flattened – 'I thought I was in heaven. I saw one big fireball, and then I didn't see anything any more. Everywhere was dust.'

But at least she and Ziv were still together. Then, after 40 days in captivity, a commander told her she was going home, but that the boys and girls were being separated.

It was the last time she saw Ziv: 'I gave him a hug and said, 'Zivi, keep safe', and then they took him.'

Ordered to cover her clothes with traditional dress while she was moved, she heard the sounds of Israeli planes and drones above and it quickly became clear the war was not over – she was being driven to a tunnel entrance, not being released.

Of the network built by Hamas that stretches for hundreds of miles she recalls her first impression: 'It is like a city. I walked in and said: 'Oh my God, it's huge!''

Herded down the narrow passages, she had to feel her way in the half-light of her guards' headtorches, until they came to a clearing.

There, illuminated by the dim glow of battery-powered lanterns, she saw something utterly chilling.

'There was one cage, a very small cage,' she recalls, 'and there were five girls sat in the cage.'

Then, as she approached the bars, a familiar voice shouted: 'Two fingers?' Among the group, which included an eight-year-old, was 24-year-old Romi Gonen, shot in the right arm as she was kidnapped from the Nova festival on October 7 and whom Emily had met briefly while they were both being treated in hospital.

Emily's time underground has blurred into one single nightmarish memory, punctuated by periods incarerated in cages, but she says: 'It was stinky, hot, humid, damp. You don't get used to it.'

The details are haunting. She recalls the floor of the cages was sandy, wet and crawling with cockroaches. Everything, in fact, was wet from the humidity underground.

'They let you go to the bathroom once or twice a day – you have a hole in the ground. It stinks.

'There is no running water, just a gallon jug with water in it.'

At times, there would be six of them crammed into a cage, making it impossible to lie down, and they could barely see.

'The battery lamps give you light, but it's a very low light,' Emily recalls. 'It makes your eyes water.'

All the time, they were under the gaze of at least three armed terrorists.

Worse than the guards, though, was the silence. 'It makes you deaf, Emily says. 'It murders the ears… You go crazy in it.'

Initially, Emily was among a group of 11 women and girls and a week later the first November ceasefire was agreed. Six of the group were freed.

Unfortunately, the ceasefire ended before any more could be released.

Asked how she got through, Emily said they had no choice but to accept it: 'We just continued to survive.

'We were totally surrounded by terrorists. Five girls. They have weapons. They are stronger than you. They can do whatever they like, whenever they like.'

For Emily there was the fear that her sexuality would be uncovered: 'I hid that about myself because I knew it was worse than them knowing I was Jewish or Israeli – they would kill me.'

She had to fend off advances from guards, enquiring why she wasn't married.

'I told them I have three brothers, they don't allow me to go out on dates with guys – I need to wait for the one,' she joked.

But she was under no false impressions over what would happen if they discovered she was gay.

On one occasion she asked a guard what he would do if he discovered his brother who he loved was gay.

'He said, 'Well, I would kill him.' I said, 'Ok, but it's your brother?' He said, 'No, he's sick.'

After around three months without seeing daylight, their routine changed and they were switched between the tunnels and houses, staying in almost 30 different locations and moving without warning lest the IDF discover their position.

Car dash cams were used as improvised security cameras to monitor them, and later the terrorists lined the homes with explosives that could be activated in case a hostage rescue was attempted.

Emily stayed with dozens of different male, female and child hostages, but the one constant for nearly all her time in captivity was Romi.

She has spoken powerfully of the 'twin-like' bond they formed, as Emily's left fingers had been shot while Romi's right arm did not work.

They used their working limbs in synchronicity to wash their clothes, eat, and dress one another. Both woman had to tend to their agonising wounds which festered in the tunnels.

Emily tried to stay sane with a routine she started in the first days with Ziv.

'I would do sit ups every morning,' she said. 'The most sit ups I did was 600. But most days it was 400, 450.'

It caught the attention of her guards, who nicknamed her John Cena, after the Hollywood actor and wrestler, for her physique.

'The terrorists would call me Sajaya, it means you are very confident, very strong,' she recalls. 'I did everything just to survive. If they sat with me now and I could kill them – of course, I would be happy to do it.'

Emily even once managed to convince a tunnel guard to give her his gun 'to play with'.

'Then he walked away,' she said. 'I said to the girls, maybe I should kill him? I started getting really excited about the idea.

'But then the girls said, 'yeah, but then what? Then we're all going to die.' '

While she didn't care about her own safety, she backed down.

But while Emily outwardly appeared strong, inside she was in turmoil, not only over the fate of the twins but her mother, brothers, and father who had been diagnosed with advanced Alzheimer's 12 years ago. She feared they had been killed on October 7.

'I didn't want to talk about my family because it would break me,' she says. 'But you start thinking about all the people, especially at night when you are trying to fall asleep.'

At night, though, she often had agonisingly vivid dreams of returning home. 'Then I woke up, and I was still in Gaza,' she said. 'It was s\*\*t. But what can you do?'

When they were being held above ground, she occasionally caught glimpses of television and often saw images of Romi's family protesting – but never any of her own.

Then, one morning, Romi said there was a woman holding a picture of Emily in the Israeli parliament on television.

'I didn't recognise her for a second and then I was like…. Mum!' Emily said. 'Then I started to cry. I was shaking. It was the opposite of an anxiety attack. It was this relief, my mother is alive. Everyone was crying. '

But with no sign of any chance of release it was a rare high point.

In particular, there was one family in whose house they were billeted for a period who pushed Emily to the brink of suicide.

'They were the worst people,' she said. 'The worst family. They would make fun of us and laugh at us. They would tell us: 'Nobody cares about you.' They would hide food from us and tell us we were never leaving Gaza.'

When, after 13 months in captivity, she was returned to them, Emily could take no more.

'I said I'm not staying here. Either I'm going to escape, or I'm going to kill myself.' She and Romi made a suicide pact.

Typically strong-willed, Emily grabbed the least cruel guard and demanded he bring his commander, telling him: 'If you don't do something and get us out of here, you are going to have two dead hostages.' The commander assured her she would be moved but two months passed and nothing happened.

But at the beginning of January this year Emily had a premonition they would be released.

She remembers adamantly saying to her fellow hostages: 'I'm telling you. We are going to get out.' She even shaved her legs and made Romi do her eyebrows in preparation.

On January 19, Emily was proved right. She was not quite done with bossing her guards around, however. When they handed her a red top to wear for the release ceremony, Emily refused to wear the colour of her Israeli football team's rivals.

'Tell your commander, Emily Damari doesn't wear red,' she insisted. They agreed to give her a green top instead.

Images from the handovers shocked the world, with released hostages stumbling out in the sunlight surrounded by a baying mob of Hamas supporters.

Pictures of Emily staring into the faces of Hamas and smiling in defiance as she was released were a defining image of the day.

She was handed over to the IDF in Israel who confirmed all three of her brothers and her parents were alive, and tried to get her to talk to psychologists and therapists on standby.

'I said, 'fine, fine, but where's my mum?' Emily recalls. 'They said this is your room, and I said 'great, whatever, where is my mum?'

'And then she came! I said: 'Mum, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.' '

Incredible footage shows the moment they embraced.

That hug, she says, was: 'Perfect.' Pausing, she adds: 'My greatest hope is that Gali and Ziv will have that experience too'.