The Spontaneous Show

Hagai Ulrich converses with Nadav Bin-Nun about music and art, improvisation, violence, and narcissism, following the release of his *Spiritual Album*.

Conversation / Hagai Ulrich August 25, 2018

For over a decade, Nadav Bin-Nun has been making videos, movies, music, and performances. On the occasion of the release of his *Spiritual Album*, we talked about his work. At his request, the conversation was conducted without any preparation, while strolling in the streets.

Let's start at the end:

H.U.: Nadav, I mentioned to someone that I was going to publish a conversation with you, and she said I should not encourage the violence and narcissism contained in your work.

N.B.: Oh no, she said that?

H.U.: Yes. And then I told her that one of your jobs was to perform for elderly residents of a nursing home. It surprised her.

N.B.: Well, this is a mind-blowing job. These people are at the last stretch of their lives. The other day I came to work, and they said, 'Hannah died.' That same Hannah whom you hugged just yesterday was no longer there. Dead. You come to work, and a person is dead.

I always do performance there. Wild performance. The situation can be bizarre. The other day, when Prince William came to visit Israel, I asked one of the women there, 'Do you see these keys? The first one is for the King David Hotel [in Jerusalem]. She said, 'fine,' and made a face. 'The other key,' I said, 'is to Prince William's room.' And again she made a face. 'And the third one opens his closet. Go there, at 3 am, and open the closet. There's a gun in there, shoot him.' I asked her, 'Would you do it?' And she said, 'Yes.' Everyone all around is laughing. They love it.

H.U.: it's a little like your art.

N.B.: it's more extreme.

נדב בן-נון - קהלת ואני

Video of נדב בן-נון - קהלת ואני
Nadav Bin-Nun, Ecclesiastes and I, from The Spiritual Album, 2018

H.U.: In addition to video and film, in recent years you have been performing your music, playing songs that you published independently as albums on YouTube.

N.B.: The current album is the third part of a trilogy. The first part was The Cambodian Album *[1]* (2016), which was followed by *The Cambodian Show*. Then came The Naïve Album *[2]* (2017) and *The Naïve Show*. *The Cambodian Album* came out after breaking up with a girlfriend with whom I'd had a complicated relationship. It was compiled from Cambodian tribal music I had found on the Internet. I used mostly instrumental segments. I wrote texts in Hebrew and sung them. It is not a

communicative album. *The Naïve Album* comprises my own music, electronic and Pop. I created *The Spiritual Album*, the last of the trilogy, with an instrument called Push-2, which I played. While *The Cambodian Album* was about a difficult relationship and *The Naïve Album* was about love and tenderness, *The Spiritual Album* was only about me, myself, the room where I had been recording, and the loneliness of making it.

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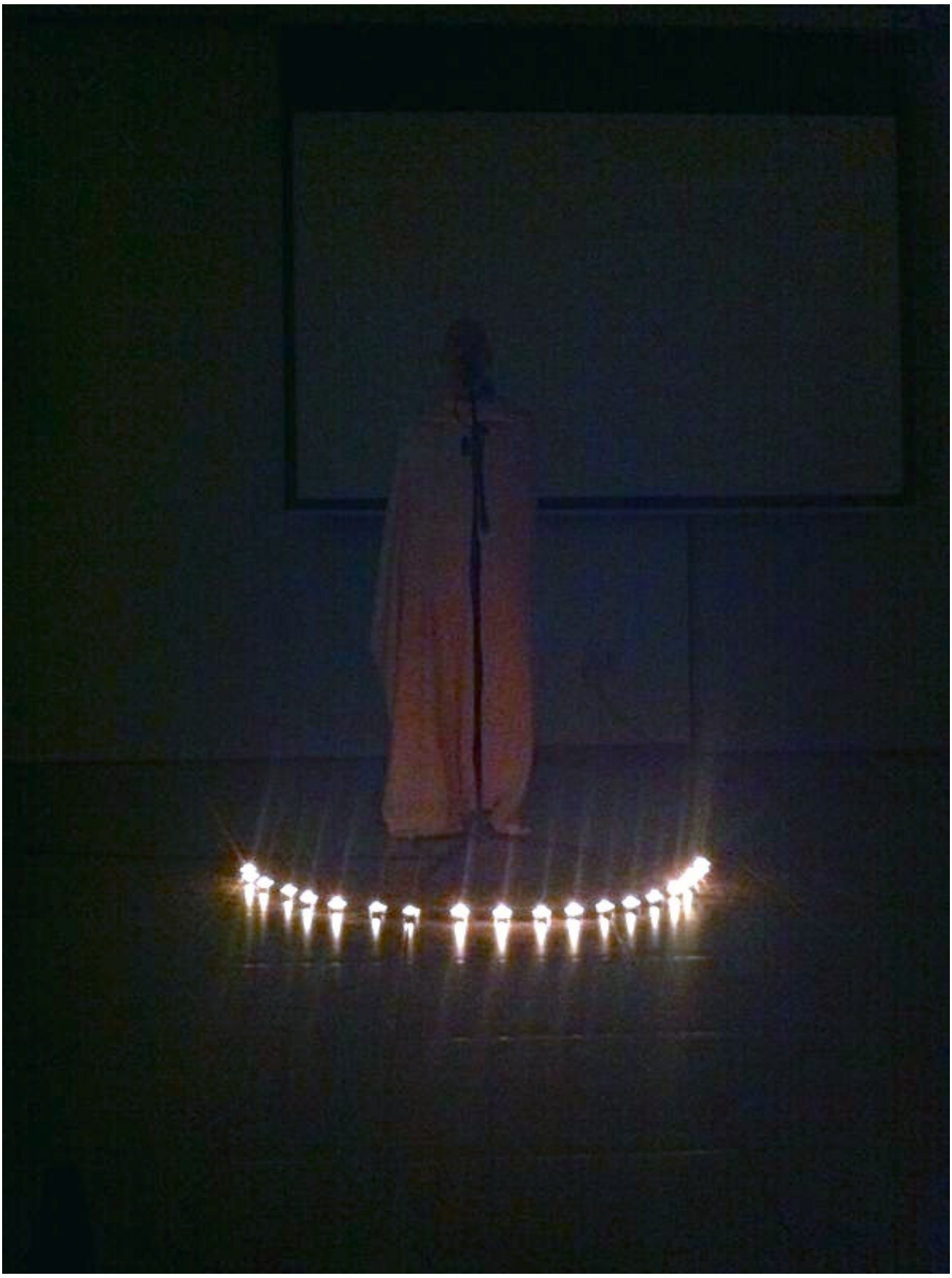
Video of הרוחני האלבום - נון-בן נדב
Nadav Bin-Nun, The Spiritual Album, 2018

H.U.: And when did you begin performing the songs?

N.B.: The first time I did such a performance was at the HaMidrasha Gallery-Hayarkon 19, when it just opened, in 2014. It was an on-going art event, curated by Tzion Abraham Hazan. I did a performance called *Alek Mishtara*. I took a sheet off my bed and wound it around myself like a guru, and sang songs I had written, which were later included in *The Cambodian Album*. I repeated this sort of performance in other locations. Later I started appearing with *The Naïve Show*, and then changed it into *The Spontaneous Show*.

נדב בן-נון, מתוך עלק משטרה, 2014, גלרית המדרשה - הירקון 19 **[4]**



[5]Nadav Bin-Nun, from Alek Mishtara, Hamidrasha gallery-Hayarkon 19

H.U.: You seem to be in a bit of a trance In these performances, crazy at time - it looks shamanic. People in the audience can't always figure you out. They smile hesitantly, not sure what to make of this dance you're doing. You also come too close to people, stare at them, wave your arms, and it may alarm them or make them uncomfortable. In *The Spontaneous Show*, you perform the song *Hard Drugs*, which is quite a heavy song, and in the middle of it, you start dancing funnily. And then you turn serious again: you stand, look at the audience, and pretend to remove a mask. It is unclear off whose face you are removing the mask – yours, or the viewers'?. As a viewer, I've often wondered - are you serious, ironic, or mocking?

N.B.: I pretend to remove a mask only at the end of *Hard Drugs*. I don't create choreography for the dance; it is mostly improvisation. In the performance, I dance and do silly things. And yes, depth is achieved in this combination of gravity and jokiness.

נדב בן-נון - סמים קשים (הקליפ הרשמי) **[6]**

Video of קשים סמים - נון-בן נדב (הרשמי הקליפ)
Nadav Bin-Nun, Hard Drugs, 2017

H.U.: You improvise in your performances, and yet you create an experience of very intense, repetitive images. To me, they often seem to accuse the audience of something – perhaps of the misery and the sense of vanity the words evoke, or maybe of hypocrisy. As I watch them, I experience a conflict with myself. It's the same with other segments from *The Spiritual Album*, such as *Ecclesiastes and I*.

N.B.: I wasn't referring to myself in these words. I opened the book of Ecclesiastes. It says, 'I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.' (Ecc. 1:14). It sounds good to me. I said, great, let's put in some Ecclesiastes. And I also put in my own texts. I improvise a melody, make a sound, words slowly emerge, and these are the words I write down. During a performance, too, I want to act in front of people impulsively, immediately, with no consideration for anything, and truly live the moment. To act without committing myself – toss up something and then act within the thing which emerged. I don't construct a scheme. I find it tiring and uninteresting. Intuitiveness is the most honest thing. It will always be vital for me to work intuitively. Otherwise, I'd feel stuck. The most fun is to surprise myself. The way the music allows me to act is like the way I have done my early movies – an impulse, an improvisation. This is how I make music now. I have started to feel overly conscious of things in the movies, while music and performance let me be more dynamic. I like to do things in front of an audience for the first time, to experience the crowd and react to it. I react even if they are silent, or if they applaud. It's the same with your questions; write it down that I'm hearing them for the first time, and have not thought about the answers.

נדב בן-נון, מתוך המופע העצמוני, פסטיבל הפנזינים, 2018 **[7]**



[8]Nadav Bin-Nun, from The Spontaneous Show, Fanzine Festival, 2018

[9] נדב בן-נון, מתוך המופע העצמוני, פסטיבל הפנזינים, 2018



[10]Nadav Bin-Nun, from The Spontaneous Show, Fanzine Festival, 2018

נדב בן-נון, מתוך המופע העצמוני, פסטיבל הפנזינים, 2018 **[11]**



[12]Nadav Bin-Nun, from The Spontaneous Show, Fanzine Festival, 2018

H.U.: in your better-known video works, like *Poetry that's Meant to Kill* and *The Match* from 2010, and also in *The Soft German* movie (2014), your mother is present, either as full participator or in other ways, such as imitating or impersonating her. It is also true regarding your latest video, *Coming Closer* (2016), which features her. How did the series of works with your mother begin?

N.B.: In 2007 I made a movie called *Love is a Dancing Tear* [13], in which I interviewed myself for an imagined retrospective in Beijing. I played the interviewer, and I borrowed a wig from my mother, who had been undergoing chemotherapy at the time. She had cancer. I created an initial character based on her. Then I made *Meal* (2008). My mother prepared a meal, and I sat down to eat. She sat down too. She noticed the camera and said, 'What, are you recording this?' And she looked at the camera. So this situation happened, where she was in the movie. I've discovered the magic of shooting someone who is not aware of being shot, and it turned into a series of films like this one which I have been making very consistently.

Nadav BIn-Nun - Coming Closer/2016 **[14]**

Video of Nadav BIn-Nun - Coming Closer/2016
Nadav Bin-Nun, Coming Closer, 2016

H.U.: In your art, in video and performance, you draw on your interactions with others to create images – is this something that motivates you? To initiate a stimulus that activates other people?

N.B.: I'm not sure I see where you're going with this, but I'll say that since childhood I've tended to activate people provocatively, to test limits, trick people, irritate them, to get close to the edge and put people in uncomfortable positions to make them react. I had no idea that this was evident in my movies. I thought it was more in my regular social interaction, which is problematic, as some people claim. But yes, it probably relates to the movies as well.

H.U.: In *The Match* (2010), you impersonate your mother – you sit facing the camera and call women you have known in the past, asking them - ostensibly in her name – to pay you a conjugal visit in prison. You use a funny voice, pretending it is your mother's, and say, 'Nadav, my son, is in jail for murdering his father. Can you be with him?' They are stunned. And you record everything. Real conversations.

N.B.: In A Film Without a Film *[15]*I do a similar thing. I'm reading a love letter to someone with whom I have very limited interaction. I wrote her a letter, but she didn't want to hear it. I tried to read it to her, and I recorded her as we talked. She didn't want me to read it, and that's why it's a film without a film. It was an improvisation. All the early films had no script. Later I did more writing, and the improvisation was less evident.

Nadav Bin-Nun - The match/2010 **[16]**

Video of Nadav Bin-Nun - The match/2010
Nadav Bin-Nun, The Match, 2010

H.U.: You turn the viewers into partners in the violence, which is always related to your gaze upon them. In *The Match* and *A Film Without a Film*, you gaze at the camera while performing a violent act via the telephone. In *The Camera*, a person in the movie seems to disappear in its fictive space, which the camera lets you do. You look for that person, and you can't find her. Finally, you face the camera as if deducing that it had made your friend disappear. You grab the camera forcefully and say to it, 'Now I will show you who has the power! You go behind the camera and groan while the camera loses focus. It creates a sense that you are raping the camera. It can be seen perhaps as punishment for making the character in the movie disappear, or as a sadomasochistic compensation. Which raises the question – who are you raping - the camera? The viewer, who is watching through the camera? Or maybe the viewers are participating in the rape by looking into your inner world through the recoding? In any case, the viewers are participants in the violence, and somehow it's funny.

N.B.: Each work has its unique motivations. In *The Camera*, it has to do with the plot. The camera is a character, and that's why I speak to it. In *A Film Without a Film* I show the viewers what is happening. These are different motivations.

H.U.: I'm trying to say that your works raise issues of responsibility, of guilt. There seems to be an attempt to function as a mirror for the viewers – to tell them, 'You are all participants in whatever happens here. It's also you.'

Nadav Bin-Nun - מצלמה/2010 **[17]**

Video of Nadav Bin-Nun - מצלמה/2010
Nadav Bin-Nun, The Camera, 2010

N.B.: I don't know if this is done consciously, and maybe I'm looking at the viewers only because I want to draw them in. If I don't, perhaps they won't look at me. As in a conversation, if you look a person in the eye, it might cause them to look back at you, to communicate.

H.U.: It's the same in performance, and also in the movies. You create situations characterized by violence, awkwardness, guilt.

N.B.: I want to test the viewers. It's as if now the criminal is looking at them, saying to them, 'Come, experience this thing as a partner in crime. You've accepted my invitation, and now I look at you and inflict my violent act on someone else. And since you've accepted my invitation, you are complicit.'

In *A Film Without a Film* I even shed tears. After my violent act, I give the viewer the opportunity to feel compassion toward me. The object of identification is first and foremost myself. I'm the one whose conduct is inappropriate. Perhaps this places the viewer in an ambivalent position - are you ready to participate? I look at you now, and you must look at me. Look, I think of these things now in a way that I have never wanted to. There will always be intellectual links to everything you do. It's easy to pull a thread and make connections. I don't do this as an artist.

Nadav Bin-Nun - Poetry that's meant to kill **[18]**

Video of Nadav Bin-Nun - Poetry that's meant to kill
Nadav Bun-Nun, Poetry that’s Meant to Kill, 2010

H.U.: But you repeat it quite regularly. There's also a kind of repeated carelessness in the sound, in the cinematography, in the infantilism that undermines the seriousness you've created for a moment, or a sophisticated shot that you suddenly interrupt.

N.B.: Life and video and music are all one integral unit. I don't take responsibility for life, and I don't take responsibility in the work. If the work is intellectual, I'll break up the intellectualism. If you want excellent sound, I'll disrupt the chorus, so that it would not be what you wanted it to be. This is the resistance to taking responsibility. Maybe an inability to commit. I try to test limits, and you come and say, "You've created a certain boundary with clear rules, and then you undermined it, and now decide because I want to know because to me it seems intellectual and artistic." And that's neither here nor there.

H.U.: And that's how it is in *The Soft German*? [A feature film from 2014 Bin-Nun has written, directed, and distributed, in which he plays the main character, Johann.]

N.B.: *The Soft German* started with an idea about a German who dreams his grandfather has murdered during the Holocaust, and he wakes up terrified and questions his mother about it. She says they have nothing to do with the Holocaust. He starts to investigate, and that is how the story begins.

THE SOFT GERMAN 1.jpg **[19]**



[20]Nadav Bin-Nun (left) as Johann, from the movie The Soft German (2014)

H.U.: Is he suppressing it?

N.B.: Ruth [a main character in the movie] is acting out of the Israeli collective suppression mechanism. The movie's musician once told me she thought that Ruth represented the Israelis and Johann the Palestinians and that in fact, the movie is about the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the way the Holocaust has helped legitimize the occupation. The movie shows the romantic, sadomasochistic relationship of an Israeli (Ruth) and a German (Johann), who is demeaned by her. She can humiliate him and boss him around because she denies certain things and is unaware of her actions. Conversely, his guilt, as a German, enables the passivity with which he accepts her behavior, up until the end of the movie. Ruth makes it possible because of the German-Jewish past, or, you might say, the Israeli-Palestinian one. I did not see it when I was making the movie, but apparently I had a reason to include the military and the patriotic songs.

H.U.: It does seem intentional. And another thing, Ruth collects hairs from former partners and keeps them in jars. That is, the acts that demean Johann are something she does repeatedly and preserves and documents. In the middle of the movie, Ruth and Johann kiss. In the background, there's an obituary notice for "Gideon Ginton" (a hybrid of the names of Israeli artists Gideon Gechtman and David Ginton), Ruth's father. This has led me to think that she might be a representation of an Israeli artist. Ruth tells Johann that collecting hairs does not have the logic of a hobby but rather is an essential need, which is something I've heard artists here say of their work – there's a need to make art, but it doesn't help anything. Ruth and Johan also visit the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion [a part of the Tel Aviv Museum]. In another scene, Johann visits her at a rehearsal for a play. In yet another, she puts Johann's tear on her face and drinks his tears from a jar – it seems like a performance. She is in her inner world and is not interested in the outside reality. She invents a story about Johann and calls him Karl throughout the movie. He confronts her about it toward the end. Is this a critique of Israeli art? That it doesn't touch reality?

N.B.: It's the first time I hear it, that Ruth is an artist… I don't know how to analyze Israeli art. Once more you are trying to drag me into a conversation about Israeli art, and I can't talk about it.

H.U.: What about Ginton and Gechtman?

N.B.: I created Ruth as a kind of combination of Ginton and Gechtman in terms of their art. David Ginton, who had been my teacher, worked with photography that contained elements of performance and had himself photographed with [a copy] of Michelangelo's *David*. Gideon Gechtman did performance, collected hair, and hung up death notices with his name on them. But the issue of criticism of Israeli art does not motivate me. It doesn't move me. I am sincere with you. If you see intellectualism, you can mention it, but it's different. It is not reflexive in the sense of making a movie about Israeli art.

Nadav Bin-Nun - Mask/2008 **[21]**

Video of Nadav Bin-Nun - Mask/2008
Nadav Bin-Nun, Mask, 2008

H.U.: In your work, you play a persona, but you also let people see that there is a persona. It creates tension and interest but also ridicule, perhaps because they see themselves in it.

N.B.: I don't know that I'm putting on a persona. It's me and nothing but me. I play myself in extreme situations. To be myself in such circumstances is to put on a persona just as you put on a mask for your parents, or for anyone else.

H.U.: And what happens when you take off the mask?

N.B.: The way I appear before an audience in performance is, for me, a cleansing. Like a ritual of taking off the mask. The mask must be there so that you can remove it, and understand that you are now exposed. I see honesty in a mask. A dishonest person would wear a mask without showing that he is displaying the mask.

H.U.: I feel that this is something that's missing in our art and our society in general – to straightforwardly show violence, abusive relationships, obsession, guilt, and lack of awareness - things that exist within everybody. This violence exists in everyone, expressing itself in small everyday things. In observing the Other, in his flattened representation, but for some reason, very few people display it in all its rawness, as you do.

I've pushed you to talk about people and reality because this is my position. But tell me, aren't you becoming a scapegoat on whom we can dump all the mess, because he has 'incriminated' himself in a video, and now we - society in general - find him guilty of the violence that we all commit every day?

N.B.: A scapegoat? Me? I'm the one making the art! I control everything and I look people in the eye. I've decided to make movies. I express myself as honestly as I can. In working with the old people in the nursing home, it's the same. This is more important than art, my work in that place. People at the end of their lives enjoy me, look forward to my visit, see me in the morning and their eyes light up. It's about taking them to the edge and stretching my limits, and theirs. It may sound inappropriate, but it's honest. Today at the nursing home, there was a woman who sat off to the side and disturbed everybody by yelling 'I'm miserable, I'm miserable.' A hundred-year-old, drooling, screaming 'I'm miserable.' I said to the nurses, bring her in. She said to me, 'I'm miserable,' and I said to her, I understand, and she said, 'you make fun of me but I'm miserable.' And I said to her, sometimes I lack compassion, I can't listen to everyone, and they all look at me and the nurses are not sure what is going on. And I said to her, 'Magda, you are miserable but you are also wonderful,

Magda, you are wonderful!’ I walked away from her slowly. She had no idea what I've been up to.

נדב בן-נון - להבה (הקליפ הרשמי) **[22]**

Video of נדב בן-נון - להבה (הקליפ הרשמי)
Nadav Bin-Nun, Flame, 2018

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