



amid
the *Faith
flames*

Five lives ruptured by the cruel violence of
Palestinian terrorists; five beacons of *emunah*
during these challenging times

SHIFRA WEISS

It's a dark Friday night in December 2002.

Terrorists storm the kitchen of Yeshivat Otniel during the Leil Shabbos meal. One of the four young men on kitchen duty, Noam Apter, makes a split-second decision that seals his fate, but saves the lives of at least 100 others: Instead of running, he locks the door between the kitchen and the dining room and throws the key in a dark corner, trapping himself and the other three with their killers.

Many of us remember hearing this heroic story when it happened, feeling awed by Noam's ultimate sacrifice. Some wondered whether they could have had his presence of mind, his incredible strength. But what about the people who really knew Noam — his family, his loved ones? Do they wish he had acted differently, chosen to save himself — and come home again? How do they make sense of the tragedy? How do they cope with their loss and go on with their lives?

Terror victims are, unfortunately, all too common in Israel today. Though every story is different, it never ceases to amaze how survivors draw strength from suffering, turning an impossible burden into powerful messages for the rest of us.

On the picturesque streets of Jerusalem's German Colony, the organization OneFamily — Overcoming Terror Together conducts its important work of supporting victims of terror as they rebuild their lives. In their offices, five women — each touched by tragedy — have come together to talk about their experiences and journeys.

Elishava, Maya, Pirchya, Livnat, and Chaya share a reality that is harsh, but not hopeless. Looking at them sitting around the table, they don't look like victims. Though they haven't "gotten over" their traumas, they have come to a place of peace through a combination of external help and inner strength.

SMALL MEASURES OF COMFORT

Serene and feminine, Elishava Chai Efrati's eyes shine with dark humor, having taken in rich portions of both joy and sorrow. In December 2009, her husband Rabbi Meir Chai was shot to death as he was driving home. Elishava was left widowed with seven children.

Despite her terrible loss, Elishava is able to see the *chesed* in Meir's quick demise. "If HaKadosh Baruch Hu saw fit to bring Meir's life to an end quickly, I think that, despite all the shock and pain, this was the best way to end it. It doesn't make a difference that it was done by an act of hostility."

Instead of dwelling on what is missing, Elishava, who has since remarried, chooses to focus on what she gained from Meir. "If I were asked to do it again, to be Meir's partner in life only to lose him at an early age, I would say yes, despite the searing pain. Because he didn't only die *al kiddush Hashem*, he lived his whole life *al kiddush Hashem*. It was worth it to me to have that privilege of being his partner."

Even her children have picked up on this sense of appreciation. "At a OneFamily camp," Elishava relates, "one of my kids remarked that children who lose parents to illness or accidents have it harder, because they don't have that added sense of meaning, the knowledge that their parent died for a value. And that is a real *nechamah* to us."

Like Elishava, Noam's mother, Pirchya Apter, opts to look for Hashem's kindness in the

weaving of her life events. "I had a certain *chesed* in that, on some level, I had the spiritual and psychological tools to deal with his death. I've studied a lot of *chassidus* and the introductory level of Kabbalah, and I'd already dealt with a lot. Many unpleasant things happened, but the Torah I learned strengthened my *emunah* and enabled me to deal with them."

Pirchya remembers hearing the horrifying news. "When they first told me, I almost had a complete breakdown. But then, three words came into my mind: *Gam zeh meiHashem*. I realized that it's all from Hashem, the nice things and the very painful things, too. Once I'd absorbed that, I was able to stand again.

"I could feel that I was in Hashem's Hands, so I didn't have to worry. He'd let me know whatever I needed to know. And He did. And ever since, I say the morning blessing *zokeif kefufim* with special *kavanah*. I really know what it means, I've been there."

For Chaya Borovsky, the loss is still fresh. Her 31-year-old son, Evyatar, was stabbed to death at the Tapuach junction in April 2013, leaving a widow and five orphans. Modest and kind, Evyatar belonged to a theatrical troupe. Acting was his outlet, and he'd bring joy and therapeutic emotional release to others. He was working toward certification as a medical clown, hoping to give the profession more of a presence in Israel's religious hospitals.

Chaya can't hide her raw pain as she speaks of her confusion and grief. "I've had moments when I can't help asking: If Evyatar was so pure, then why did he have to die like that, with a knife? I have no choice but to accept it. We are people of faith."

For Chaya, comfort is currently impossible — she desperately feels she has to see Evyatar again. "All the time I'm wondering, where is he exactly? What does he look like? I answer myself, he doesn't look like anything — he doesn't have a body now! His wife Tzofia has dreamed of him. I wish I could see him in a dream too, so I could have some real experience of him, not just abstract thoughts."

Still, remembering what Evyatar was like and the certain reward he is now enjoying offers some consolation. "There's every reason to think he's in a good place now — he spent 31 years doing good."

MAIMED FOR A MISSION

On July 31, 2002, Maya Segal-Laslau was in the cafeteria at Hebrew University's Mount Scopus campus when a bomb exploded, killing nine and wounding dozens. Maya's life was saved by a friend who was among the dead. Her ears were injured, and she lost an eye, yet petite Maya radiates vitality despite her wounds.

The trauma Maya underwent has marked her for a purpose. In a clear, strong voice, Maya elaborates: "I see it as my mission to tell the story of nine people who were murdered. Not killed by a bomb. Murdered." She pauses. "The second part of my mission is reminding people who are willing to hear, or not willing to hear, that Jewish people in Israel are being

murdered because we are Jews who want to live in our own homeland. It's not done by accident or by mistake. It's not a decree of fate. People with twisted minds did it with their own hands.

"All of us here — and it doesn't matter whether you're on the left or the right politically — we don't have another home." (There's a murmur of agreement all around.) "This is my home, and I'm here to stay."

Does rage energize Maya's fervent drive? No, Maya says, it's not rage so much as having been forced to face an unpleasant reality. "That gives me belief and strength

I didn't have before."

Part of that remarkable strength is Maya's ability to show compassion for the nation of her friends' murderers. "True," she muses, "strangers came along and changed my whole life without asking my permission. Not only my life — the lives of everyone connected with me. So yes, there's anger over that. But more than anger, I feel sorrow that there is a society like that, raised on hatred, full of negativity instead of living with a desire to love, to grow, and blossom. It's sad that there are people like that, and that they're raising children like that."

Pirchya would rather focus on Noam's life and death than on the people who caused it. But she also refuses to be drawn into anger. "My energies are limited and I don't want to waste them on that. When I was younger I went to demonstrations. Now I have other things to do."

One of those things is a weekly *shiur* Pirchya teaches in *chassidus* for women at OneFamily headquarters. She smiles. "Maya is one of my regulars."

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The Right Amount of Comfort

How do you relate to someone who's been traumatized by terror? What can you possibly say? Trauma researcher Dr. Zieva Konvisser offers helpful guidelines.

- Your primary role is listening, whether in the shivah house or much later. Even years after the trauma, survivors sometimes need to talk about it. Keep these points in mind:
 1. Listen empathically. Don't offer advice — just be there.
 2. Don't ask questions; just let them talk.
 3. Remember the deceased for who they were, not as murder victims.
- When you do open your mouth, consider what you say carefully, especially how it will sound to the survivor. "I think we develop a very finely tuned sensitivity," says Maya Segal-Laslau. "Knowing how easy it is to say the wrong thing makes me very careful what I say to others."
- Be wary of pointing out the "silver lining" to victims of terror. A friend told Maya, "Now that you're finished with all the surgery, you probably forget that you ever had two eyes." Uh... no. Well-meaning people like this woman mistakenly equate recovery with a return to the pre-trauma state of life.
- Be aware that the survivor has been through something you may never understand, and that's okay. "Acceptance is the only thing that helps," says Pirchya Apter. "Only friendship that has patience for what we are, that understands we will never again be the same as we were."
- Don't be so cautious that you end up saying nothing, or worse, hiding from the survivor. Zieva Konvisser has heard from survivors again and again that the most hurtful reaction in the aftermath of the tragedy was seeing acquaintances cross the street to avoid meeting them. "A little show of empathy is all that's required," she says.

HITTING HOME

When a family member is the target of a terror attack, the reverberations are felt throughout the extended family. "The parents, the wife and children, the siblings..." Chaya says, shaking her head slowly.

"Everyone, the whole circle of family and friends, feels the threat, worrying, 'Could it happen to me — to my child or my parent?' " says Livnat Dahan. "It causes fears, anxiety, and pressure. I think my sister Sofia was such a *tzaddikah* — if that happened to her, what do I deserve?"

At a family bar mitzvah in Jerusalem's Beis Yisrael neighborhood on Motzaei Shabbos, March 2, 2002, a suicide bomber blew himself up alongside a group of women and children waiting outside for the men who were davening Maariv. Single at the time, Livnat had started walking ahead with her little niece Shira, and they were just a few meters away from the explosion that killed Livnat's sister Sofia and her baby son, along with nine other Jews.

Livnat suffered injuries to her ears from the shock waves and, to this day, deals with the emotional turmoil of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). She has been like a mother to Shira since Sofia's death 12 years ago, while marrying and having six children of her own.

When family continues to suffer even after experiencing such a loss, it's confusing and painful. "You have to work to separate the rational thoughts from the emotional," says Livnat. "I see how things went for my brother-in-law, and it scares me." (After losing his wife and son to a suicide terrorist, he remarried — and then had a child with Down syndrome.) "I need to remind myself that he isn't me. Each person has to realize he's on his own separate path, and Hashem has a different plan for each of us. There's no point being scared of someone else's experience."

RECOVERY TOOLS

That even one person can rise from such a loss as a positive and productive member of society is astounding. Zieva Dauber Konvisser, PhD, has met dozens of such individuals through her research on the human impact of trauma, particularly the possibility of positive change after trauma. In her book *Living Beyond Terrorism: Israeli Stories of Hope and Healing*, she notes that survivors who recover after a terrorism-based tragedy share certain characteristics.

Those who thrive are the ones who face their situation squarely and take action to move beyond the trauma. They accept that their lives have changed and reorder their priorities. They grapple with fundamental questions and "call on their inner strength, core beliefs, and values.... They stay connected and seek outside resources to help them survive rough times.... They tell their stories and make sense of their lives.... They are hopeful, optimistic, and celebrate life."

The ability to overcome the trauma of terrorism, says Zieva, depends on a combination of internal and external resources, including psychiatric support, as well as support groups, retreats, and the like.

"It's amazing what women get out of support networks," says Zieva. "Talking about it is a way to make a coherent story out of the experience." As one survivor told her, "You need to talk, talk, talk, until you get the poison out of the fangs."

"What happened is never going to 'make sense' in terms of a plot with a beginning, middle, and end," Zieva explains. "But in time it comes together into a coherent story that makes inner sense, freeing the person to step out of it and live 'next to' the trauma."

Livnat has been able to construct her story so that it has begun to make sense for her spiritually, helping her maintain stability even at those terrible moments when

her PTSD is triggered. "Sofia was the one who influenced me to become religious," says Livnat. "She was always strengthening others. Everything I have, she gave me. And at the bar mitzvah, she left her daughter with me for a minute, and a moment later came the explosion.

"It's hard to understand, but I know that Sofia and those like her are the ones giving us strength, they and what they left here in This World. It's not what we do, but their influence that gives us strength to go on."

To pull through these difficult times, survivors need to learn to accept help, including professional help. "Israelis tend to be macho — even the women," Zieva says. "It's hard for them to accept help." Though the present generation is more open to counseling and therapy than in the past, there is still residual stigma associated with accessing psychological services.

"I used to think I managed the world," Elisheva Chai Efrati confesses. "I couldn't accept help from anyone." But she has learned to accept the assistance she requires with grace and gratitude. And Livnat Dahan says she regrets the time she allowed to slip by before taking care of herself and getting the help she needed after the trauma.

Acute symptoms of trauma require help from trained professionals, a fact that these women have all come to grips with.

Those who thrive, according to Zieva Konvisser, also turn to creativity and giving to promote their healing. "They see negative events as an opportunity to help others," she writes. "In the wake of grief, many bereaved family members create meaning through altruism, others create memorials to meaningfully recognize and honor their loved ones.

"It's important to hear what people's identity is, however long it took for them to see themselves as survivors rather than victims. It's attitudinal. When they began to show hope, that was when they began to heal."

Chaya Borovsky continues to volunteer at hospitals, a regular part of her life before she lost Evyatar. Livnat has learned to sew and has found the creative outlet tremendously helpful. "She's making a curtain for my room here at OneFamily," says Mindee Levinger, coordinator of OneFamily's Jerusalem branch.

But perhaps the most powerful resource of these survivors is that same *emunah* that formed the mainstay of their lives before their trauma. Chantal Belzberg, executive vice chairman of OneFamily, has followed the progress of hundreds of survivors of all levels of religious affiliation. She confirms that "without a doubt, those who are less religious tend to have a harder time rebuilding their lives."

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THE LITTLE VICTIMS

When the person experiencing the trauma is too young to begin to comprehend the evil behind it, how can she recover?

According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, children are more liable than adults to get stuck in the emotional turmoil of the trauma itself, which impedes their ability to move through the typical phases of the grief cycle. Unable to progress with healing, they are completely dependent on help from adults. Unfortunately, without appropriate intervention, their emotional development can be stunted and their future compromised.

Many children — orphans or young siblings of the deceased — were affected by the acts of terror that took the lives of Noam, Evyatar, Meir, and Sofia. Thankfully, most of these children have received therapy through OneFamily or other sources of care. As they grow up, they tend to become emotional caregivers themselves. Livnat's younger sister, only ten when Sofia was killed, went on to study psychology and special education. "She manages better than I do!" says Livnat.

Because of their experience, these children become adept at knowing what their peers, other surviving children, need most. Pirchya tells about one of her eight surviving children, a daughter who took part in her last OneFamily camp when she was in 12th grade. "On the last night, my daughter and the other older girls wanted to give a gift to the younger ones. So they gathered them together for a talk session, no holds barred. Everyone talked out the feelings they'd been holding inside, and tears flowed freely. Camp is supposed to be fun — but there can't be a taboo on expressing honest feelings!"

Elisheva tries to normalize her children's lives to the extent that is possible. Even though her son Asaf's birthday is on Meir's *yahrtzeit*, the family headed to a restaurant to celebrate after visiting the cemetery. "It was his day, and nothing was going to spoil it," she says.

Yet the impact of the loss of their father is unmistakable — and not only in a negative way. When her son, an army recruit, wanted to train as an officer, at first he was denied the opportunity. "They thought he wasn't suitable," Elisheva relates, "but he turned the whole army over until they offered him a chance to try out. He had to be interviewed by a psychologist who examined how Meir's murder had affected him. He was asked: Was it a rock-bottom point in his life, or a turning point? My son said it was a turning point.

"'You're in denial,' the psychologist claimed, but my son insisted, 'Listen to me. Even if it's going to cost me to say this, even if you're going to make it hard for me to become an officer, I'm telling you it was a turning point for me. Not a rock-bottom point. Hashem selected this trouble for me, and I've been through something hard, but I've only moved forward.'" ☺