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World > Middle East
 from the October 30, 2002 edition



TIME TO REFLECT: On a Family Healing Retreat, Yisrael Shushan and his mother, Esther, pause to look out at the Sea of Galilee; his sister Yochevet died in a Jerusalem suicide bombing last year. SHARON ABBADY/SPECIAL TO THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

Families mourn loves, not heroes, on Israeli retreat

By **Ilene R. Prusher** | *Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor*

HODAYOT, ISRAEL – Malki and Michal were best friends. Though they went to different schools and came from different families – one religious and one more secular – the teenage girls had other things in common.

They were neighbors. They were counselors in the same youth group. They even shared the same initials. And they were heading to a meeting for their volunteer work when they stopped off to get a slice of pizza in downtown Jerusalem. There, a year ago Aug. 9, a Palestinian suicide bomber blew himself up in a Sbarro restaurant, killing both of them and 13 others.

Now, it is the families of Malki Roth and Michal Raziel who have something in common – an unbearable loss that they feel few around them understand. More than 600 Israelis and 1,900 Palestinians – a growing number of them children – have been killed in the two years since a spiral of Israeli-Palestinian violence usurped the Middle East peace process. Families of these victims are often encouraged to see them as war heroes or martyrs.

But for many families, there is little consolation in viewing their grief as part of a national struggle – when what they see is an empty chair at the dinner table.

It was with this expanding list of families in mind that Seth and Sherri Mandell came up with the idea of bringing together Israelis who have recently lost someone close – a child, sibling, or parent – to a terrorist attack. Last month, while schools and offices were closed for the week-long Jewish holiday of Succot, the Mandells helped to bring 15 such families to this rustic resort and field school, nestled on a hillside near the Sea of Galilee, for an unusual three-day retreat. The pilot program, which combines group

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therapy with outdoor activities like hiking and kayaking, represents a new approach to healing the most personal of wounds inflicted by a war that is often relayed to the world in political terms.

"We're left with a very big hole in our lives," says Arnold Roth, who was the father of seven until 15-year-old Malki – a pillar of a middle child and a classical flautist – was killed 14 months ago.

"In my family, no one wants to bring it up because it's liable to trigger responses that we don't want to deal with," he says as his intense, hazel-eyed daughter, Pesi, 10, slips into the chair next to him and wraps small fingers around his hand. "The loneliness of it is offset by talking to other families, because what we're hearing is [that] the same issues keep coming up again and again."

The Mandells would know. In May of last year, their 13-year-old son, Koby, was bludgeoned to death near their home in Tekoa, a Jewish settlement in the West Bank. Koby and his friend Yosef Ishran, 14, skipped school one day so they could explore the striking desert gorge nearby. The boys' bodies were discovered in a cave the following day, their skulls crushed by stones.

The grisly nature of the boys' murders – and the fact that the Mandells were American immigrants who came to Israel from Silver Spring, Md. in 1996 – attracted a flood of media attention. The outpouring of shock and sympathy was also tinged with censure from Palestinians and even left-leaning Jews who blamed them for putting their children's lives at risk by moving to the controversial West Bank settlements.

Steering clear of politics

But in the Mandells' drive not to let their son's death pass as another meaningless tragedy, they established the Koby Mandell Foundation, whose programs steer clear of politics and stick to helping people cope with loss. Last month's Family Healing Retreat was devoid of ideological content and focused only on bringing families together for an uncommon hybrid program of therapy and recreation – outdoorsy stuff Koby, a star baseball player, would have loved.

"They say you have to move on, but I also feel that you have to feel grief and give it expression, because it's there and it's not going away," says Sherri Mandell, as she begins to weave her way down the cliffs of Arbel, a place through which someday, according to Hebrew Scriptures, the Messiah will come. Some families' losses only grow harder over time: Daniel, now the Mandells' oldest son, cannot believe he's the same age as his big brother Koby, who will forever be 13.

"It's a little like there's an elephant in the room and some families simply pretend it's not there," says Mrs. Mandell, as families trek down the steep, rocky trail with two armed guards, twice the normal requirement for Israeli hikers. "For some families, the elephant is there all the time and it's taking up the whole room. There's a lot of power in these deaths, and we want to help people use that power to grow."

The program, in fact, grew out of the "Mothers' Healing Retreat," which the foundation recently organized to help women who had lost children in attacks. In the past year, the foundation also launched Camp Koby, which offers 6- to 10-day sleep-away sessions for children who have lost siblings or parents in terror incidents. The programs are free for participants; the foundation runs primarily on donations from the American Jewish community. Mr. Mandell, a rabbi who once headed the Jewish student organizations at Penn State and the University of Maryland, is using US ties to raise funds for the foundation, in the hope that it can be expanded as a model to be used across Israel and in other conflict zones.

"The reason that we can do it is so that we can get up in the morning," says Mandell, who has a kind face and greying beard, and wears walking shorts and a knitted skullcap – a mark of the

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modern Orthodox lifestyle he began to adopt after a visit to Israel 25 years ago.

"The idea is to create an informal social network. One of the major issues for people who lost children to terror is a sense of isolation because no one understands, unless they've been through it," he says.

"Yiyeh beseder"

Israel has known war, to one extent or another, throughout its entire 52-year existence. But in the state's early days, Israelis collectively viewed the fallen as heroes who were making great sacrifices for the country's establishment. Today, with far more young civilians than soldiers falling victim to mass violence directed at cafes, clubs, and buses, the losses are harder to countenance.

Still, many here say, a part of the Israeli national character urges those grieving to be strong, to carry on. "*Yiyeh beseder*" – "It'll be all right," they say. That sort of chin-up mentality makes it difficult for many families to cope with their losses.

"There is nothing systematic here to help, not anything like the American model, where something terrible happens and boom, there's a therapy group," says Mandell.

Israel's national insurance agency – the country's health care administrator – does offer counseling groups for people who have lost children to terrorism. But they are larger, amorphous groups that can throw together parents who just lost a child a few months ago and those who lost one 20 years ago. The Mandells' retreats focus on those most recently hit by terrorism, and bring together groups with a common language – dividing the Hebrew-speaking parents from the native English speakers.

The group at the Family Healing Retreat last month was mostly made up of religious immigrants from various Western countries – mainly the US, Britain, and Australia – who share a mother tongue as well as similar struggles. Many parents here say they have been forced to question, from within and without, their decision to move to Israel.

"There's a certain feeling of ambivalence in the support I get from the outside," says Mr. Roth, a software executive who lives in Jerusalem. When he went to visit his native Melbourne, some people suggested this never would have happened had he kept his family in the quiet Australian suburbs. "At the end of the day, I feel this is where I should be," he says.

In sessions, other parents express a feeling of guilt that – though they resent its imposition from others – they often internalize. Says one immigrant mother of her son's death: "I feel like I killed him."

Uneasy adolescence

Around 10 p.m., the din of crickets rises and guards are lowered. Children and young teens, sitting in a circle in a rustic classroom, talk differently from the way they do when their parents – now off in separate sessions – are around.

"At my house, everything I do is a fight. Just to go into town, or go out with my girlfriends. My mother never wants to let me do anything," says Miriam Sarah, a pretty 16-year-old with a trace of an accent from her native France.

"I'd like to just take the bus to go anywhere, to a friend's house or the mall, and now they won't let me," says Rivki, 13, one of Malki's younger sisters.

These might seem like normal teenage complaints, part and parcel of the battle for more independence amid the pressures of everyday life. But here, tensions with parents are blown out of proportion by the ongoing conflict. "After there has been an attack," Dafna Shem-tov, a family therapist, tells the group, "sometimes parents start to relate to their children as if they are

younger than they are – and it happens just at the age when a kid feels he's growing up."

The suggestion unleashes a torrent of feelings about parents who don't want to let their kids go anywhere anymore for fear of more terror attacks. Even families who haven't been directly affected by violence are keeping their children away from crowded places and public transportation. The teenagers talk of parents distraught at the mention of the mall, or of Mom giving permission on the condition they don't tell Dad.

"My sister was killed in Sbarro...." starts Rivki.

"Was murdered," interrupts a teenager who lost her brother.

"Okay, also murdered," says Rivki. "I mean, everything has changed." Even school feels different. "I don't know if my friends are my friends for me or because I'm one of these terror victims, because I'm Malki's sister."

Miriam Sarah, who sustained serious injuries in the Sbarro bombing that killed her sister Yochevet, dismisses her mother's worrying as pointless. "I just tell her that if I'm going out anyway, what good will fear do? It can happen anywhere."

Her brother, who has begun to grow the curled sidelocks worn in ultra-Orthodox Jewish circles, says that since Yochevet's death, it's become harder to concentrate on his studies. "It hasn't affected my faith, but my trust," says Yisrael, 15.

Dr. Valerie Velkes, the program's senior therapist and a psychiatrist who specializes in children's and family therapy, says that the level of stress-related psychological problems among average Israelis has soared over the past two years. The number of her patients requesting antianxiety medication has jumped from about 10 to 40 percent, she says.

And children who have lost a family member have additional layers of stress.

"We see this overprotection now – kids are feeling stifled," she says. "Children who have lost siblings carry an enormous amount of stress and guilt and anger and they have nowhere to put it. I hope to get them to a place where they can at least talk to each other."

Older teenagers often end up trying to protect their parents, and avoid bringing up the subject altogether. "They feel that 'If I tell Mom how upset I am, it will only upset her.' So they shut off completely," says Anat Tsur, another family therapist, briefing parents about what their children are experiencing. "They think 'Mom and Dad have more pain than I do.' Or they say, 'There are times when I enjoy myself and then I feel awful. How can I enjoy myself when my brother or sister can't?' "

And after a year?

In Judaism, the official period of mourning for a loved one – during which special memorial prayers are uttered daily – lasts one year. It suggests one should feel differently after a year, says Roth, "but it doesn't feel that way at all." Still, some here are finding meaning in their mourning. The Roths founded a nonprofit fund in their daughter's name, dedicated to raising money for her most cared-for cause: severely handicapped children like her youngest sister.

After Meir and Chana Lanzkron lost their youngest son, 13-year-old Naftali, in a suicide-bomb attack on a bus stop 18 months ago, their nine other children decided to publish a nature guidebook in his memory. It consists of chapters on animal and plant species that are found in the Bible and still exist in Israel today, and is geared for Israelis going out exploring – the sort of thing Naftali loved to do.

The outpouring of concern and support from abroad, evidenced in the assistance for programs like this one, suggests to Mr. Landzkron that something positive is coming out of this dark

chapter. "It's very easy to get into a depression, and that's what they [the bombers] want," says Landzkron. "But I see something very good has come of this – it is bringing all of us closer together."

- See also www.kobymandell.org and www.kerenmalki.org.



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