

Jewish Agency helps terror victims: "We tell the victim: you are not alone"

Since its inception, the Fund for the Victims of Terror of the Jewish Agency has provided thousands of terror victims financial support, rehabilitation aid and tuition assistance. "An immediate response is crucial to the victims and their families, not just financially but also emotionally.

That Friday in June 2015 is carved in Netanel Hadad's mind. In the afternoon, Netanel (28) and his best friend Danny Gonen, drove out to a water spring outside their town of Dolev, in the Benyamin region. Two best friends, both 25, with the world at their feet. A Palestinian man drove by and stopped, gesturing that he had run out of water. The two stopped their car to help him. The Palestinian pulled out a gun and shot the two friends point blank. Netanel was hospitalized with some injuries. Danny was critically injured, and pronounced dead upon arrival at the hospital. Earlier this week, a military court sentenced two Palestinians who were part of the terrorist cell that carried out the attack to 21 and 17 years in prison.

"The attack was traumatic and distressing, and caused the death of my best friend. I knew that from that day on, my life would never be the same. My life, in the blink of an eye, became chaotic, yet somehow, due to warmth and care encompassing me, I managed to carry on my daily routine." In addition to being surrounded by his family and friends, Hadad was also cared for by the Jewish Agency's Fund for the Victims of Terror, funded by generous donations of Jewish communities around the world, aiming to show their support and solidarity of Israelis in distress as a result of terror attacks.

When a terror attack occurs, first on the scene are the rescue and security forces, immediately followed by the Fund for the Victims of Terror representatives, offering thousands of shekels of immediate financial aid to the victims and their families. This money is crucially needed to pay for immediate necessities – from purchasing new eye glasses to replace the pair destroyed in the attack, to paying for the family's rides to the hospital. Victims recognized by the State as terror victims, will later receive a grant of up to 25,000 shekels. Terror victims are eligible for financial aid for up to three years from the date of the attack. This grant is intended to help the victims in their rehabilitation and to help them fulfill their dreams and wishes in order to advance their lives and aid in their healing.

Netanel Hadad heard about the Fund for Victims of Terror from Devorah Gonen, Danny's mother. "Devorah heard they might be able to help with tuition, so she urged me to call them. From the moment I contacted them their response was simply incredible. They tried to help with so many things," shares Hadad. "They asked about my studies and my rehabilitation and offered lots of support, always kindly and warmly. They helped with my tuition, with the funding of a running group in memory of Danny, and urged me

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to turn to them with any request, even when I was too embarrassed to ask. When they gave me the grant, I tried to cordially decline, but they made me feel like I was actually helping them, and not the other way around. I will always carry with me the emotional and physical scars of that day, but the realization that there still are amazing people out there, just as amazing as the friend I lost, does make it a little bit better.”

“Anyone who knew Danny will forever mourn his loss. It is almost palpable. The attack happened just as I was starting my Computer Science degree studies at HIT (Holon Institution of Technology). Due to the attack, I deferred my studies and left work for about six months. I eventually went back to school and started working at Microsoft Israel R&D Center. I graduated a few months ago and went on a trip to the Far East with my wife, Tamar.

Sometimes I feel like I am climbing up a high mountain, without knowing how much further I have to climb. Therefore, I just keep going, step by step. Every once in a while, I look back, just to see how far I’ve come.”

“We Are All Emissaries”

Hadad is just one of many terror victims living in Israel. Since establishing the Fund, the Jewish Agency has helped over 7,000 families to the tune of hundreds of millions of shekels. Yael Raz, Director of Emergency Response Division, explains that the Fund’s donors are quite versatile: “The main donations arrive through the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA), or through Keren Hayesod. There are also individuals who come to Israel looking for ways to contribute. Some even pick up the phone and just call us, and many Jewish boys and girls celebrating their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs wish to contribute, as well as Jewish brides and grooms, who choose to donate their wedding presents towards a good cause.”

In 2002, Jewish communities around the world decided to create the Fund for the Victims of Terror, in order to help the victims of the terrorist attacks of the 2nd Intifada. Since then, the Fund has undergone a few transformations. It has been operating in its current structure since 2013, providing victims with more and more emergency grants, within 24 hours of the attack. “When a missile strikes a home in the area close to Gaza residents require immediate monetary assistance, and today we know full well that this immediate aid of 4,000 NIS is significant, not only financially but also emotionally. The victims and their families know right then and there that they are being supported,” says Raz.

“The fact that we find them, sit at their bedside in the hospital, or come to show our support during a Shivah, is hugely significant. One of the key elements of trauma therapy is tapping into the community resources in the first 72 hours following the event. We

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come to them with the whole Jewish world standing with us, and we tell them: 'You are not alone. We know this is a difficult time, and we are here offering an immediate grant now, and further assistance later on.' The immediate response is always tears of joy and astonishment. They are amazed that someone who owes them nothing is thinking of them and extending a helping hand. In addition is the fact that we require no red tape. In times of emergency, people find it very hard to organize their documents. In our case, they get the assistance then and there. We get the job done, whether through the hospitals' social services, the municipal welfare services, the municipal authorities or Social Security. We have a network..."

"When a terrorist attack occurs, we get to work. Our team is very small, but we basically consider any Jewish Agency employee as our emissary. We have an extensive reach, throughout the country and every corner of the world. In days of calm, the entire network is enrolled; never mind in days of turmoil. The minute something happens, our field agents call to offer their help. The Jewish Agency's financial aid agents, in charge of issues the emergency grants, are so skilled and experienced, that we have a check ready within a half an hour of the first call."

"The Fund doesn't discriminate between Jewish and non-Jewish victims," notes Raz. "There were many cases of tourists who perished in terror attacks in Israel. One time our emissary arrived at a remote village, three hours' drive from London, and just knocked on the family's door. The family in that case was not Jewish. And our solidarity really made a difference."

Choosing Life

On October 13th, 2015, Maya Rahimi (now 28) was riding the No. 78 bus on her way from her residence at Armon HaNatziv neighborhood in Jerusalem to her work at the Accountant General's office. Two terrorists, armed with a gun and a knife, began shooting at the bus, injuring seven and killing three – Alon Gubberg, Haim Haviv and Richard Leikin, an American-Israel peace activist. Rahimi was seriously injured, suffering stab wounds to her shoulder and a punctured lung.

"I tried to escape but the two men chased me and stabbed me from the back. I realized later how lucky I was, as a bullet ripped through my bag and missed me by mere inches," recalls Rahimi. She has since left Jerusalem and moved to Modiin, and is now working in finances. "The move provided peace of mind. I'm no longer terrified of walking in the street after dark."

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Following the attack, Maya was hospitalized for a week at Shaare Zedek Medical Center in Jerusalem. "I was cared for with tremendous sensitivity. To this day, I keep in touch with Dr. Ofer Marin, who treated me then. And he wasn't the only one. At the time, when that terror wave was just beginning, there were media items about emergency aid for terror victims. I was still in the hospital when Hila Malmud, a rep for the Fund for the Victims of Terror, contacted my mother. She gave us 4,000 shekels donated by Jews of the Diaspora. Later on, the Fund helped me buy a laptop for my studies, and paid for a self-empowerment workshop to help strengthen my self-worth. In addition, they helped with a year's subscription to a gym and a personal trainer. I just didn't have the attention span to train on my own, but my shoulder still needed to heal."

"I did do some physical therapy, but I couldn't keep going. Representatives from the Jewish Agency helped me keep going. They kept calling, supporting, encouraging, caring, and just being there, providing real care and attention. When they realized I only used part of the sum they gave me, they checked to see if there were other things I wanted for myself. Nothing here was taken for granted, and I deeply thank the donors and the Fund."

In September 2017, Vered Edri, a 22-year-old woman, was coming home from a civics class she gave titled "A Bi-National State and Minorities' Rights." Standing at a bus stop in Nofei Mamreh in Kiryat Arba, she noticed a terrorist approaching her, holding a knife. "I started screaming and running away, while he was chasing me, knife in hand. I reached a wall and had nowhere to turn." The few seconds from the time I reached the wall and until the terrorist was gunned down by soldiers lasted a lifetime. "After that horrible trauma I knew I could not give in, I had to move on, create something new," says Vered.

With the support of the Jewish Agency's Fund for the Victims of Terror, Vered joined a culinary arts school, and during her studies she was able to overcome her debilitating fear of holding a knife. Every day she learned to create new pastries and take another step towards recovery. "It's very confusing to be a terror victim. I didn't know what that meant before. From the moment I was first approached by representatives of the Fund, I felt I was being supported and given help without having to beg for it, but simply because they want to help. It was a powerful moment."

"To me, there was no other choice, but to keep living," says Vered. "I stayed home for two days, but by the third day I got back to work at the Oriyah Girls Ulpana in Gush Etzion, passing by that same spot every day, accompanied by my parents. For everyone else it's just a bus stop, but when I walk by, I see an ambulance, soldiers, a terrorist

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running, being gunned down. It is my battlefield. It is still an uphill battle, but I was one of the lucky ones. I was rescued and given a new lease on life. I can't throw that away."

"You ask what do pastries have to do with rehab?" asks Raz. "To me, the answer is clear. Vered will be healed when she can regain her trust in people she was distanced from by the trauma. Our team discusses every single case, examines the big picture of the rehabilitation process. This team includes representatives from Social Security, and together we build a rehabilitation program for each and every beneficiary. Naturally, large, public systems are cumbersome and slow, and this is where we step in to give that little extra push and speed up the victims' healing. Simple, everyday events like going to a play or sitting among family and friends in a restaurant or outside, can prove challenging to traumatized people. These small everyday things are an integral part of the healing and rejoining life."

Chairman of the Executive of the Jewish Agency, Issac Herzog, concludes: "The Fund for the Victims of Terror is a moving testament to Jewish and Israeli solidarity. Along with other organizations, like Amigour Sheltered Housing for the Elderly, we exemplify the strong bond between the Jewish world and the People of Israel, and specifically those in need. This bond has persisted for decades and grows stronger every day. It is the epitome of the Jewish value of all of Israel being responsible for one another, " כל ישראל " ערבים זה לזה ". I'd like to take this opportunity to thank our partners at Social Security, at the Ministry of Defense, and at the local municipalities, for their shared efforts in helping victims of terror."