

Camp Koby: Therapeutic Healing for Young Terrorism Victims

There are so many extraordinary things that take place in Israel daily that it's hard to keep track of sometimes, much fewer have the presence of mind to recognize, and pause to thank God for them. Each is incredible in its own right.

It is a blessing to live among these blessings, some of which are outstanding and miraculous, especially in light of the many challenges we face.

Recently, I was overwhelmed by an experience, highlighting one miracle after another, an abundance of blessings and how these originated out of deep pain and sorrow. During the recent holidays, I spent a day in camp. It's not an average camp by any means.

Camp Koby is a program offered by The Koby Mandell Foundation, a nonprofit organization benefiting kids who are victims of terror or tragedy. In fact, it's the largest camp of its kind in the world. It is named for 13-year-old Koby Mandell, one of the early victims of what's now called the "second intifada."

One morning in May 2001, Koby and his friend Yosef Ishran went on a hike in the pristine desert near their home and came across a group of Arabs who bludgeoned them to death with huge rocks, leaving their young bodies unrecognizable.

Rabbi Seth and Sherri Mandell are Koby's parents, and the founders of The Koby Mandell Foundation. They have turned their grief into giving others in a similar situation the means to cope. Upon arrival I asked Seth if the goal was to make the kids normal. He answered, "No, we don't want to make them normal. We want to make them better than normal, to build

them up to be leaders.”

During my day in Camp Koby, I saw 250 kids participating ranging from 7 to 18. Several things touched and impressed me deeply.

I heard over and over how, for most, Camp Koby was a second family to the kids. That’s not only an expression of success for the program, but that a family is where one can truly be him or herself, where people understand and care about one another unconditionally. For kids who are grieving the loss of a loved one, this is all the more important because not all nuclear families have the coping mechanisms to deal with their loss in the healthiest way.

I learned how, among some of the families, divorce is common because parents can’t seem to recover from their loss. But for grieving kids, this is yet another loss, compounding the problems they must deal with. Camp Koby gives them coping mechanisms to get through it, but also to have stable marriages themselves when they grow up.

Camp Koby groups kids from similar ages and backgrounds to make the programming and therapies all the more personal and targeted. Among one group of teens, I saw two girls whispering back and forth to one another, which struck me as out of place and even rude as all the others were engaged in the discussion without distraction. What I learned was that one of the girls was translating for the other as the second was a new immigrant.

With this same group of teens, one of the most impressive sights was that all their cell phones were put on a windowsill on the side. Not one held their phone or was tempted to text others, post messages on social media or any other outside distraction. They were all 100 percent there, present, engaged and participating in old-fashioned verbal communication.

For younger children, communication took place at different

levels, using means of expression such as games and drawing, with skilled staff to help use these to get the kids to express themselves and feel free and safe to do so. Art therapy is one of these methods, allowing them to express their emotions on a piece of paper where they might not have the words.

Most of the staff volunteer their time and many are from the high-tech or other business world. They give their time for free, many using up (and even exceeding) vacation time allotted by their employer, but without any hesitation.

I saw neighbors and friends' kids participating as well. Of course, I knew who the bereaved ones were and why. But I also saw counselors volunteering without a personal tragedy making them bereaved, thus making their helping other kids who are bereaved, all the more impressive.

In most cases, while sitting in and observing the programs, the kids spoke quietly, knowingly, in "code" that was understood by the others, punctuated by silent nodding. One girl, talking about her loss, related how she felt in a way that was sad and even awkward, but her peers didn't blink. When she finished, clearly uncomfortable recounting this, she concluded with, "And that's it," as if to say, "This is too uncomfortable for me right now." This was understood and supported by the others.

One might look at the kids in any other setting and take their smiles for granted. But at Camp Koby, this is extraordinary. They feel free and safe there, and are open and able to heal invisible scars as a result. I heard of the story of a girl, using the quiet pristine desert setting to go out to sing by herself late one night. A counselor heard this and commented what a beautiful voice she had and she should enter the Israeli *Star Is Born* TV reality competition. The girl, modestly and quietly, explained that she couldn't sing in front of people, that it's only at Camp Koby where she feels

safe and free to do so.

The Jewish people have no shortage of baggage and trauma, brought with us everywhere through the centuries of our dispersion. In recent decades, it's known that Holocaust survivors passed their trauma on to their kids. Camp Koby heals its kids in the first generation, dealing with emotions which few outside the circle of other bereaved children can understand. One teenage boy affirmed this by saying, "Every time I come back, I realize how much I always need this—it fills a hole that I am not aware of, or that try to forget about in the rest of my life."

Another brought tears to my eyes, making me reflect on my own parenting when, sharing about his father's murder, asked, "Who will be proud of me now?"

Unfortunately, like most nonprofits, funds are limited, so the services provided are adjusted accordingly. At 18, kids age out, not because there's not a need, but because there's just not enough to continue to interact with them formally. Like a recovering addict, healing from bereavement, in this case, is never fully complete. Camp Koby is judicious and terribly impactful with their resources: Just \$100 covers the cost of one child for a two-day camp. But the need is much greater than they can handle at the moment. If money were not an issue, they could have camp for 4-5 times the number of kids.

I left my day in camp touched, inspired and grateful. I relate to the kids because, though it's been 20 years since my father died, and I am an adult presumably with greater coping mechanisms, there's still grief and something missing, despite that I am a father of six myself. My father "only" died of cancer, not from war or terrorism. But loss is loss.

When I left, I felt part of the extended family. I'm not a victim of terrorism or war directly, and never hope to be. But I am aware that living where we do, in a sense all Israelis

take on a bit of victimhood because there's always someone out to get us. Camp Koby inspires me that, despite the challenges, we can and will overcome them because that's what we do. But also because there are incredible people making this program happen for whom we all need to be appreciative. {eo}

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