

Healing the Invisible Scars From Heinous Terrorist Acts

Last Friday was a perfect fall day. The sun shone brightly and the sparse white clouds set against the bright blue sky was stunning. A gentle breeze blew through the Judean Mountains and the temperature was just between that of needing a light coat and no coat at all.

I could have been out for a power walk as my feet stepped on the gravel and rocks by the side of the road. But, this was not a walk for pleasure or exercise, rather for solidarity and mourning.

As I walked, hundreds of others converged by car and foot from different directions. Some abandoned their cars and chose to walk rather than sit in traffic that was also backed up for miles and just creeping along.

By the time I arrived, I joined the thousands of people who had the better sense to arrive earlier, as hundreds of others continued to arrive. We stood in complete silence, minus the occasional yet increasingly frequent sound of someone sniffing as a result of his or her tears.

Other than the emotional words of the eulogies, the silence was broken by an occasional breeze through the trees and something that, juxtaposed, gave evidence to where I was and why I was there. In the distance, the sound of Friday's Islamic prayers echoed on the pristine ancient mountains through which our biblical forefathers traveled centuries before Islam was born, and in which Jewish life was re-established as an anchor of the return of Jewish exiles to reclaim and rebuild our land nearly 100 years ago.

The vast number of people who turned out to mourn Rabbi Yakov Don, my son's ninth-grade teacher who had been murdered less

than a day earlier, was noteworthy and significant in of itself. But this was especially notable that this was on a Friday morning, just hours before the onset of Shabbat, the day of rest.

This represented two conflicting Jewish traditions. The first is getting ready for Shabbat, which includes all last-minute cooking, shopping and other work because at sunset, all the work and preparations end, and a day of complete rest begins. The other is the imperative to bury a dead body as soon as possible, usually within 24 hours.

Indeed, Rabbi Don, whom we had come to mourn, was murdered less than 20 hours earlier. In 20 hours, thousands of people and their families expedited preparations, dropped everything and came out to pay respects to our neighbor—a beloved teacher—and to mourn together with his family and as a community.

This was the first time I had been to the funeral of a terrorist victim, catching up to the fact that my oldest children had already done so in cases that were horrific and tragic. This included the burial of three boys kidnapped and murdered in June 2014, just 100 yards from where Rabbi Don was murdered the night before. One daughter had the distinction of going to the funeral of the sister and brother-in-law of a good friend in high school, including the murder of their children, the youngest only eight months.

Paying their respects, among those who attended and eulogized Rabbi Don was the Speaker of the Knesset (our parliament) and the Chief Rabbi of Efrat where I live. Most gripping, however, were the eulogies spoken through sometimes uncontrollable weeping by Rabbi Don's wife and children.

Weeping through her words, Yakov's widow, Sara, a teacher in my daughter's school, praised him and remembered him fondly: *"Yakov, my beloved, my sweetheart, I still can't believe that*

what was will never be again. You always wanted me to speak at family events, the wedding, bar mitzvahs, and now it's finally happening. You said you were lucky that I was your wife, but I was the lucky one to have a husband who was loving, attentive, tender and warm. You were happy when we were happy. But for yourself, you didn't want anything. Everything you did was for your children and you always told me how proud you were of them and how much you loved them."

Three of Yakov's sons spoke about his kindness, how he was their role model and teacher, how he never hated anyone and how Yakov was a happy and optimistic person. One son cried, *"Teach me to be optimistic in this moment."* Noting that it was the eve of the Sabbath when it's customary for a parent to bless his children, another son said, *"This will be the first (Shabbat) that I won't receive a blessing or feel my father's embrace."*

As I began to absorb and process my thoughts to write this, news of yet another terrorist attack and the murder of a 21-year-old woman, Hadar Buchris. Between the time of the announcing that the terror attack took place and a young woman died and the release of her name, I waited breathlessly, along with many others, praying that it wouldn't be someone I know.

But when Hadar's name was released, not only did I not breathe a sigh of relief, I also wept an extra tear because I understood that she was someone's child, someone's grandchild, a sister, cousin and friend to many. Within 24 hours, they would go through the same grief of burying her, the latest victim of an endless war of terrorism where the victims are targeted simply because we are Jews living in the land that God gave to Abraham and his descendants.

And the next day, two teenage Arab girls attacked a 70-year-old man with scissors on a main Jerusalem street, and another Israeli man was stabbed to death while waiting at a gas station.

It's been heartwarming receiving emails and messages with prayers, words of encouragement and asking how people can help. Families of those murdered and surviving victims do need prayers and support, psychologically and financially. The government provides some of the latter.

But it's the invisible scars that are the ones that take the longest to heal and are so critical. If not literally, it's almost true that no Israeli family has not been touched personally by the tragedy of war and terror. To a degree, we are all victims.

But rather than being victimized, Israelis need to gain strength and be empowered to move beyond the grief, not to hide the invisible scars resulting from personal losses and resulting fear, but not to become victim to these that make us unable to go forward.

Over the years I have gotten to know Rabbi Seth Mandell whose son, Koby, was brutally murdered on May 8, 2001. Koby and his friend, Yosef, went out on a hike near their home. They came across Arabs who bound, stabbed and beat them to death with rocks, disfiguring their bodies in a way that would make ISIS proud, making identification of their remains difficult.

Rather than stewing in their grief, Rabbi Mandell and his wife, Sherri, established the Koby Mandell Foundation () to help heal the invisible scars and empower survivors who have suffered a direct loss. Their work is quiet and behind the scenes, without lots of fanfare and photos of the people they help. Their programs are provided free of charge, and combine formal, informal and recreational therapeutic techniques to foster an environment of emotional support. When it comes to healing the invisible scars and giving Israelis the ability to move forward, their work is simply invaluable.

Unfortunately, in the past year, there has been no shortage of children who have suffered the loss of a parent or sibling who

makes their work all the more powerful and essential, today and for at least a generation to come. One of those murdered was the Mandells' neighbor, Dalia, who was in her mid-20s, the age Koby would be had he not been murdered as well. Dalia's siblings are among those who have benefited from the services the Koby Mandell Foundation has provided.

Koby's mother, Sherri, shared her own personal reflections of a terror victim, a mother whose son was murdered, in *Blessings of a Broken Heart*. You should never know the grief and suffering that the Mandells and others have endured, but this offers an intimate window into the lives of one family dealing with the grief of their loss.

May the families of those who continue to suffer death and injury be strengthened by the comfort of those who pray for them and stand with them, from near and far.

Jonathan Feldstein was born and educated in the U.S. and immigrated to Israel in 2004. He is married and the father of six. Throughout his life and career, he has been blessed by the calling to fellowship with Christian supporters of Israel and shares experiences of living as an Orthodox Jew in Israel. He writes a regular column for 's Standing With Israel. He can be reached at FirstPersonIsrael@.