

Coping with Stress and Bereavement During the Yom Kippur War

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Is it possible that people in Israel feel the need to be reminded daily that their very existence depends on the sacrifice of those who have fallen, and express their gratitude by making heroes of all fallen soldiers? As one bereaved parent poignantly suggested, "half of myself is dead but the other half of me continues to live."

After deciding to spend my half-year sabbatical in Israel, I made arrangements to carry out research in the Division of Psychiatry of the Tel Hashomer Hospital near Tel Aviv in the Fall of 1973. Just as I was getting ready to begin my investigation relating to the family background of schizophrenics, war broke out on October 6, 1973. This paper represents a report of my experiences during a critical moment of history. The paper will cover four types of activity in which the writer was involved while he was in Israel. First, how the Division of Psychiatry of Tel Hashomer Hospital near Tel Aviv handled the "combat fatigue" casualties. Second, we shall report on interviews with professionals and non-professionals who were responsible for providing immediate psychological services to the civilian population and the bereaved, during and immediately after the war. The third part covers interviews with Mr. A. Yahel, Director of Yad Labanim, an organization which handled the problems of the bereaved families after the critical period, and the fourth section includes a report on a number of interviews conducted nine months after the war, with bereaved families.

I. "Combat Fatigue" Cases

Most of the civilian patients at Tel Hashomer Hospital who could manage on their own were sent home to make room for the expected casualties. Within a very short time, the hospital was treating battleline soldiers with "combat fatigue" and women soldiers who broke down under severe emotional stress.

Combat fatigue patients were treated with sodium pentothal and psychotherapy. Another aspect of the treatment at the hospital was group psychotherapy where both patients and staff participated. Prior to his mobilization in the Army, Dr. R. Springman was directing such group sessions and continued them with the soldier patients. Everyone who was not bedridden was encouraged to attend these group sessions during which he could ventilate his feelings and report on his experiences at the front. One young tank crewman told about leaving his tank for a moment and returning just as a bomb struck. He witnessed his friends burning to death. Traumatized by the sight, he became blind. After treatment at the hospital, he regained his vision. Others, too, recounted stories of escapes from death that were close to miraculous. They all bore a heavy sense of guilt over surviving when their closest friends died. While members of the staff were present at these group sessions, no staff member took the leadership role of the group. Because most of the patients were sufficiently articulate, the interaction was rather intensive.

Various estimates have been given regarding the percentage of war casualties who suffered psychological shock. The estimate is between 5 and 10 percent. Such figures are quite high, since the number of such casualties in previous wars was negligible. The general explanation for the large number of combat fatigue cases in the Yom Kippur War is that the Israel army was caught off guard by the start of hostilities. The conflict started on Yom Kippur, holiest of Jewish holidays, at the time many Israeli soldiers were praying in synagogues. Some

were carrying sandwiches while they joined their units, in order to keep the fast until sundown. Within a scant few hours these same soldiers were fighting at the front. Each had an enormous and difficult transition to make; some could not make it.

Another factor in the increase of combat fatigue figures was the high number of casualties inflicted by the concentrated fire-power thrown at the Israelis. The thin line of predominantly young troops at the front (estimated to be 600) who stood their ground until reinforcements came sustained terrible losses at the beginning. Transport troops, too, who were not trained for combat, suffered from shelling by long-range missiles. Days of heavy fighting with little rest took their toll among veteran combat soldiers as some of them also broke down. Approximately 75 percent of these soldiers were returned to their units two or three days from the time of their breakdown.

II. Psychological Services for the Civilian Population

Immediately after the war, a number of facilities manned by volunteers came into existence to help the relatives of soldiers deal with the stresses of war. They were usually attached to government agencies and to universities. Bar Ilan University, Tel Aviv University and Haifa University had established special units where people could call 24 hours a day. Regular outpatient clinics were likewise geared for the task. However, initially very few persons took advantage of these facilities. It is assumed that during the actual fighting regular patients and others were reluctant to come to these clinics. As the war went on, and with the high rate of losses, they did come, but as stated by a number of those interviewed, the flow was not as large as expected.

It is extremely painful to inform a soldier's relatives of his death, or that he is missing in action. In Israel, no telegram is sent to the next of kin. Instead, the news is transmitted by a team of individuals selected for this purpose.

The team is headed by the "Town Major" (the military representative who handles civilian matters for soldiers), who first obtains information regarding the soldier's family background and the state of his parents' health. Friends and neighbors are approached in order to find an appropriate personal way of breaking the news that will ease the shock. A doctor is included as a member of the team, in case of emergency. The most important questions asked by the family relate to how it happened, and where. Families keep a map in their homes and when a loved one is killed, they mark on it the place where he fell.

Shortly after news of the death is received, the Ministry of Defense sends volunteers, both professionals and laymen, to help the family through this critical period. From conversations with people who were involved in this type of work, we became aware of the extremely stressful experiences they had, and the sense of shock they themselves had to sustain. They felt very close to the bereaved families and identified very strongly with them. Some felt, initially, that it was pretentious of them and almost verging on arrogance to try to bring solace to these families. From their experience, it was found that it was preferable for these volunteers to go in pairs, and without calling ahead of time. One volunteer would speak to the mother, while the other could stay with the children, or each could stay with the grief of the father and mother separately. They could also spell one another from the stress of talking to the sorrowing family. Relatives of missing persons could not mourn, though they felt in many instances that there was no chance of survival. Rather than wait, some parents went to hospitals, to released prisoners, or whoever might be in a position to provide information about their loved ones. Sometimes, there was some sense of relief when the confirmation of death was received, since the family could then mourn.

Regarding the reaction to the news of death of a loved one, it ranged between the Spartan attitude without crying, to the breast-beating

and scratching of the face and pulling of the hair. Some remained just petrified and in a number of instances the social worker encouraged some families to cry. Reportedly, some women lost their second husband in 1973, their first having died in the 1967 war. While mourning for one son, some families received news that the second son had died. One woman had lost a husband, a son, and a son-in-law, during the October War. We also knew of a couple who had lost their first mates and children in the holocaust, and who had remarried when they came to Israel. The second great tragedy for them was that their son, born in Israel, was killed in action.

Most hospitals added more social workers to their staff to provide services for large numbers of relatives who came to visit the wounded. Usually, a doctor provided the visitors with a true picture of his patient's medical condition. The social worker then would accompany the visitors to the bedside and try to reduce their shock at seeing a wounded father, son, or husband, especially those with serious burns who were hardly recognizable with their blackened bloated faces and puffed-up eyes.

Social workers and psychologists listened to and tried to help wounded soldiers unburden themselves of their feelings, having escaped death while friends around them died. Disabled soldiers from previous wars did their part by visiting those newly handicapped, in order to impress on them the fact that they need not be incapacitated. The most challenging task for a social worker was to aid a family that had been told there was little chance for their relative's survival. A wounded soldier before his release spends a few days in a rest home where he receives psychological evaluation. This is to insure that he is psychologically sound before his release. Obviously, if a wounded soldier had not recovered from the psychological trauma of war, he was referred to the appropriate agencies for follow-up.

Women who lost their husbands found it heartbreaking to tell their young children of

the death. A number of widows who had gone through such an experience volunteered their services to help mothers cope with this difficult situation. An absent father, even if not dead, may affect children, particularly when they are young. This was strikingly illustrated by a letter received from my 13-year-old daughter (my family remained in Israel for the Spring term while I returned to New York to teach). She wrote me the following comments on her experiences with a neighbor in Israel who had two young children, a girl aged four and a boy aged two, and whose husband had not yet been demobilized:

There's a pretty sad thing going on next door. Leora's husband is in the Golan now. She and Shirete and Ariel were expecting him to come home for the weekend, but with the recent alert he couldn't. The kids are in a pretty bad way. Shirete wets her bed and comes into her mother's room and wakes her up. Leora's mother is staying with them, but I've had quite a few babysitting jobs. Shirete is old enough to know what's going on—but Ariel is only about two (He can't talk yet) and all he knows is that his *abba* (father) isn't home and he wants him. I took both of them to the park. Shirete can play by herself. I just have to watch her. Ariel I have to lift on the slide, on the swings everytime he wants to do anything, and all day he kept saying "*abba*." When he wanted to go on the slides, he'd say "*abba*." When he wanted a cookie, he said, "*abba*." Mom says the word *abba* has become a general meaning for him, symbolizing something he wants. He says it all the time, even when he is smiling. It really kills me. I can't help but think of all the little children in Israel who are old enough to know what is happening but too young to understand why. Anyway, yesterday *abba* came home for just one day. Mom and I saw Shirete in the hall, and Mom asked, "*abba babait?*" (Is your father home?) Shirete shouted, "*ken!*" (yes), ecstatic with joy. But he left this morning, he had only 24 hours.

Because the needs of the Israelis are so great, Dr. Jerome Kosseff, of New York, has organized a group of interested mental health workers who are willing to spend some time in

Israel at their own expense in order to provide their expertise to mental health workers in Israel.

III. Interviews with Director of Yad Labanim

With an estimated 12,000 Israeli soldiers killed since the founding of the State, practically every family is affected in some way. Because of Israel's small population, this figure constitutes, proportionately, a tremendous loss of life for the entire country to absorb. I am particularly indebted to the Chairman of Yad Labanim, who himself lost a son in the 1967 war on the Golan Heights, who provided me with some information about the organization. Yad Labanim was founded in 1949, the year after the War of Independence, to represent the views of the bereaved in dealings with the government, and also to memorialize the fallen various ways. Subsequent wars increased its membership, so that now there are 52 branches all over Israel.

Feelings of isolation constitute the most frequent complaint expressed by the bereaved. During the initial period of mourning for the dead, relatives, friends, neighbors, and others come to pay their respect. This can go on for weeks. When the visits taper off—as they do after a time—the mourners begin to feel lonesome and neglected.

The sense of isolation was poignantly voiced by Israeli writer Yihai Mossinsohn, whose son died in the war. In an interview published in the *Jerusalem Post* (March 27, 1974) Mossinsohn said, "Death isn't a plague. I mean, there are people who're afraid to come near, as if the thing were catching. I had this experience myself after Ido (his son) was killed. Some people, even friends, kept away. People don't know how to cope with a thing like that because the living don't want to talk of death, don't want to think of it."

Sometimes isolation may be self-inflicted. For example, it was related to me that a man who had lost his son spent Passover night with some Arab friends, in spite of the fact that several of his relatives had invited him to their Seder. The reason he gave for not wanting to spend the Seder with family was that the

Seder, which celebrates the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, is a time of happiness for everybody and he was afraid that his own personal unhappiness would dampen the joy of others. Celebrating the holiday in his own home was out of the question, he felt, because of past memories.

What can be done to reduce feelings of isolation which the bereaved suffer? One attempt at solving this problem would be to have families who are, or who feel excluded from normal contacts, to join together. This would be done in the same sense as people establish clubs on the basis of common interests. Bereaved families have even stronger reasons to join together, and this kind of merging, while in no sense ideal, would certainly reduce a person's sense of isolation.

Concrete proposals to achieve such interaction meet with objections from a number of individuals. Some have pointed out that all the bereaved have in common is personal tragedy, practically nothing else. Several attempts have already been made to bring together parents, widows, and children, who can perhaps get some solace from one another. The movement is still in its infancy. It will take some time before anyone can assess its impact on these families.

The Chairman of Yad Labanim told me of a personal experience which relates to just this concern. A very high government official who had lost his son while in the Army seemed to take his death with a cool attitude. In fact, he seemed so insensitive that people remarked on his attitude. When the Chairman met to speak with him about government matters concerning Yad Labanim, in the seclusion of his private office the man broke down and cried. He was able to express his grief in the presence of a man he knew had had the same experience.

Serious consequences for a marriage can arise from a couple's inability to face tragedy with a sense of unity. Some couples separate; others can no longer pursue the normal sex life of husband and wife. The Chairman of Yad Labanim deplored the fact that although Israel is research-oriented in many fields, no money

at all was being allocated for the study of problems of adjustment of the bereaved families. It is, in a global sense, a very delicate area of research. Only in the last few years has research on the effects of death been conducted in the United States. However, research with the bereaved of wars in which the United States was involved is non-existent.

In keeping with Jewish religious laws, a soldier is considered dead only when there is absolute evidence he died. Consequently, for the large number who were reported missing, a long time elapsed before the deaths were officially announced. These delays tended to foster a resort to spiritualism. Some widows and parents, out of their despair, participated in seances that were held to contact the dead. Such practices were noted even among the sophisticated younger educated groups. However, these occurrences, which were prevalent mostly during the early period of intense grief, have subsided with time. Also reported were cases of fantasies on the part of parents who were certain they heard their son's footsteps, and who felt compelled to visit the cemetery.

IV. Interviews with the Bereaved After the Crisis and Memorialization of the Dead

During the summer of 1974, I returned to Israel to pursue further my interviews in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War and its effects on the families of the bereaved. It was arranged through Yad Labanim for me to interview a number of bereaved parents. It would have been premature on our part to interview any bereaved parents immediately after the war, as they were still going through the early mourning process, and the objective of research would not have justified my contacts with them at that time. Only parents who could speak English, French, or Spanish were interviewed.

The question most often raised to me was whether the parents would be willing to discuss in detail how their son died in the war, and how they learned about it. My personal experience showed that the parents were quite willing to talk about their son, and they needed no prodding to provide detailed information.

Some interviews lasted from two to three hours. It was felt that articulating the sad event helped the parents psychologically, since friends and relatives were reluctant or hesitant to broach the subject. One mother indicated that she would have been happy if she had the opportunity to talk about her son every day. We interviewed families whose sons had been reported as missing. According to Jewish religious traditions, a soldier is not declared dead until the army is absolutely certain that the body has been identified. Thus, many families were kept in suspense for weeks and months. During the war, it was possible for the soldiers to communicate with their parents either by phone or radio. However, when there was silence, parents started to worry and to make inquiries. Since, in many instances, the Army could not provide precise information, a number of parents did their own investigating by calling friends and officers of the missing, for possible clues, and some even went so far as to visit the battlefield searching for clues.

Up to June, 1974, it is estimated that some ninety families did not know the fate of their men who fought in the Yom Kippur War. They are somewhere on a battlefield, and their bodies have not yet been recovered. Obviously, these families undergo a great deal of stress during months of uncertainty. The agony is all the more difficult when parents do not know even when or where their son fell. One bereaved parent states, "I don't deceive myself, our position is very strange. Knowledge is not enough. We have to feel that our son is dead, and this we cannot do; it's as if he had just disappeared into thin air. Until parents see the remains of their child and know where he lies, they go on trying to avoid looking reality in the face. Nothing is so tragic as to have a loved one missing and not know what happened to him . . ."

One father visited the site where his son was last seen in a burning tank. That particular site was taken by the Syrians but was freed thirty hours later. He discovered his son's helmet and goggles, but there was no trace of the tank, though tracks led to the Syrian lines. With a group of friends, he combed the area to

find out if his son had been buried. He surmised that there was a possibility that the tank had not caught fire completely; otherwise, it would have exploded. He also assumed that the Syrians had pulled the tank toward their lines as war booty. The fact that he was not able to find a retrieved and repaired tank of the Israel army bearing the serial number of his son's tank led him to believe that if his son had survived, he would be a prisoner of war. This was the logical conclusion he drew from all the facts he was able to get on the battlefield. He kept his hope alive until the Syrians released the list of war prisoners, and his son's name was not included. However, his assumptions were proven correct when his son's body was returned by the Syrians. Apparently, he had been wounded and captured, but probably died in hospital. Another father did not receive final confirmation of his son's death until May 5, 1974. Immediately after the war, he discovered that his son had gone on night patrol, and his tank unit had been ambushed, but the area was in Egyptian territory, and there was hope that he was taken prisoner. He finally learned that his son had died when the Egyptians returned approximately 100 bodies to the Israeli lines.

Parents of the missing carefully examined foreign newsreels and photographs of prisoners in Egypt and Syria and tried to identify them, since there was a delay in releasing the name of the prisoners by the Arab forces. These photographs were shown to friends and relatives to help in identification, but there was always doubt, since the photos were not clear. Most parents with a missing son hoped that his name would be included among the list of prisoners. Some could not face reality. It is reported that one father refused to accept the confirmation of his son's death, preferring to believe that he was still alive as a prisoner of war. However, when he saw that his son's name was not included in the list of prisoners, he committed suicide. A number of parents reported that when their son went to join his unit, he had a presentment that he would not return, and such expressions were made in jest or in a casual way, and seemed more meaning-

ful in retrospect.

A number of those who had fallen represented the first to have made it in Israel from the educational point of view. In one case, a young man with nine siblings, whose parents had come from an Arab country and were of modest means, had managed to become an officer in the Israel Army. Thus, he had become the pride and joy of the family. The high praise bestowed upon this successful son may have had some negative impact on his relatively less successful siblings.

After the interviews with the bereaved parents, they showed me the many ways they perpetuate the memory of their sons. In one home, I saw seven pictures on the wall of the living room, including an oil portrait. However, in one home of a Moroccan-born father, the picture of his son was covered, and I was told it would be uncovered a year after his son's death. In one home there was a shelf on which were exhibited the army insignia and medals of the fallen son, displayed in a transparent plastic case with a permanent light. In another home, a shell casing which had been collected by the dead soldier prior to the war was turned into an object of art, fashioned into the shape of a heart, bearing his army insignias, with an inscription in Hebrew indicating that he would not be forgotten. In some instances, the fallen soldier's room was left intact, with all his belongings on display. It was reported to me that one bereaved couple had managed to build a model tank in their backyard, which was lit at night. Most *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* have a special room set aside to memorialize their dead. They are sometimes separate small buildings which are usually used for meditation. Pictures of the fallen are displayed with the dates of their birth and death. Most parents were proud to show me a big folder with the letters they had received from various officials, ranging from the President of Israel to the unit commander, expressing their condolences. Some even showed me the high school diploma and grades.

Another way to perpetuate the memory of the fallen is to write a small commemorative

book. I stayed with a bereaved family in a kibbutz for two days, and was shown books which were published not only for those who died in the war, but also for those who died either in accidents or natural death. Some are quite elaborate and professionally bound. The Ministry of Defense provides the funds to the families who wish to prepare such a commemorative book. The Ministry of Defense also maintains an up-to-date directory of such books. One son had died in a mission as a frogman. The covers of the book showed a photograph of a shoreline with the sea at dusk. The book included the following:

1. A biographical sketch of the soldier with a large picture.
2. A statement from his school teacher, who knew him very well, with pictures of the soldier when he was a child.
3. A report by a fellow frogman who survived, and who describes the mission and how the soldier died.
4. A handwritten letter from his unit commander addressed to the parents, expressing condolences and sharing the grief.
5. A poem written about the particular service in which he served.
6. A note from a journalist who had a number of interviews with the soldier prior to his death.
7. Notes from a girl friend, and male friends in the kibbutz and outside the kibbutz.
8. Letters from the Army inviting him to join the special unit and the certificate of his training.
9. An award received for winning a swimming competition.
10. A tape recorded discussion of his parents with friends of the deceased discussing the significance of volunteering and sacrifice. Frogmen volunteer for their missions.
11. Letters of condolences from the Ministry of Defense and others.
12. A newspaper report by a journalist reporting on the mission, with an aerial picture of the island where the soldiers died.

The entire book is interspersed with pictures taken during his training, and relaxed moments with his unit comrades. These books are distributed to friends and relatives.

I visited Safad, an ancient town in the Galilee, which lost 21 of its adolescents, students at the religious high school, in an excursion to Maalot, where terrorists attacked a school building. Quite a large number of these adolescents (66) were wounded, some seriously. Three members of a family were also killed prior to the attack on the school. The impression that a witness got while she was trying to provide comfort to the waiting families during the critical moments was that they were stoic. While the parents were waiting for news, there was no panic, nor any expression of hatred against the attackers, and when they learned the news, they reacted by fainting, screaming and just crying. There was some bitterness against the school authorities for planning the trip and insisting that the children go.

All of the families involved were of Oriental origin, that is, emigres from Arab countries. All of them had large families, with from 6 to 12 children. A father of 10 children who was interviewed on television stated that the fact that he had 9 other children did not reduce the pain of losing one. One family lost two children. In one family, consisting of 10 sons and 1 daughter, the daughter was killed. The bereaved families were visited by teams of psychiatrists and psychologists during the mourning period, and they responded well to their aid. However, the sadness was there, as expressed in a memorial by an inhabitant of Safad, who wrote:

If pain gave off smoke as fire does, it would be impossible to see in Safad. But pain does not cloud one's vision, and we see very clearly the fresh turned earth in our enlarged cemetery. Earth that smothers the unheard laughter, the unplayable games, and the unfeeling joy of our children . . . Our hearts are shredded, our minds bewildered . . .

All of the adolescent victims were attending an academic high school, and were close to finishing their studies, which represents quite an achievement in Israel, particularly since the standards are very high. These adolescents had been able to continue with their studies in spite of their parents' low income. However, there

is not any doubt that the trauma must have left the surviving adolescents with psychological scars. A psychiatrist reported to us that some of these adolescents who survived refused to be left alone at night. They were startled by sudden sounds and had difficulties in sleeping.

The town of Maalot was also seriously affected by the attack, although none of the children who died came from there. Maalot, like Kiryat Shemona, is also a development town. The population was traumatized by the event. For weeks many of the families slept together at night, with as many as thirty persons in an apartment. In many cases, they insisted that an armed soldier remain in the apartment with them. The tension eased later, but it heightens again whenever there is an alert or a report that infiltrators have crossed the Lebanese border.

In Kiryat Shemona I was given a commemorative book of the 18 children who died. The book includes a prayer for the dead (*El Maaleh Rahamim*), a description of the terrorist attack, speeches by the President of Israel, the Premier, the Minister of Police and the Mayor of the town. There is also a short biography of each of the dead, a special song written by a poet, and a composition written by a ten-year-old girl who had lost both of her parents in the attack. In it she describes her feelings when they had to go to the bomb shelter during the Yom Kippur War.

The Ministry of Defense uses the services of a well-known writer, Reuven Avinoam, to read the literary productions of the fallen soldiers and select the best items, which are periodically published in a commemorative anthology. Four such anthologies, of approximately 600 pages each, have already been published. Dr. Eugene Weiner, an American-born sociologist, from the University of Haifa, has been conducting a study of books commemorating the fallen Israeli soldiers. Some Oriental families keep the memory of their sons by purchasing a Sefer Torah on which is inscribed the name of the fallen, and which is used during religious services. Names of the fallen also appear on chandeliers, curtains, etc. of the synagogue.

In the course of my interviews with a bereaved family of Moroccan origin, I met the pregnant wife of an older brother of a soldier who was killed on Mount Hermon. She indicated that she had followed her father-in-law's wishes that she have another child so that she could give the name of the deceased to the new-born child, although she already had four children.

Israel also has a large number of monuments to commemorate her dead, ranging from simple stones set one on top of the other, to quite large structures such as one can see on the Golan Heights, which look like arrows fanning skyward. Similar smaller monuments are to be found in other places, usually where some battle took place. Sometimes a burned out tank or armoured car with the names of those who fell inscribed on stones are seen along the road. These monuments cannot be missed by anyone travelling on the highways of Israel.

What needs somehow to be explained is the consistent emphasis on being reminded of the fallen soldier by such physical tokens as commemorative booklets, displayed insignias, photographs, etc., besides a large number of monuments found in all parts of the country. This is even surprising when we note that Jewish tradition emphasizes simple burials with pine coffins and plain tombstones, and discourages the placement of flowers on graves, and when belief in life in the hereafter remains a nebulous concept. While the physical trappings of death are deemphasized by religion, the memory of the dead remains alive through the daily recital of the Kaddish prayer for a whole year subsequent to the death, and at least once a year after that. However, as one rabbi indicated to me, although all these memorabilia are foreign to Jewish tradition, it must be some kind of "gut" reaction, because of the special significance of those who have died. Is it possible that people in Israel feel the need to be reminded daily that their very existence depends on the sacrifices of those who have fallen, and express their gratitude by making heroes of all fallen soldiers? As one bereaved

parent poignantly suggested, "half of myself is dead but the other half of me continues to live."

Thus, there seems to be a strong identification with the fallen soldier in Israel. While the purchase of a *Sefer Torah* in the name of the fallen is a Jewish tradition, the printing of a commemorative book is used. The religious use the *Sefer Torah*, while the non-religious Israeli also uses a book, but divested of any religious significance in the traditional way. At the end of my interviews, I noted that the bereaved parents seem to have unburdened a load by telling the story of the death of their son, and even had allowed themselves some

pleasantries. Is it possible that the continuous reminder of the death of a dear one softens their tragedy?

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