

Israeli Experts Discuss the Newtown Tragedy in Light of the Israeli Terrorist Experience

Exclusive to the Jewish Voice

By: Tzvi Allen Fishman – reporting from Israel

The horrendous tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut stunned an Israeli nation still reeling from the aftermath of a war that sent missiles flying toward every major city in Israel. Israelis could be seen tied to their TV sets and tears were visibly streaming from their eyes when they saw the scenes of both the children and adults slaughtered in this massacre.

The tragedy was a stark reminder to Israelis how they too were not immune to the workings of maniacs bent on the destruction of their schools and homes and the murder of their children. It also brought flashbacks of their personal experiences, the air raid sirens, the runs to shelters and the sound of missiles exploding. It reminded them of their loved ones lost in terrorist attacks, bus bombings, shootings and wars.

The comparisons are understandable. A missile fired by crazed terrorists or a bomb planted on a bus by suicide terrorist has much similarity to the workings of a crazed madman running into a school and gunning down a class of first graders and school staff. The intent is the same; that of causing massive death and destruction and shattering the lives and dreams of both those murdered and those still alive.

In light of the Newtown massacre, the Jewish Voice interviewed two top Israeli experts in the fields of psychotrauma and terrorism in order to get the Israeli perspective on four burning questions: How can the adults who lost their children go on with their lives, what effect will the trauma of the Newtown massacre have on the children who witnessed it and survived, why has a Newtown type massacre not happened in Israel and what can be done in the United States to prevent this from happening again.

Professor Daniel Brom is

the Founding Director of the Israel Center for the Treatment of Psychotrauma of Herzog Hospital in Jerusalem. He is originally from Holland, where he founded a psychotrauma center and is a certified clinical psychologist. Prof Brom is a world renowned expert in the field of psychotrauma education, community resilience, mental health care and the ability to increase the capacity of Israeli society to cope with the ongoing existential terrorist threat. He has published numerous books and articles on Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.

Professor Brom was asked how the parents of the children murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary school can go on with their lives. Brom responded that the Israeli experience is unique because it unfortunately encompasses numerous ways that parents can lose children, including terrorist attacks and the Army as well as accidents and illness. The loss is terrible in any case but the grieving process may differ in each case. This is due to the involvement of the community in helping grieving parents. Especially in cases of the Army and terrorist attacks there is much public involvement and governmental help given to the grieving parents. "There is sort of a collective guilt of society operational."

"At the same time", Brom states, "there is a myth that if you lose a child you will never have any pleasure in your life and that parents will never recover from this. It's true that this is the most horrific thing that can happen to parents but there are parents that can live with it and can be good parents and productive to the other children. Although it's fair to say, the pain of losing a child never leaves you in general, it does not mean you need therapy all your life. Parents describe it as a piece of flesh has been taken out of their body." Individual and group therapy has not been successful to reduce symptoms of grieving parents because it is a long term grief. Many things remind parents of the loss of the child includ-

ing the other children reaching milestones. It creates a question of what could have been and what should have been if my child would have grown up. The pain does not go down but becomes deeper. The tragedy of the loss goes against the expectation that the parent has in life that of believing that the child will grow up and be an extension of the parent.

Concerning the question of "how do I continue to live", one way is to give meaning to the loss by creating a charity in the name of the child or doing well for society, and create a positive meaning out of the horror. Many parents report that the "environment became toxic" as other people shy away from them because the thought is so painful that this could happen to them. It's very important to have people around who can be supportive despite the fear and pain that they may feel.

When asked whether Israel is better prepared to deal with loss, Brom responded:

"One of the main ways to deal with the loss of a child is to create a narrative about the life of the child. In the Army it is easier for the parents to create a story like that of heroism or giving one's life for the country. The tragedy in Newtown was so senseless and unexpected and it's difficult to create such a story. It's more akin to a terrorist incident or a car accident, although in the case of terrorism the source of the veil is clearer.

Brom further states that there is a higher level of openness and communal involvement in grieving because of the Jewish religion and its system of grieving with the Shiva, Sheloshim and yearlong grieving periods. The community is urged to help and participate in the grieving process with the family.

Brom was then asked whether the effects of the trauma of the Newtown massacre can be reduced in the children, who witnessed it and survived, Brom responded that it certainly can be mitigated. Israel is very prepared for the response to the psychological trauma of terrorism. There are special programs prepared for the schools and most children in



Danny Brom



Elliot Chodoff

Israel have been exposed to war and terror in some way. "There is a lot of communal, sociological and psychological work done to prepare Israeli children for psychological trauma. This has resulted in the reduction of the effects to the children in the aftermath of a tragedy." In Israel we see that psychologists are sent to the schools for a few days after a tragedy and that is ample to mitigate most of the effects and normalize the learning process. The United States focuses more on an individual response while Israel focuses more on this communal training and a communal response. Brom responded that the USA should adopt a similar form of system in order to reduce the effects of trauma on children.

Brom concluded with a few words to the Newtown parents, "there is a tomorrow and with the help of community and friends, they will recover and be able to build productive and interesting warm lives and relationships. It will hurt but pain is not pathology and they will learn to live with it and give it a place in their lives and create meaning by doing good things. For the children he recommended that they be given attention and the ability to talk about their fears openly but not to be overly pushed into this openness.

Elliot Chodoff is an Israeli political and military analyst and well known lecturer. His specialties include military, political and organizational

sociology, international terrorism, the global war on terror, military strategy and tactics and the Middle East Conflict. He is a major in the IDF reserves and is the Deputy Chief of Staff for Population for the Northern Region of Israel in Home Front Command.

In questioning Chodoff why a "Newtown massacre" has not happened in Israel and whether it is related to differences in gun ownership and gun control in Israel,

Chodoff explained that the situation of gun control and gun ownership is quite different in Israel than in the United States. The comparisons being currently made by the media are not correct because in Israel more people have licenses to carry guns than own them unlike that of the USA which is the opposite. In the USA the majority of those who have guns have concealed weapons and handguns while in Israel all those who carry handguns are strictly licensed and the majority of guns carried are assault rifles. The reason is because it is required by the Army and most 18-20 year olds are carrying them.

Chodoff feels that there another great difference between the countries is that the population of Israel is highly trained both in the use of firearms and also in knowing what a firearm is used for and when to use it. He relates the story of the terrorist attack at the Merkaz Harav Yeshiva where minutes

after the first shots were fired a trained Army officer ran into the Yeshiva from across the street with his assault rifle and killed the terrorist.

Chodoff feels that the fear factor and the knowledge that there are so many trained gun users in Israel mitigates the possibility that someone would use weapons in a school setting, because they know that they would not get away with it. Gun control to Chodoff means not controlling the acquisition of guns for protection but making sure that only highly trained and screened individuals are licensed to carry guns. This is the prevalent Israeli model as all Army personnel are all psychologically screened and highly trained in a guns use.

Chodoff was asked how to prevent a Newtown massacre from happening again; he feels that the only way is to give guns to school personnel to carry for the protection of the students. They all have to be extremely well screened and trained in their use. The Israeli system of arming guards and individuals in schools, shopping malls and public places has worked in preventing tragic situations. In the case of Newtown where one individual would have used his weapon, even if it meant losing his life, the concept of having highly trained armed staff to stop him before he can do very severe damage would have been the only possible way of reducing the effects of such a tragedy.

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