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# MAGAZINE



# Unity, support and meaning

Iris Yifrah, Bat-Galim Shaer  
and Rachel Fraenkel are an inspiring  
example of the strength of the Jewish people

# Israel's modern



FROM LEFT to right: Rachel Fraenkel, Bat-Galim Shaer and Iris Yifrah speak at the Knesset on June 25, five days before their son's were discovered near Halhoul.

Thrust into the public light after the murder of their sons, **Rachel Fraenkel, Bat-Galim Shaer and Iris Yifrah** are turning their tragedy into meaning, offering strength and unity to the nation and striving to keep the memories of their children alive

• ORIT ARFA

Photos by MARC ISRAEL SELLEM

It's two days before Yom Kippur, about a week since the murders of yeshiva students Naftali Fraenkel, Gil-Ad Shaer and Eyal Yifrah met their death at the hands of the IDF, and the city of Hebron shines.

Spotlights dash towards the sky from a concert stage set up in the Jewish Quarter. The Cave of the Patriarchs is painted with purple and red lights, and white beams twist as if in a kaleidoscope on the ancient stone walls. The blazing shofar serves as another reminder that Israel is in the midst of the Ten Days of Repentance when traditionally, Jews the world over recite the *shlosh* penitential prayers to purify their souls and crown God as King.

Thousands of mostly observant wom-

en of all ages are waiting to listen to Rachel Fraenkel, Bat-Galim Shaer and Iris Yifrah, the mothers of the three kidnapped teenagers. Just the night before, thousands of men gathered for words of strength and inspiration from their husbands. Tonight, it's the ladies' turn.

Rebecca Siechel, 21, sits in a row of plastic chairs, having taken the shuttle from Jerusalem. An advertisement for the event featuring what has become an iconic picture of the happy, pre-kidnapping Naftali, Gil-Ad and Eyal had caught her attention. When she read that their mothers were the guest speakers, she immediately signed up.

"Throughout this process, we went through it together in solidarity, secular and religious," she said of the 18 summer days when the nation united in prayer to #BringBackOurBoys (after the Twitter campaign of the same name). "Once they

were murdered, they had to go through their own pain, but they are continuing to unite the nation even when it's still so fresh. They are the symbol of unity."

Ahuva Weinberger, 33, sits next to her, having come from the nearby settlement of Otniel in the Hebron Hills. "To hear the strength of the women who went through something so difficult, it gives strength. It also gives some sort of opportunity to get out of life's routine and see people who are strong, and it's empowering."

As the three mothers seek to balance their grieving with their new, unexpected role as public figures, they feel a sense of purpose in keeping alive the spirit of national unity that their sons inspired, and which they have come to represent. While the IDF searched for their sons, the women graciously stepped into the public light, sharing with the world

# foremothers



their pain, longing and faith through public rallies, media interviews, a plea at the UN – and a national funeral.

“We came more from the place of our private pain,” Bat-Galim Shaer told *The Jerusalem Post* in a telephone interview prior to the event. She gave the interview in part to reach English speakers abroad, she said, whose support is not to be taken for granted. “We were very moved by all the empathy we received from Jews in Israel and around the world. We feel a sense of responsibility in the way that any adult feels a sense of responsibility. We’re trying to do things in a way that’s just, honest and good.”

The layered meaning of the mothers gracing Hebron in the twilight hours is not lost on the crowd. Steps away from the stage is the traditional burial site of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah – the founding couples

*‘Our story is one that started in Hebron,’ Fraenkel begins, referring to the story of kidnapping...*

*‘I didn’t think they were thrown just anywhere. The tears of Hebron embraced them’*

of the Jewish people. There’s a palpable sense in the cool Hebron air that what happened this past summer was an event of biblical proportions, and

that these women are unintentionally emerging as foremothers of modern Israel, aspiring to live their lives according to a divine ideal in the midst of a family tribulation turned national.

Rachel Frankel approaches the podium and looks at the crowd. “Wow,” she says, smiling.

It’s that same bright, effusive smile that managed to break through the recounting of the tragedy, in what has become a viral Rosh Hashana YouTube message sponsored by the Jewish outreach portal Aish.com. “What we saw about ourselves, we’re part of something huge, we’re part of a people, of a true family. That’s for real.” She called on viewers to “choose an act, large or small, to keep the spirit of those days alive.”

But here in Hebron, one of Judaism’s holy cities and also a political flashpoint in modern Israel, the >>

**JERUSALEM MAYOR** Nir Barkat (second from right) stands with the families of the three boys at the inauguration of the Jerusalem Unity Prize, an annual grant in memory of the three boys awarded to a person or organization that works to unify Israeli society. (Jackie Levy)



**RACHEL FRAENKEL** speaks to Iris Yifrah at the Great Synagogue in Jerusalem on July 30, marking the boys' 'shloshim.'



**THE THREE** fathers (from left to right), Ouria Yifrah, Ofir Shaer and Avi Fraenkel say kaddish at the Jerusalem Great Synagogue.



**HUNDREDS OF** women gather in Hebron to hear the three mothers speak at 'slihot.'  
(Hebron Jewish community)

overriding message is one of continuity – not from those heart-wrenching days of summer, but from the days when the Nation of Israel first walked the land.

“Our story is one that started in Hebron,” Fraenkel begins, referring to the story of the kidnapping. The murderers came from a Hamas terrorist network in the city, the ongoing search for the boys was concentrated on the Palestinian side, and their bodies were found in the Hebron Hills. “When I think about those days, I didn’t think they were thrown just anywhere. The tears of Hebron embraced them.”

Up next, Shaer hearkens to her son’s words to tell their story, but the one that began centuries ago. Remarkably, she came across a *dvar Torah* Gil-Ad had written about Hebron, as if in anticipation of this moment.

“The Cave of the Patriarchs was the first purchase that the first Jew made in the Promised Land,” Gil-Ad had written. “The importance of burial sites, the purchase of burial sites and the fact of them being placed together, is a strong expression of the deep family ties, even in death.”

“Hebron,” he went on to explain, comes from the Hebrew word *hibur* – meaning “connection.”

“That’s the foundation of the People of Israel – a strong connection,” he wrote.

This “strong connection” is exactly what Shaer experienced as she went through the grueling wait for news of her son, through his eventual burial in the city of Modi’in alongside Naftali and Eyal.

“It was very new for us,” Shaer told the *Post*, recalling the letters, grassroots social media campaigns and even booklets of expressions of solidarity she received from all over the world. “We were not at all aware of the

*‘Your hearts were with us from the first day, throughout the search, the prayers, the efforts, from people of all kinds, from all sectors’*

– Rachel Fraenkel

connection of Jews in the world to Israel. It’s very meaningful; we have to nurture it.”

The families are establishing a foundation dedicated to memorializing the teens. Moreover, Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat and the three families recently unveiled the Jerusalem Prize for National Unity, granting NIS 100,000 to individuals and organizations that further cohesiveness in Israel.

Prior to Rosh Hashana, the Shaer family spent about two weeks in the US for some rest and relaxation following the tumultuous events in Israel, guests of the Lion of Judah women’s philanthropy group of the UJA-Federation in New York and the Beth Jacob Congregation in Beverly Hills.

Throughout the bicoastal trip, during which she addressed both Jewish communities, she felt a communal embrace, hearing the oft-repeated refrain: “They’re not just your boys; they’re our boys.”

But full enjoyment eluded her without Gil-Ad.

“On the one hand, we did manage to have a change in scenery, and to have experiences together,” she said of her family trip. “But on the other hand, we missed Gil-Ad greatly. He would have felt really connected to this trip; he loved attractions, trips, tours abroad.”

While Operation Protective Edge enjoyed national consensus, debates both within the government and the

public naturally emerged as to the political purposes and military methods of an operation launched to stem Hamas rocket and tunnel attacks, which is believed to have been precipitated by the teens’ disappearance. The families by and large kept their public message apolitical. Shaer chose to focus on the solidarity and patriotism the nation exhibited throughout the summer.

“What was important in this case was not our political opinions. It was more our desire to show the commonalities of the people, and not how we think differently. It’s not that we’re blurring our opinions. We have our opinions, but sometimes we forget that we have more in common than we have differences.”

In Hebron, the role of faith in God in overcoming tragedy runs through the words of Iris Yifrah, mother of 19-year-old Eyal, who refers to herself as a “small, ordinary woman going through a great trial.”

“We wandered around, without rest,” she relates to the captivated audience, recalling those trying 18 days. “I couldn’t sit. I couldn’t rest. I couldn’t breathe. My body was empty of strength. My heart was in pain. And from the pain I cried out to the Creator: Please Father, return Eyal, whom I had the honor of raising for 19 years. I beg of You. I miss him so much. I’ll do everything; I’ll dedicate my life to



**A RALLY** outside the Prime Minister's Residence on June 17 was just one example of the masses coming out in support of the boys.



**CANDLES ARE** lit by a mourner at the Gush Etzion junction after the boys' bodies were discovered.

You. Just please, return him."

God didn't answer her cries in the affirmative, and the idyllic family life she had known was shattered in one moment. "My heart was broken. I thought I'd lose my sanity, and from above, the Father looked at me and said: "Nu, what do you say? Do you still believe in me? Does *Imma* [mother] still love me? Does Imma still trust me? I didn't give you what you wanted. You wanted Eyal home with a full heart, but I had other plans. What do you say?"

"From my tears, with a broken, pained heart, I lifted my eyes to the Creator and said: Yes, *Abba* [Father], I trust you. I so believe in You and your leadership. I love You, and I know that You determine everything."

Tears pierce the air, and sniffles of sorrow become louder as singer Ruchama Ben-Yosef's all-women three-piece band plays meditative interludes, the melodic Psalms matching perfectly the sentiments of the mothers. Ben-Yosef's liturgical music was born out of her prayers as a woman struggling with, and eventually overcoming, infertility – and it heightens the emotional charge brought through the theme of the aspiring, supplicant, faithful Jewish mother.

Fraenkel reminds the women that the people's *hessed*, acts of loving-kindness, propped them up, too. "Your hearts were with us from the first day, throughout the search, the prayers, the efforts, from people of all kinds, from all sectors."

At the climax, hundreds of young women gather around the mothers at the foot of the stage, arm in arm, in a literal embrace, joyously dancing and swaying to the songs of faith. With the stage lights changing color, and the halo of the Cave of Patriarchs spilling onto them, the future mothers of Isra-

el clearly feel empowered to continue to turn the pages of the story of the Jewish people.

"I felt chills," Siechel says at the end of the event. "They really came with the purpose to strengthen us, to encourage us, when we're supposed to encourage them. It should be the opposite; that's what was so moving."

**BUT WHEN** Shaer returns to her home in Talmon bloc, she still has to prepare for a Yom Kippur and a Succot holiday without Gil-Ad, and missing him is her stark vulnerability.

"We're trying to find a balance between work that is dedicated to the memory of the boys and a way to channel the event, while also going back to a regular, private family life," she told the *Post*. "We really want to get back into a certain routine."

She has taken a year off from work as a history and civics teacher to be at home with her five daughters – and with herself – to make the transition into this new reality. "The longing for him is very great. The pain is very strong. There are moments that are not easy at all. We're trying to embrace each other, to be together and look ahead. It's not easy. There are very difficult moments. The pain is physical."

She looks to her four-year-old daughter for lessons in overcoming the grief. "She misses him a lot, but she's very happy. She understands it very well –

she asks questions and misses him, but she manages to be happy. I try to learn from her, to be happy, but it doesn't erase the pain or the longing."

She knew the IDF had been searching for the murderers and that eventually justice would be served, and while she's relieved the murderers aren't running free, she'd prefer not to think about them.

"The thought weakens me. I think about Gil-Ad... It closes one circle, but there are many other circles that still need to be closed. But of course, it was an important circle to close."

Finding meaning in his death gives her some comfort. "We all wanted the kidnapping to end differently, to have Gil-Ad home. It's what we wanted; God wanted something different. That in death you can find meaning puts things in proportion. It gives you some strength during the difficulty. We choose to live; we don't choose to die."

And in the spirit of the High Holy Days, Shaer ended her interview with this message to the Jewish people – yet again, perhaps inadvertently, giving others strength.

"We wish the people of Israel a *shana tova* – a good year with good news. We all went through a difficult year. We have 70 families [who lost family members in the conflict with Hamas] who also have to deal with a loss and a void this year. I want to wish the nation only good." ■

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