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Through It All, Optimism (05/31/2005)

Liora Tedgi
Interview by Michele Chabin



Liora Tedgi's family has been giving to the Jewish state — both in terms of charitable assistance and personal sacrifice — since before its founding. In 2001, while pregnant with her second set of twins, Tedgi was injured in a car bombing in a quiet residential Jerusalem neighborhood. After one of the twins died in the attack, Tedgi, a 40-year-old Jerusalemite and mother of 10, decided to establish Or Meir and Bracha Terror Victims

Support Center, an organization that assists terror victims "who have fallen through the cracks" of Israeli bureaucracy. Eight members of Tedgi's family have been injured or killed in terror attacks.

My childhood was one of suffering and poverty. My mother worked from morning till night as a cook, and also worked for the burial society. She grew up as an orphan, the oldest of all the children, and raised her brothers and sisters. She has suffered from heart problems all her life, had 19 catheterizations. My father suffered from lung damage from an infection in the army and survived cancer. His mother had cancer and he took care of everyone.

For this reason we had no money for food, and I remember how when the winter began we went to our shed and put on hand-me-down shoes that didn't fit. We wore them anyway. My mother would wear two pairs of socks and slippers.

Although these were difficult times, my mother never wanted to ask for help. Her nature was always to give. Even today she cooks meals, as a chesed, for 100 old, poor people in Jerusalem.

For me, the worst part of being so poor was having to go to a place that distributed food. When my brother and I asked for eggs or vegetables, we were given them grudgingly and felt terribly embarrassed. When we arrived home with the food, my mother cooked it and gave most of it to others who were even poorer than we were. She told us to bring the food quietly to other families in a way that would not embarrass them. One day I told my brother that when we grew up, we would create an organization to distribute food to the needy in a dignified way.

I opened just such an organization soon after the car bomb attack in the Beit Yisrael neighborhood in Jerusalem. It was Feb. 8, 2001. I was standing a few meters away from the car that blew up, and it was the hand of God that saved me. I was in shock and couldn't move. When I turned around I saw utter devastation; the smell of burning I will never forget.

I was devastated but realized I needed to channel my energy into something positive. I promised God that if he would give me another set of twins to love — I already had one set, as well as the

baby who survived the attack — I would establish an organization to help terror victims.

My husband and I chose terror victims because of our own family history. My uncle, Matityahu Cohen, was killed by a mine placed under his truck during the siege of Jerusalem while he was trying to transport food to the hungry. The remains of his truck stand on the side of the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv Highway, at Shaar Hagay. My grandfather was in the truck and died from his injuries a few months later. My father-in-law was wounded in a terror attack in Tiberias and died from his wounds after years of suffering. My brother-in-law, a policeman, was stabbed by an Arab in the Jewish Quarter, cutting out part of his lung, and he remains in constant pain. My cousin Shlomo, a soldier, was badly injured when a terrorist blew himself up. He was in a coma for a year-and-a-half and still suffers memory loss.

We knew from experience that many families fall into a state of crisis while waiting for their medical files to be completed or their cases reviewed. Some families have to wait three years or longer. In one instance, a 14-year-old boy was in danger of having one of his injured legs permanently shorter than the other. Had we not been able to raise the money to purchase a special apparatus for his leg, he would have had a terrible limp all his life.

Others who come to our center have been given a low disability rating, or no disability rating at all, by the government. Many terror victims are unable to hold down a job due to psychological trauma, and the government usually doesn't provide financial assistance in these cases.

Our center gives out free weekly food parcels and special parcels for the holidays. We offer vocational courses to terror victims who can't return to their old jobs. We run a summer therapy program. We also offer ongoing financial help to pay for such things as basic utility bills, school supplies and books, and household appliances. We've also opened a 24-hour emergency hotline. Our office is so small, we are forced to distribute the food parcels in a nearby parking lot, rain or shine.

Since you asked, I have mixed feelings about Independence Day. I have feelings of happiness that our country is a year older, and that the people who died for our country have not died in vain.

At the same time, I am very sad about all the bloodshed in our country, and all the attacks, so what sort of freedom or independence do we really have? Ultimately, though, I'm an optimistic person, and I believe with all my heart and soul that by love and respect, caring about one another, we will continue to be a special nation.

To live in a Jewish country, where all those that surround me are Jewish, is very special. I love to live in the land of our forefathers, to walk where the Patriarch Abraham walked, where King David walked. This is a wonderful, beautiful country with a rich history.

I am not a political person, but if I could change anything about this country, it would be to stop the conflicts between us. In all the generations, other nations tried to wipe us out. The key to our survival was togetherness.

My father rode on a donkey from Persia to Eretz Yisrael for a year and a half because of his love for the holy Land of Israel, and of course this love is deep inside me. I am not qualified to judge the State of Israel any more than I am qualified to judge another human being. Everyone in my eyes is equal. Ultimately, I believe that Israel is in God's hands. n

Liora Tadgi can be reached at liora@terror-victims.org.il