

The Spiritual Power of Pain

By Bayla Sheva Brenner

Miracles aren't always easy to recognize. Some are obvious, and others come and go unseen. But more striking and enduring than the miracle itself is how the recipient responds to it. Members of the Levy family saw their miracle as an opportunity to become closer to the Maker of All Miracles.

It was a hot Tuesday, three weeks into the summer of 2005. Early that morning, Betty Levy, then sixteen, had enjoyed a few hours of sun at the beach, returned to her home in Netanya and planned to travel into the city to buy a few things before starting her waitress shift at a local coffee shop. Her friend decided to join her for the shopping expedition, suggesting that they stop at the mall to buy balloons for two friends celebrating their birthday that day.

The balloons were never bought. As the teenagers waited at a crowded pedestrian crossing outside the mall, Betty's friend whispered something funny in her girlfriend's ear, causing Betty to stop in her tracks and laugh. Her friend continued to the other side of the street just as a suicide bomber detonated twenty-two pounds of explosives several feet behind Betty.

Betty lost consciousness and fell to the ground. "I woke up and didn't

understand what was going on," she recalls. "I saw fire and smoke and people screaming. There was a woman lying next to me with her legs on fire. I thought, maybe something happened to me, too, and saw that my legs were burnt, as well as my hands and my back, and that I was covered with blood. I felt my body burning, and something was wrong with my right ear." Betty managed to get herself on her feet, and ran into the mall frantically calling out her friend's name. "I passed a mirror and saw how [badly] burned I was. My hair was scorched

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and my face was black; I didn't recognize myself." Betty's friend, who had fared much better because she was further from the suicide bomber, ran over to help until an ambulance came and took them both to the hospital.

This was not Betty's first encounter with terror. On Purim 1995, at the age of six, she witnessed a horrific attack at Tel Aviv's Dizengoff Center. "My grandmother took me to buy a few

things for her work as a cosmetician," she says. "When we left the building, there was an explosion. I remember the [loud] noise. The security people brought us to the roof. I saw a lot of people downstairs, parts of bodies, blood, ambulances and police. People were running and screaming. I never returned to that place again."

Healing Through Hope

After a month and a half in the hospital, undergoing grueling burn treatments and fighting infections, Betty returned home. She continued treatments three times a week and had consultations with plastic surgeons. She also required regular physical therapy sessions since the severity of her burns compromised her ability to move her body. Betty was instructed to wear a thick and uncomfortable pressure suit to soften the scar tissue. (It can take more than a year for scar tissue to mature; the suit keeps the skin from growing back thick and immobile.) "I had to wear enormous clothing to cover the suit," she says. Aside from the extensive burns across her back, Betty's right eardrum had burst, necessitating surgery. Additionally, the nerves of her inner ear were damaged, causing excruciating pain. Although she was left with a degree of hearing loss, the pain in her ear eventually subsided.

In the aftermath of the attack, Betty had a difficult time coping with everyday activities. She felt herself

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becoming more vigilant in public places. “I kept concentrating on all the people around me, behind me, next to me; all their facial expressions and movements,” explains Betty.

“I forced myself to go back to school. One day, I stood up in class and pleaded with everyone to please treat me as they had before. I felt horrible and very angry.”

She also had pressing questions. “[I asked] why me? Why now? I’ve learned that I’ll never get the answers; some part of me began to accept what happened,” she says. “I told God: ‘[Alright], this is what happened, but give me the strength to deal with it... I made a vow [to God] that if everything would come out okay, I would go to synagogue every Friday night.’” Betty, who attends public school, kept her promise and began to observe Shabbat.

Betty’s brother, Bar, fourteen, and sister, Meshi, eight, as well as six of Betty’s friends, decided to join her. “We walk together to the synagogue every Friday night,” Betty says. “It makes us happy in a way I can’t describe. We also say Tehillim every night. It has added something to all of our lives and connected us to each other and to Hashem in a way I could not have expected. I feel better, hopeful and more powerful. There is something inside me I did not have before the *piguah* [bombing].”

Born to a religious Moroccan family, Betty’s father, Dovid, immigrated to Israel when he was a year old. Although he admits to “stumbling” spiritually in the army regarding Shabbat observance, he continued to put on tefillin every day. “I know where I’m from,” he says. “I believe in the Ribbono Shel Olam. When I saw my daughter injured, a girl who didn’t do anything wrong, I didn’t say, ‘I don’t believe.’ [Faith] is not the kind of thing that disappears. I respect my daughter’s wishes; I think [being observant] is something very positive.”

“My family always had strong faith in God,” says Betty. “[But] we didn’t sit and talk about it. After the attack, I started to believe more. When one is



Betty Levy was sixteen when she survived a suicide bombing in Netanya, Israel. She suffered extensive burns and damaged the nerves in her right ear. Betty, pictured in New York after her most recent surgery, is currently eighteen. Photo: Bayla Sheva Brenner

in a difficult situation, one has to have something to hold onto; this is what holds me, my faith.”

Betty’s mother, Sigalit, acknowledges not only her daughter’s spiritual growth, but her own as well. “A terror attack affects everything in the home; it changes everything and everyone,” says Sigalit. “People say to me: ‘If there is a God, why are children killed?’ I say there are things that have to happen; sometimes God does things so that a person will fix himself. Something serious happened and one can’t stay the same. My *emunah* [faith] got stronger.”

Six months after the attack, the Levys received a phone call from All4Israel, a New York-based volunteer organization that provides emergency and long-term medical and financial help to victims of terror attacks in Israel. Betty was told that a plastic surgeon from New York, Dr. Lloyd Hoffman, with whom the organization works, was in Israel at the time and could possibly help repair her scarring. “[The doctor] examined me [and took photographs of the affected areas] and said: ‘I cannot promise you anything. If I can help you, I will call,’” says Betty. The hoped-for call came five months later. Zalman Indig, director of All4Israel, informed Betty that the doctor was ready to perform the surgery in

New York free of charge. He added that the organization would take care of her flight and living expenses while in the US.

Since 2006, Betty has undergone a number of successful surgeries with Dr. Hoffman, her most recent this past summer. “The recoveries are very painful, very hard,” she says. “But it’s worth it.” She views the overwhelming magnanimity of All4Israel and of Dr. Hoffman as “a present from God.”

Dovid sees his daughter’s survival in the same light. “The terrorist was only two and a half meters [just over eight feet] from her,” he says. “Ten kilograms of explosives should have blown her [to pieces]. The Ribbono Shel Olam protected her; she was saved by a miracle. You can’t define it differently.”

Betty reports that the attack changed her whole perspective on life. “I know what’s important and what’s not,” she says. “Sometimes in daily life, things get in our way, little things, and we get very nervous; today I know how to stop and put it all into perspective.” The attack also intensified her feelings about her homeland and her place in it. “I’m more proud to be a Jew and feel more connected to Israel,” says Betty. She continues to enjoy her life in Netanya, despite her fears. “The fear is always there,” says Betty, “but I’ve learned how to live with it.”

“I’ve been back to the mall,” she says. “The first time was very hard, yet I felt like I had won; [I thought:] ‘I was here and you tried to kill me, but I came back stronger.’”

After Betty completes her treatments in New York and returns to Israel, she plans to finish her high school exams and explore the field of physical therapy. “She saw the psychological effects of burn injuries on people,” says her father. “It touched her. She wants to set an example as someone [who was injured] in a terror attack and made it through, to give others hope. I believe she will succeed.”

“I know something important [today],” says Betty. “Pain is power—when you use it to find your faith and your strength.” **JA**



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