

May is Mental Health
Awareness Month
For Your Wellbeing



COPING WITH THE TRAGEDY IN MERON

Rabbi Dr. Dovid Fox, Director of Project Chai, the crisis intervention, trauma, and bereavement department of Chai Lifeline, offers practical suggestions and guidelines following the horrific tragedy in Meron. If you have any questions or are in need of guidance, contact Project Chai's 24-hour crisis hotline at 855-3-CRISIS or email crisis@chailifeline.org.

The word from Meron is petrifying. On a day encased with kedusha, joy and seeking a sense of connection with all that is good and holy, we have experienced a tragedy. The images of the wounded and the stunned, and the unthinkable reality that we are facing casualties and horrendous losses have entered our consciousness. The news, the news reports ricochet through our hearts and minds. And we are deeply saddened. And we are scared. And we are very worried, and panic may be on the rise all around.

This is not the time to look for interpretations or to hunt for meaning. We do not know “why” and that is not given to us. It is far too early for anyone to rush to cope by trying to make sense of a tragedy this massive, and so far-reaching throughout the Jewish world. We try our best to slow down the racing thoughts and to collect ourselves. That is a healthy step, because all of those who pulsate within with pain, sadness and fear, and all of those still numbed and in shock, need first to regroup. We need that step for our own wellbeing, and those who are turning to us in panic and confusion – our children, our students, our relatives – need support and attention. They need that from us, now.

Parents and adults: check in with yourself. Identify your own reactions, because it is normal to react to tragic news. It is not normal to have no reaction at all. Notice your thoughts – disorganized, fixated and hyper-focused, obsessively worried, image-occupied, flashback memories – all of those are thought reactions, cognitive reactions, which can follow shocking, traumatizing information. Notice your emotions. They are not the same as your thoughts, and need your acknowledging too. Sad, anxious, scared, tense, irritable – there are a range of emotions following the flood of traumatizing information and you want to be mindful of them. Physical sensations – they happen as well, following crisis events – and one might be suddenly energy-absent, hyper, restless, nauseous, insomnia. Be aware of how you are reacting within. Behavior can seem different, you may have difficulty focusing on your tefilla or your learning, or you may become very focused on those avodas. We each react, we all react our own ways, and step one is be aware that you are affected by this, and identify how you are reacting.

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Find a trusted friend or mentor, and talk through your distress. This is an essential next step in being able to regroup and reorganize. This is not a time to be judging, to be critical or to make suggestions that sound good but may seem insensitive. Listen. Be supportive. Gentle encouragement and not attempting to discourage anyone from having and sharing their current struggle.

For your children, recall these guidelines:

- Encourage your children to share what they have heard, and how they have reacted
- Halt the gossip and rumors, and avoid the excessive amplification of fact and assumption which often invade the media
- Do not try to downplay with false optimism unless you know for certain that there is no personal cause for a youngster to be scared or worried about r'l loss of loved ones or friends
- Younger children do not need to hear or see gore or horrible detail
- Older children deserve to have their questions validated but again, move towards cautious reassurance rather than generating more fear in them
- Validate the soul searching questions some older children pose, but keep them with a perspective that we do not yet know all of the answers
- Be attentive to the family member or student who shows excessive distress, and seek consultation if their behavior or functioning concerns you. Our crisis line at 1 855 3 CRISIS is open and always well staffed.
- Assure those who turn to you that you will keep them advised as more information comes forth. They should turn only to you and to responsible trusted adults as needed.

This feels very much like an eis tzara l'Yaakov, because it is. Mimenu yivashea – we will be saved and rescued. But there are losses. There is sadness and fear. May our prayers and our avoda be le'ratzon and may we see soon the emerging geula.