



Israel at War: Managing the Trauma for Individuals and Families

There are no words that can adequately express our collective sadness and horror over the events that occurred in Israel over the holiday. We all pray for an end to the loss of life and conflict in Israel.

The following are some general pointers on how to process this information for yourselves and with your children. We will begin with general advice and then specific suggestions for different ages. These were constructed in consultation with Dr. Norman Blumenthal, Tzivy Reiter, and the Ohel trauma team.

As you read this, please remember that every person is unique and each family's overlap with this catastrophe is distinct based on their own history and connection to residents of Southern Israel and those serving in the IDF.

Taking Care of Yourself

In times of crisis, parents and caregivers play an essential role in helping children cope. They provide a safe shield between children and the scary world around them. Yet in the throes of the unbearable events of the last few days, parents may themselves be in crisis. At such times, anxiety is high and physical stress responses can manifest. Some people will feel increased agitation, and other people may withdraw emotionally. Common reactions are fear, sadness, anxiety, difficulty sleeping and difficulty focusing.

All feelings are legitimate. There is no right or wrong way to react. It is important that you make space to care for your own needs during this painful time.

- Recognize and accept your feelings as normal responses to extreme and abnormal circumstances.
- Since everybody reacts differently, people close to you may not react as you do. It's important to respect everybody's coping style. When looking for support, look for someone who you believe is able to provide the compassionate response that you need.

- While it is tempting to voraciously seek out any news that maybe coming in, the repeated viewing of the gruesome and heartbreaking videos and images of the attack is extremely harmful and should be avoided.
- Maintain a regular schedule as much as is possible, but give yourself permission to take time out as needed.
- Remember to HALT- getting Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired can put you more at risk for feeling overwhelmed and unable to manage.
- Taking actionable response in times of crisis can be empowering and give back some feelings of control in an increasingly scary situation. Giving Tzedakah, engaging in tefilla, organizing supplies for the IDF, and reaching out to support loved ones in Israel and people here at home who have loved ones in Israel, are not only powerful actions to take at this time but alleviate trauma as well.
- Try not to perceive any difficulty with coping as evidence of weakness. This is not a sign of weakness but rather a sign of your humanity.

Taking Care of Your Children

- Before you have a discussion with your child, make sure you have processed and organized your personal reactions and understanding. This does not mean you aren't upset or scared, but that you are able to model expression of those feelings in a calm way. Scared children are often more impacted by your tone, body language and the consistency of your message than the exact words you use.
- Today, in the age of technology, we are more likely to share scary information rather than shielding children as we had in the past. Children have access to abundant information and often feel entitled to know. They may resent finding out newsworthy events later from others and start wondering what other information parents are withholding. While every horrifying detail need not be shared, the basic information should be told to your children in age-appropriate language that includes a realistic sense of immediate danger. It is helpful to have a narrative about these events to give over to your children. Some talking points may include:
 - From the beginning of time, the Jewish people have faced enemies and have triumphed. We have experienced loss and we have rebuilt. This is a scary time and Hashem will protect us.
 - We are far away from the fighting and we are safe.
 - Many people around the world are supporting Israel and will be helping them win this war.
 - There is a lot of information circulating: some are rumors and some are fact. Children should come to you with any questions and you will clarify the information.
 - The greatest antidote to acts of war, are acts of Ahavas Yisroel, chesed and connection. All Jews feel responsible for one another and are with each other in this crisis. This message should be reinforced.

- It's also important to check in with your children and ascertain their current level of knowledge and understanding. Ask them what they know and how they are feeling.
- With all trauma, speaking it out is often most therapeutic. Allow your child to talk about this event but do prevent it from becoming repetitive or to the exclusion of normal routines.
- Children and adults naturally differ in how much they feel a need to verbalize scary occurrences. Some, referred to as "attenders" want to talk a lot and get much information. Others, known as "distracters" prefer to limit what they hear or know. Neither of those two are the "right" approach. Attenders need to attend and distracters need to distract. Intellectually gifted children tend to be more prone to attending and more impulsive children prefer to distract. No one knows your child better than you so trust your ability to tailor your conversations to your child's unique coping style.
- Be on the lookout for children who are suddenly behaving differently. This could include clinging behavior, sleeplessness, outbursts or fears of immediate harm. Children who experienced previous trauma or who are prone to anxiety, depression and ADHD may need additional support to cope during this time.
- Please advise children to limit their use of internet news and social media for information, and to be selective of the sources of their information. An overload of sensational and graphic images can create heightened trauma and increase feelings of anxiety.
- As the world outside may appear unsafe and scary, create safety in your home environment – by spending time, playing, talking, maintaining routines and connecting with your children.

The Pre-school aged child

- Children under six may have a diffuse sense of something scary happening but could be unclear of details and proximity.
- Clarify that these events are occurring far away and assure them that they are safe.
- With children this age, your voice, body language and mannerism are of the utmost importance and need to convey certainty and security.
- If the child asks whether this could happen to them, just assure them it won't. "Rare" and "unlikely" are not sources of assurances since their world is very small.
- If you are unsure if your child is ok, keep an eye on his behavior or her imaginary play during which children this age often express worries and concerns.
- Show increased affection and assurance to young children at this time.

The School-age child

- Children roughly between six and twelve have a realistic sense of events that are rare and of the expanse of the world and time. You can assure them that such violence is a rare occurrence and remind them of the distance between Israel and America. You can let them know that many people are working hard around the world to support the soldiers and keep everyone safe.

- While they are not immediately threatened, this is an opportunity to teach children about the deep and abiding connection with fellow Jews and Israel.
- When facing potentially threatening news, children this age, and especially boys, often display curiosity about some of the more gruesome details of war. They may ask many questions about exactly what occurred. While sparing gruesome details and images, share what you know and don't hesitate to admit to not knowing. Don't reprimand them for focusing on such details, instead of the distressing nature of these events, since this is very typical for those ages.
- A common response from children this age is to hear information, withdraw and return later with questions. If there is a new development or something that you are telling them and they request "to go play," don't be surprised and just let them know they can ask you questions any time.
- Children this age are often comforted by concepts of Gan Eden and Teshuvah. You should feel free to reference these time-honored Jewish ideals in your conversations.
- School-aged children are usually not troubled by why bad things happen to good people and there is no need to raise that complex matter unless your child raises it first.
- Children at this age tend to have a world view of good versus bad people and derive much comfort from the victory of the more righteous. It may be helpful to tell them that Israel has a strong army and track record and that justice will be done.
- It is sometimes helpful for these children and adolescents to frame these events in our long and painful history of persecution dating even back to the Bible. That broader context can be comforting and places this as a painful chapter in our history rather than an overwhelming or annihilating occurrence.
- The elementary school-aged child is capable of feeling sympathy for the war victims and can be taught to express such concern or engage in actions for their benefit. Give children opportunities for actionable responses such as prayer, taking on good deeds for the merit of those impacted, or giving charity.
- Focus on the helpers and those mobilizing to support Israel during this time.
- Don't worry if your child does not seem to be having a reaction. Everyone reacts differently and it doesn't mean your child doesn't care.

Adolescents

- Adolescents are far more likely to find out all information on their own and through friends often formulating their own opinions and outlooks. Sometimes the parent's job is more to temper their passion and the certainty with which they view matters. Allow them to share what they know and how they view it while sometimes gently suggesting that the situation is more complex or subtle than they convey. Do not overtly argue or contradict.
- Teenagers also have a capacity for empathy which is an ability to imagine yourself in someone else's shoes. It would not be unexpected for your teenage child to literally imagine themselves taken hostage, G-d forbid, and get most distressed and overwhelmed. If that occurs, firmly contain their emotions and even suggest a temporary distraction.

- Adolescents are also very idealistic and will cast these events in the broader context of Israel's right to exist and Jewish survival. This may be particularly important if they are descendants of Holocaust survivors. There is much data on how an awareness of one's ancestry and their lives can be used constructively for coping at large. Selectively share such family stories if applicable.
- Themes of "why do bad things happen to good people" and existential questions may emerge, especially with teens. The right to have these questions should be validated and adults can agree that we don't understand G-d's ways.
- Your older teen may be already anticipating his gap year in Israel and wonder what impact these dangerous developments may have on that. Encourage patience and share your hope and dreams that such a highlight of their young lives may be achieved.

We hope that these pointers are useful and remain fully available for any concerns you may have regarding your child's adjustment to these most distressing events. If you have any further questions, please feel free to reach out to us at **516 659-9420** or trauma_leadership@ohelfamily.org

Ohel's Teacher Support Helpline is available to offer support for educators and youth support professionals, and can be reached at **718-686-3189**, or teachersupport@ohelfamily.org. The Teacher Support Helpline is available Mon-Wed 12-1pm; Wed-Thurs 4-6pm.