

*The late Ofir Libstein, Head of the Shaar HaNegev Regional Council, fell while defending his fellow residents in Kibbutz Kfar Gaza. KKL-JNF vows to continue Ofir's path and work to rehabilitate the Gaza Envelope and rebuild the communities.*

## REMEMBERING OFIR LIBSTEIN - A TRUE KKL-JNF PARTNER

Gunshots and explosions rocked Kfar Aza as Hamas terrorists burst into the kibbutz on Shabbat morning (October 7). **Ofir Libstein**, head of the Shaar HaNegev Regional Council and a member of the kibbutz's civil emergency unit, did not hesitate for a moment; he left his house to protect the other residents. He fell during an exchange of fire with the terrorists. The scale of the massacre perpetrated on Gaza Envelope communities – including Kfar Aza – would only become known later.

Ofir, a former member of the KKL-JNF Board of Directors, was a steadfast partner of Keren Kayemeth Lelsrael in developing the western Negev. Born in Eilat, he grew up in Kfar Netter on the Sharon Coast. During his military service, he met Vered, a native of Kibbutz Kfar Aza, and fell in love with the special charm of the place. In an interview with the news site 'mynet', he described himself as an 'entrepreneur in heart and soul', always working to combine the social-community world with the business world.



*Ofir and his wife Vered, photo courtesy the family*

In his previous positions, he served as CEO of the Kibbutz Industries' Association, headed AgriTech Israel and the Joe Alon Center Museum of Bedouin Culture, was a community manager in Kibbutz Holit and a member of the Shaar HaNegev Council. He served as a director in various companies and organizations.

Together with his wife Vered, he initiated and managed the festival Darom Adom (Scarlet South), which encouraged tens of thousands to visit from all over to see the bright red anemones that bloom here each winter. He described the initiative in an interview with the 'Globes' financial news site: "Vered and I decided to leverage the flowering anemone areas to

change the discourse on the region. Instead of an association with Hamas and shooting, we wanted something to be proud of, and that's how the Darom Adom Festival was born".

As head of the Sha'ar HaNegev Regional Council, he regarded agriculture, tourism, solar energy, industrial zones and technological hothouses as the main growth engines of the region. He promoted these fields for the sake of the residents, in cooperation with the nearby city of Sderot, and steadfast partners such as KKL-JNF.

### **Dreamer and fulfiller of dreams**

"For me, Ofir represented the good and beautiful of the Land of Israel, a man of values who first of all cares for others and is prepared to fight for his path," says Or Shalev, director of KKL-JNF's northern Negev region. "It was clear that he would be among those who run out, in danger of their lives, to defend the kibbutz and the residents".

According to Or, Ofir was a leader who not only dreamed, but also made his dreams come true, including many projects he promoted together with KKL-JNF. Two prominent examples: the development of the Nahal Shikma Scenic Route and the construction of the Nabih Mar'i Lookout Point. "KKL-JNF will assist in the restoration of Sha'ar HaNegev and the Gaza Envelope, will continue to develop the area and will help fulfill the dreams that Ofir did not get to fulfil," Or Shalev vowed.



*Yossi Ifergan- Topshot, KKL-JNF Photos Archive*

Daniel Gigi, a member of KKL-JNF's Land Development Administration and former director of the southern region, had known Ofir for nearly 20 years and worked together with him in promoting a variety of projects, including road preparation, establishing industrial areas, development of agricultural access roads, tourist sites, and hiking and cycling trails. "Ofir was a friend and partner in the journey. He was committed to the educational, economic and value development of Sha'ar HaNegev, and saw this as a real mission," says Gigi.

In an interview with KKL-JNF, Ofir acknowledged the organization's significant contribution to the Gaza Envelope (Otef Aza) communities: "Otef Aza is the front line of the State of Israel. 50,000 residents live here, who are essentially the renewed Zionism. KKL-JNF are true partners in the construction of houses, new neighborhoods, safe routes, afforestation and a high-tech park, with the aim of making the area flourish and building the future together".

### Hope and initiative

Anat Gold, director of the KKL-JNF Central Region, previously director of the KKL-JNF planning division and before that, director of planning in the southern region, first met Ofir as a young and energetic kibbutz member, before he was elected head of the council. "He was a partner brimming with hope and initiative, and together we advanced many projects that grew from his kibbutz and other kibbutzim in the area – the development of entrances to agricultural communities, bicycle and hiking trails, museums and visitor centers".



*Yossi Ifergan- Topshot, KKL-JNF Photos Archive*

On that terrible morning, when the terrorist attacks broke out, Anat messaged Ofir to check that he was in a safe place. The message remains unanswered. A few minutes later she heard in the media that Ofir had been killed. "He was a colleague, a man of vision and action, a person who believed in the innovation and empowerment of the region," she says.

Less than a month ago, Ofir participated in a race in the KKL-JNF forest in memory of Lt. Col. Nabih Mar'i, a member of the Druze community who fell in a battle with terrorists 27 years ago. At a ceremony held in his name at the Nabih Mar'i Lookout Point, which had recently been upgraded by KKL-JNF, Ofir thanked his "partners on the way" and noted the impressive growth of the Sha'ar HaNegev communities and the regional prosperity in recent years .

### A leader with a path

"From the day I met Ofir more than 20 years ago, he cut the figure of a leader with a path. We were privileged to realize together with him a large part of his vision," says Elisha Mizrahi, director of the Friends of Israel Department in the KKL-JNF Resource Development Division and former director of KKL-JNF's northwestern Negev region. "As head of the regional council, he brought light to an entire area, and not just in Sha'ar HaNegev. He was a local leader with the potential to become a national leader".

Elisha's voice trembles and his eyes fill with tears. "Ofir was a personal friend of mine, and I loved him very much. It is not at all surprising that on that cursed morning he took his weapon and went out to defend the home".

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"Ofir was a very special individual, a great friend and a wonderful partner on many projects throughout Sha'ar HaNegev," stated Dan Springer, the CEO of JNF Australia. "Always smiling, always positive, with a unique and infectious laugh."

Ofir joined JNF's representatives in Australia late last year for the organization's main campaign, traveling across the country to raise funds for 14 protected kindergartens .

"We collaborated until recently on a major innovation center, which he will sadly not see come to fruition", Dan continued. "However, the fruits of his vision will be enjoyed by many residents for years to come. Ofir's life ended as it was lived, bravely fighting for his community."

Ofir was married to Vered and the father of four: Aviv, Nitzan, Idan and Uri. The body of his son Nitzan was found in Kfar Aza about a week and a half after the terrorist attack. Among those murdered were Ofir's mother-in-law Bilha, and his nephew Neta, who jumped on a grenade to save his girlfriend.

KKL-JNF has accompanied the Gaza border communities for decades and embraces them now in these difficult moments. With the support of its partners from around world, KKL-JNF is committed to helping the residents in the near-term - by evacuating families and providing them with lodging, emotional support, and daily respite activities. KKL-JNF will also assist the communities in their long-term rehabilitation, out of the conviction that we will return and rebuild, with confidence, this unique region of Israel.



*Alexander Kolomoisky, KKL-JNF Photos Archive*