

*"Until Now, Therapy Was Based on the Message 'Now Everything is Alright'. It's Not That Simple*

## AN INTERVIEW WITH ADI EFRAT, DIRECTOR OF THE SDEROT ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY CENTER AND A SURVIVOR OF THE KIBBUTZ BE'ERI MASSACRE

The city of Sderot has been subjected to indiscriminate rocket fire from Gaza for over two decades now, leaving a large number of residents in a chronic state of trauma. But the October 7 terror attack was unlike anything this battle-scarred city had experienced before. On that day, which also happened to be Shabbat and Simchat Torah, Hamas terrorists burst into the city and embarked on a murder spree, later taking over the Sderot Police Station. The attack left 50 civilians and 20 police officers dead, and residential and public buildings structurally damaged .

The Sderot Resilience Center was established in 2014 in the wake of Operation Protective Edge, with the goal of helping residents to live as normal a life as possible in an impossible reality. The center provides therapy to help cope with trauma and anxiety. The current reality is compounding the mental health crisis – not just in Sderot but also the rest of Israel, with the Israeli Ministry of Health reporting an almost 300% spike in calls made to resilience centers in the early days of the war.



*Eli Levi Production, KKL-JNF Photo Archive*

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**Adi Efrat**, director of the Sderot Animal-Assisted Therapy Center, helps local children cope with anxiety and pressure brought on by trauma. Nothing, however, could have prepared her for the trauma she was forced to undergo when Hamas terrorists broke into her home in Kibbutz Be'eri, abducted her from her safe-room, and kept her hostage together with her bleeding neighbors. Yet somehow, she managed to survive long hours of unimaginable hell until she was rescued under fire by IDF soldiers .

Adi is now staying at a Dead Sea hotel together with most of the remaining members of her kibbutz. "The fact that our community is together gives us a lot of strength," she said. "There are a lot of community activities, we support each other. It's true that sometimes it's stressful to encounter other people's suffering, and it's difficult to find some quiet space or to be anonymous, but being in a supportive environment is very valuable for all of us".

Adi and her husband Avishai have two children, 25-year-old Eitan and 21-year-old Dvir. "It's hard for everyone, but we try to take walks and go outside, because there's something calming about that. Sometimes we just sit together in the room, hug each other and cry. It's not just a personal and a family trauma, but a trauma for the entire community. The trauma isn't over yet, because we're still coping with a huge amount of uncertainty, for example, regarding the hostages".

### **A Nationwide Response**

During the terror attack, while the residents of Sderot were shut up in their safe rooms, the resilience center staff were summoned to the municipal operations room, where they manned a telephone hotline that supported the terrified populace. In cases of extreme stress, they went to the people's homes accompanied by security forces, even as the life-threatening situation raged outside.



Once most of Sderot's 30,000 residents were

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evacuated to safer areas, the resilience center staff began providing a nationwide response to people's needs. The center employees travelled from place to place, organizing dozens of professional therapists who volunteered to help. The extensive emergency trauma support was made possible thanks to the dedication of the resilience center staff and the contributions from Friends of KKL-JNF worldwide.

"What we're doing now, in terms of building resilience, is providing immediate emotional first aid, right after the trauma, in order to prevent post-trauma later on," Adi explained.

### **How is the therapy you are providing now different to what was provided before?**

"The therapy is much more intensive, with a large number of therapists, far away from people's familiar surroundings, and under conditions of extreme fatigue. The therapists listen to horror stories of a sort they had never heard previously. Until now, therapy was always based on the message that 'now



*Eli Levi Production, KKL-JNF Photo Archive*

everything is all right', and 'now you are safe'. It's not simple to give people a sense of safety after everything related to security was totally destroyed. The therapeutic methods that we learned over the years weren't always relevant for this situation. The therapists had to learn as they worked. There were some therapists who gleaned insights from the first days of coping with the crisis, so they wrote them down and shared them with the others. This is how we learned together and took care of each other".

### **Hope gives strength**

The Animal-Assisted Therapy Center, which was established with the support of KKL-JNF and its Friends worldwide, enables children to open up and express their feelings via interaction with animals, birds and reptiles. Needless to say, the animal-assisted

therapy center can't operate during wartime, but brave volunteers come regularly to feed the animals.

"Of course I miss the animals, but I know that there are volunteers who are taking care of them and making sure they have everything they need," Adi said. "I have Udi, my dog, and Punch the rabbit here with me in the hotel".



*Bonnie Sheinman - KKL-JNF Photo Archive*

### **Will you go back to providing therapy in the future?**

"I'll certainly go back to providing therapy. Right now it frightens me a bit, because I need to conserve my energy for my own personal coping. Providing therapy means being totally focused on someone else, and it takes a lot of energy".

### **From where do you get strength to deal with the pain and the loss?**

"Each and every one of us had to make a lot of small decisions that encompass survival. Many harsh thoughts went through all of our heads. When you focus on identifying the strength you had to deal with an impossible situation, it gives you strength. Staying coolheaded is power. In therapy, we emphasize strengths".

### **What helps you personally?**

"Telling myself and others that we are empowered, that we're strong as a community. It's as if those who were murdered are asking us to be more connected to each other, because so few of us are left. We survived, and now it's important that we do our very best, each in their own field. Hugs also really help. During the first days, we were happy to hug anyone we saw, because we didn't know who was dead or who was alive. It's important for me to spend a lot of time with family, and to be sensitive to what the body wants at any given moment. To breathe deeply. To talk, and to listen to other people's stories".

### **Does the community play an important role in the therapeutic process?**



**NOVEMBER 12<sup>TH</sup>, 2023**

"Speaking with each other is no less important than talking with therapists. Someone who wasn't there really can't understand. Everyone deals with it differently, but we're there for each other, and the person next to me knows exactly what I went through".

**Is there a professional therapeutic response at the hotel you're staying in?**

"We had both individual and group therapy at the hotel. There are group therapy sessions for children and teenagers, for senior citizens, for mothers. A lot of children lost friends who were murdered or taken hostage, and they are in great need of therapy".

**Are you able to imagine rebuilding a hopeful and happy life?**

"Naturally, hope is what gives you strength. The Animal-Assisted Therapy Center will open up again and give hope to the local children. It's very moving and supportive to see people from all over Israel and around the world thinking and caring about us".

Adi noted that the therapists' main task at this time is to "legitimize different emotions – fear, survivors' guilt; and to impart a sense of strength and capability. To remind each and every one that in their own way they are heroes".

**Are you also a hero?**

"I don't feel like I am, but when other people say so, I don't argue with them anymore".