

Healing lives with film

Jerusalem's Maaleh School of TV, Film and the Arts teaches the bereaved how to overcome tragedy by making movies and empowering themselves

Judy Siegel-Itzkovich reports

Life, with all its twists and turns, is a movie – but making a movie can sometimes change one's life for the better. The Ma'aleh School of TV, Film and the Arts, located on Shivtei Yisrael Street in Jerusalem's Musrara neighborhood, pioneered over a decade ago a videotherapy department to help a variety of people.

There are currently seven students – therapists and filmmakers – in the department who are learning how to use videotherapy. There are also a variety of active videotherapy groups, each for a specific population, including victims of terrorism, bereaved families (including of fallen soldiers), at-risk youth, immigrants and special-needs adults.

For the sixth time in a row, the school held a special conference that this year focused on "Men, Trauma and Film." Each participant lost a child in the past two years, either in IDF action or a terrorist attack.

"Films made by people who have undergone a traumatic event are not necessary created to be shown to the public," said Maaleh School director Neta Ariel. "It's not like a regular movie that you definitely want to be seen. The benefits come to the participant just by their making a movie of their choice – of being empowered to make choices and expressing their feelings," she explained. They also feel they have left something lasting and important after them.

Using video to treat trauma is a "very Israeli project," said Miri Boker, head of the videotherapy center and an occupational therapist who spoke at the beginning of the five-hour conference. "We did this to embrace our soldiers and bereaved families."

The conference began with a 24-minute film made by Hagai, an IDF medic who participated in Operation Protective Shield in Gaza, and his friend Ariel. Unlike films made by bereaved fathers, they actually wanted their work to be shown, and the movie – *Ma Rodef Samal Rishon?* (What Pursues a Staff Sergeant?) was presented a few months ago at Docaviv.

They served together in the war, in the Sufa Battalion. When the battle ended, Ariel bought an old Peugeot, while Hagai purchased a video camera.

One of them is shown living out of his car, even sleeping in it. He moves around the country, returning to scenes near Gaza, cooking vegetables, chicken and ground beef on a camping stove and watching passing sheep. He recalls that "horrible things happened in the war." He is clearly unable to settle down after the trauma of his buddies' deaths. In one of the film's sequences, a soldier is sitting on an armored car. The narrator explains that an IDF physician told the soldiers to wear their bullet-proof vests, but that some ignored his advice. A mortar suddenly lands, killing one of the soldiers. The storyteller was saved because he by chance bent down to reach something. He was saved, but a friend was killed. "His eyes and mouth were open. I knew he was dead. I felt his last two heartbeats before he died. I tore myself away and put on a vest."

War, he said, "messes you up. Many guys I know suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. You can't survive such an experience without getting shell shock." They dedicate the movie to the memories of Daniel Marash, Liran Adir and Noam Rosenthal, who were killed in action.

"From World War I, shell shock was recognized. At first," said Ariel, "it was thought it resulted from some chemical in the gunpowder. In later wars, especially Vietnam, it was realized that the problem was psychological trauma."

When a close buddy is killed, it causes invisible trauma, he continued.

"There are all kinds of expressions. One looks normal, but one may find it hard to sleep at night. There are nightmares that keep returning. You avoid all kinds of things that remind you what happened. You just want quiet, to run away. But telling the story on film, especially when it relates a powerful story, helps you recover," Hagai added. At first, he didn't want anybody to see the movie. "I didn't like it so much. I wanted to keep it to myself. I was embarrassed by it. But as time passed, I began to like it," he said. Hagai is now a film student at Ma'aleh.

"I used to speak in a loud voice, but now, after the experience, I speak softly," said Ariel. "We work with all kinds of people who have been exposed to trauma – doctors, police, victims of road accidents or terror and terminal

patients waiting to die at home. All of them need involvement. They need videotherapy, which can help when words end. It helps deal with problems with a great deal of power."

PROF. RIVKA Tuval-Mashiah of Bar-Ilan University's psychology department and of Natal (Israel's Trauma Center for Victims of Terror and War) came to speak about photography and video workshops the organization holds. Developed in the US as part of the "I Was There" workshops.

"Every one of us is a biography constantly being written from thoughts, actions and speech. Our personality can be thought of as a story with chapters. One can trip backwards and forwards and can dream of our future. We each understand from a young age that we are a story. It is natural, but we are not aware that we tell ourselves stories on what happens in our lives. We tell ourselves why we moved to another home, what happened on a date. We decide what can be told."

Each story "has to have a protagonist, either real or imaginary. There must be a complication or a problem with a continuous connection of events."

Every healthy person, continued Tuval-Mashiah, "holds within him a dynamic life story, with significance and coherence. Psychopathology reflects a defective life story that is not coherent. Treatment of psychopathology focuses on changing the story, reediting, opening alternative possibilities and taking control of the story. Being in war can take over one's life. Trauma is the failure of our ability to deal with it. The trauma victim fears or feels helpless, has flashbacks smells odors from the traumatic event. He may suffer from oversensitivity, and his moods change. He tries to avoid a place that reminds him of his trauma."



FOUR BEREAVED fathers (center) describe their experiences making films as Maaleh School volunteers look on. (Judy Siegel-Itzkovich)

People who have been traumatized, said the psychologist, often say they are not the same person as before. "They ask: 'Why did it happen to me? Where do I go from here?' Sometimes they are ashamed of their behavior during the event. Videotherapy can help. You can't make a movie alone; you need help from others."

Natal decided to cooperate with a US organization headed by Benjamin Patton, the grandson of World War II US general George Patton.

"The US Veterans Administration deals with this. There are half a million veterans in the US who need help, but half of them don't go for treatment. They don't manage to go for treatment. We can't manage to understand why. Even in Israel, many young soldiers with PTSD don't go for help," said Tuval-Mashiah. "There are stigmas, but when they get videotherapy, there are many fewer stigmas, because they are actively involved."

Natal adopted Patton's model of jointly preparing a film with each army veteran here, choosing a job suited to him, such as a photographer, editor or director. "To recover from trauma, one must be exposed to a repeat of the traumatic event. Some fear that can cause re-trauma-



Videotherapy

A technique to soothe the pain of trauma

black holding the strings. His hands hold alcohol; his wife wants to divorce him. He holds a gun to his neck as if he is ready to kill himself. But someone nears and cuts his strings. Somehow, the filmmaker feels empowered.

THE MAALEH conference's second half presented four of the bereaved fathers who have been attending a 24-session, weekly event. The men, who include lawyer and accountant Ofir Shaer, whose son Gil-Ad was murdered by Palestinian terrorists along with two other teenaged boys kidnapped outside Alon Shvut in Gush Etzion. Ofir, who was very quiet before the workshop, has clearly opened up and become much more able to cope with his tragedy.

After thinking about the theme on which he would make a movie, Shaer learned to look closely at his surroundings, choose what he would film, how to edit it and what musical background would be appropriate.

"I felt empowered. I learned how to integrate my daily routine with mourning. In such intimate contact with the other fathers, we learned gradually how to open up. Men usually find it much more difficult than women to express their feelings, but the movie making helped us to do this."

After making his film, for the first time since his son's death in 2014, he was able to hang a photo of Gil-Ad directly opposite his desk at work. "He continues to be a part of my life. I am not just a bereaved father," he asserted.

Shalom Sarel, a building engineer whose son Bnaya was killed in the Gaza war, joined the Maaleh workshop after his wife attended one held only for bereaved women soon after the end of Operation Protective Edge, in which she lost her son. Shalom was skeptical but also benefited greatly from learning filmmaking techniques and bonding with his peers.

David Cohen, the father of Natan, who also died in the war in Gaza, also participated in the workshop along with another man, Menahem, whose son was wounded in the war and then died in an earthquake in Nepal.

Sarel noted that after his son's death, he felt he was expected by people to "return to act normally." He was fed up with all the routines of answering his cellphone and answering questions. But he learned that life goes on, and that he couldn't cut himself off from the world. He said videotherapy taught him how to do this.

Boker of Maaleh said that they are beginning research on actual reduction in post-traumatic symptoms that results from videotherapy, but so far, from their feedback from participants in the workshops, they are confident that it significantly improves their lives.



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