

# "I'm A Bereaved Commander"

An interview with Former IDF Chief of Staff, (Res) Lt- Gen Benny Gantz.

By Tal Lipkin Shahak

***"I didn't think I had any type of post-trauma. But the people, the situations, and the feelings stay with you forever, and don't disappear. I was however determined to get back to my life, to my missions and to continue normal functioning. However, I am also totally aware of the fact that there is much difficulty in this extremely sensitive world, and that people are not uniform or often ready for these challenges"***



From the window of his roof, on the 37<sup>th</sup> floor of one of the office buildings in Tel Aviv, the chairman of NATAL's Public Council, Lieutenant General Benny Gantz, the IDF's 20<sup>th</sup> Chief of Staff, could see the white city from horizon to horizon. However the battle-fields and borders to the north and south, the territories of both Judea and Samaria, and even the scene of the on-going political battles, cannot be seen from his expansive windows. Yet it is impossible for him to shake off and ignore 38 years of military service – the command, dust and fire, and the long list of names and faces. When I asked if he remembered the first friend he lost, he answered immediately without hesitation:

"Omi Goldberg, who was killed in Ein Zehlata, during his time as a reservist. Omi was part of the "Sivan Cycle" – those who studied in university and then during that time enlisted in the Army. He studied law for a year and then joined us, and as a result was a year older than the rest of us. He was an incredible man originally from Rechavia in Jerusalem. Still today, I am in close communication with his family and see them from time to time. So yes, Omi was my first friend who was killed, and after that there were others, but that's another matter"

***Q. What is the essential difference with your responsibility as a commander?***

"Being a commander is something of great responsibility. Twice I was shot and communication between me and my fellow commander stopped. He was killed. It was an extremely difficult feeling that stuck with me throughout my service and until my last day as Chief of staff, and continued until Haggai Ben Ari, the last soldier who fell during Operation Protection Edge, was killed. It is a weight that no-one will understand unless someone has experienced this. You can't explain it at all"

***You mentioned responsibility, but did not mention guilt. Do you sometimes differentiate between the two and suffer from any feelings of guilt?***

"Guilt? No. Guilt needs to be direct, when there is communication and a direct line between something you do or something you did not do. I am responsible for 68 soldiers who fell in defending the settlements in the South of Israel. I do not feel guilty, but I feel responsible for the heavy price we were forced to pay as a result of this battle"



There was a moment of pause in Benny's flow of speech and he continued quietly:

"I was commander in Battalion 890, in the north of Israel and was involved in a number of encounters where many soldiers were killed, and although am not to blame for their deaths, I am responsible for the task and mission that sent them there in the first place.

"Some of the people you may know personally, for example, Yonatan Baranes, who I was personally very close to. He was killed and I knew him since he was 14. Yonatan was an incredible and devoted soldier, who wanted to serve as a substitute for me in a time of need, when communication was down. There was a sudden clash and he was killed. I am of course in touch with his family. In his last memorial, 29 years later, I met his younger brother Adam, who was then two years old. Adam fought in the Second Lebanon war as a liaison with Battalion 890, in the same position and in the exact same place that his brother was killed. Today, Adam is a father with kids the same age as Yonatan when he was killed. Life is a circle, even if a difficult one"

He then continued, "every commander has two types of family: the families that lost someone and bereaves, and there are those that are extremely close. This is a painful mix on one hand, but when you succeed in deepening and strengthening the connections with them, both sides are strengthened. It is very difficult for the commanders, it's hard for the friends, and without me being able to imagine – it is exceptionally difficult for the family"

### ***Between fulfilling a mission and preserving the lives of our soldiers***

Lieutenant General Benny Gantz was born and raised in Moshav Kfar Achim. He served in the Paratroopers brigade in 1977 during his service in the IDF. He served as a Commander of the Paratroopers brigade, Commander of the Shaldag Brigade, Commander of the Liaison Unit between Lebanon and Israel, Commander of the Judea and Samaria Division and Commander of the Northern commands that occur. He was later appointed IDF Chief of Staff in 2011. I asked him about the connection between his roles and the changes in the balance between the values of fulfilling his tasks, in relation to the value of preserving the lives of his soldiers.

"In all of us, the value of sticking to a mission does not change. But when you are thinking about what needs to be done and working on a tactical level, you're not busy with alternative questions. Instead, you are focused strictly on the task and what you are doing. When an order is given, it becomes the total force for the operation, and everyone's focus, even at the cost of some kind of insanity"

There is no need to ask Gantz for an example to illustrate the idea due to the well-known story of Eran Shamir (z"l). Eran, who was from Mazkeret Batya, and son of Dasi Shamir and Dubi Shamir (z"l), was killed in training in 1977 while on reserve duty.

"I met Eran at a Paratroopers memorial service, where his mother Dasi, introduced us. Eran was 3 at the time and his father was killed. I was at the command pole talking to his father and the last sentence he said to me was "one hundred percent, I'll do whatever you tell me". Then he was killed. He wasn't killed because of what I told him to do, but his last sentence just proved that you need to look at the matters and the consequences of them. Before fulfilling a mission, one must think about the soldiers and how is best to perform the task"

### ***Transparent Wounds***

***Q. We are talking a lot about the price of the dead, but what about the wounded?***

"The wounded" he replies, "The wounded are another whole world. Mainly because the wounds are often transparent"

***Q. Are your wounds transparent?*** "I think so. I am the commander of bereavement. A commander that lives with death on his shoulders, even though I don't think I am post-traumatic. Even during these events, you don't cease to function. But the feelings, people and situations, stay with you along the way. Some people are hurt

during combat or terror attack, some are wounded physically and have to deal with injuries, and some are wounded emotionally. We are different people with components of various psychological factors. Therefore, there are many events that one comes out of as if it didn't happen, and some that one comes out of with great difficulty. I personally am someone who was determined to seek revival, receive new tasks and keep going in my position. But I am totally aware that we must understand this sensitivity, as it is not something built into our nature and it is difficult for people to grasp."

**Q. What does understanding sensitivity mean?** "People who are left alone are less able to see the perspectives and consultations of another, even if it is within a therapeutic situation which can help their needs"

**Q. Is this the reason you joined NATAL's Public Advisory Board?** "I had no prior acquaintance with NATAL. The request came from their part and at first I hesitated a bit as it seemed that my military service was already behind me. But in fact, it didn't really end. The fact that I was released didn't mean that the mission was over – there are wounded people here, people who need assistance and support, and although I am not a professional, I understand the public value of this act. Therefore, we became partners for the Public Council – artists and business people, Jews and Non-Jews, secular and religious- from all political, social and cultural backgrounds, as well as the representatives of the younger generation. This cultural combination means that on a nationalistic background, there are various acts of terror and war, exposure on the home front of all the residents of the country in all its parts, to injury. And therefore we have set up a council that reflects this complexity and aims to help."

# **The reality of being a first responder**

Written by Galia Aloni-Dagan

**They live on constant alert and arrive first at the scene of any attack or accident. They save lives and provide assistance to the wounded and the victims of anxiety.**

**They look death in the eyes on a daily basis. They are then required to return home and to their normal routine until the next event. We were happy to meet with three people that due to difficult circumstances and their work none of us want to meet, but we are lucky that they are here for us.**

**How do rescue forces deal with the consequences of their actions in the field? What haunts them at night, and what works those days? We spoke with three people who live on constant alert and arrive first to every scene of an event in order to provide assistance to the victim.**

## **Miriam Balin from the emergency medical organization,**

### **Hatzalah:**

"The first case after becoming certified took place in a toddler's home where a child was unconscious" says Miriam. "We arrived at a private home and found around 20 babies with one nurse who was standing on the side and had frozen, unable to speak. We started to take care of the nurse who returned to function and instructed me where to find the backpack of the child who was unconscious. His mother's phone number was written on his milk bottle, which was how we located her. Our team immediately took the child to the hospital. They found the father, and within an hour the whole family was together. It was not a happy ending though, and was extremely difficult for our staff after having attempted resuscitation, but the knowledge that our team gave to the family, and the fact that we stayed with them as well, made these difficult moments somewhat easier"



Miriam used to be a receptionist for a rescue center in Australia, and did not plan to find herself at the forefront of the difficult scenarios to which she used to dispatch aid forces.

When she met her husband, a volunteer doctor in a rescue organization, she decided to enlist her expertise both as a counselor and a paramedic to set up a special unit that provides psychological support to anyone who has been exposed to the emotionally difficult scenarios of rescue work.

"For every physical casualty there are five victims who suffer from anxiety. It is important to provide them with assistance so that they will not develop Post-traumatic stress disorder in the future". She and her husband, parents of five, are on call 24 hours a day and have several telephones. For every serious traumatic event, social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists are dispatched to the field. "There must be a match. If the victim is a Yiddish speaking Meah Shearim resident, I will send a suitable professional who can fit this specific criteria, versus someone who needs something more medical, to whom I will send someone with a different skillset. The presence of the unit's personnel has proven to significantly reduce the level of pressure and serves as a role model in various parts of the world".

She goes on to say, "it's difficult to forget what we see. It is hard to see people in situations that we are exposed to. I'm focused on what I can do to help them both now and in the future, and this is what makes it possible for me to put my emotional feelings to the side. Sometimes, the right thing to do is to cry with them, and sometimes I need to be strong. With the courses that I teach, I teach these exact things – what to do and how to react depending on each situation. I have to keep people safe as well as to be available and free to give psychological intervention in the field either at the time of the event, or after. We have a separate protocol for this: in every big accident or event, we place a special tent that allows us to take the victims out of the place of trauma and into a safe space where we can speak to them privately and quietly. In the aftermath of any incident we continue to check how they are and thank them for the work they did, even if it ended tragically, however most of all we give them the tools to understand what they feel and offer help when needed".

### **Chief Yoni Harel, a medical officer in the Israel police**

He started his profession being a paramedic in Magen David Adom. Since the age of seven, he had been diligently reading first-aid books and aspiring to be like his brother and uncle - both medics and officers. "The children in the neighborhood played soccer, and I always arrived at the playing field with my first-aid-kit" he says. He usually parks his car facing outward in order to be ready for any call, and be able to quickly respond in seconds - "from zero to two hundred. " "I constantly make sure I have all the equipment I might require and think about a million and one details. Sometimes, for example, I might pass through an intersection and find myself thinking how I would work if there was a terror attack or accident. My wife is also trained. When there are sirens, she calls me immediately, and if I do not answer, she realizes that I am already busy with the event. "

When Harel was asked about an attack he remembered specifically, he said: "In October 2014 an attack took place in front of the National Headquarters, and I found an ultra-Orthodox guy with a knife in his neck. After three months, the whole team was invited to the



Thanksgiving party of the wounded man who recovered, and that is what gives me the strength to continue".

Another event that Harel remembers did not end well. "I was caught in a terrorist attack at the Jaffa Gate just a few seconds after it had happened. Someone shouted, 'a man was stabbed!' We found four people injured. One of them was still conscious and was rushed to the hospital. I told him "Don't worry. I'll take care of you". I met him in the hospital, but unfortunately he died from his wounds on the way there. I went to tell his family as his wife requested from me to keep her informed. I do not know whether it was good that Ofer (z"l) closed his eyes with the feeling that he was in good and safe hands, even though he was alive at the time. I will always question if I should have said that. "

"Maybe these are the defenses I developed," Harel says in response to a question about how he copes and maintains functioning. "I stick to the practices of a multi-casualty event, and adherence to the work procedures allows me to act without entering the sights and names. I rarely remember the names of casualties, including those I saved and reached the headlines."

### **Haim Weingarten, head of operations at the ZAKA**

20 years ago, Haim Weingarten ran a supermarket in Jerusalem, where his uncle was murdered in a shooting attack. "I felt I had to do something. However, at that time I knew I would faint at the sight of blood, but I felt that I had a mission so I signed up to a volunteer program and training with ZAKA. The first situation I was called to was a murder case. I was only allowed to clean up the blood, and it was extremely difficult for me to sleep two weeks after the incident, without even seeing the body of the murdered woman. But the work fascinated me. The concept of 'Kindness of truth' and what I was doing, made me feel that my soul was doing something good" After setting up the motorcycle unit at the ZAKA, and seeing a great deal of success, Weingarten claims that "after dealing with these difficult cases, they go home and cope alone. The acts of kindness are what drives us forward all the time".

"When he is thrown into the scene of an attack, an accident or a murder, he describes a sense of immobility: "I put the body into a functional state that is neutralized from emotions. It's like a Safe mode on a computer. When I get to any scene of attack, I know exactly how it will look, and how it will look in two days, and more so, how the family will respond. This is a tremendous emotional burden. "

"Scenes that include children are the most difficult," says Weingarten. "I remember a case in which we were called into the Kiryat Moshe neighborhood of Jerusalem to take care of a five year old boy who was hanging on an electric gate during a game and was totally trapped in it. I and another MDA paramedic from MADA approached him and could not save him. Until the firemen arrived with the heavy vehicle, I was going crazy, and felt helpless. We tried to resuscitate the child but his injury was too severe and he did not survive it. This event haunted me for weeks.

In another event, we were called to a building site to treat a person who was injured by a forklift. I understood that he had a family and felt that he had to survive. We didn't give up and did everything we could. We performed CPR until the ambulance arrived. He was rushed off in critical condition, with a severe head injury and I just thought "Blessed be the Lord, Save him". We went to visit him, and the family kissed us impatiently. "I know he will never be the same again, but his children have a father, and his wife is not a widow. That encouraged me and gave me tremendous strength".

Despite his vast experience, Weingarten adds, "I have not adapted myself to the sights. I have built a screen for myself. I am at the event but not in it. The next day I open the newspaper and do not recognize those that were killed. I operated in the field with my eyes closed. "

### Finding closure

We asked the three interviewees whether they felt the need to know the fate of the people they cared for, to visit them or support them in their recovery process. "We don't normally encourage interaction after the event as it can cause more harm than good," Evelyn says. "Although we can't bring experiences and feelings from our work in the field into our daily lives, there are times that it is important for us to attend a funeral, to go to the Shiva or meet with the family. However we decide that on a case by case basis. Despite the fact that my husband is a doctor and sometimes the injured we care for end up being treated by him in hospital, we must uphold the ethics and confidentiality of care, and don't discuss any event between us. Normally I get a deep sense of satisfaction and fulfillment from my work on the ground and the knowledge that I did everything I could ".

Superintendent Harel usually receives information on the condition of the injured after each incident. "I want to know if the professional decisions I made in the field were correct in order to learn and improve. Sometimes it is the wounded who make contact, and during the holidays I normally receive many phone calls from people I helped save. Some of them call on the date of the incident they survived which for them often turns into a day of rebirth of sorts ".

Haim Weingarten used to visit the wounded in hospital until he began to feel it was causing him harm, however he also experienced events in which the reality of how he conducted himself dictated otherwise. "When we went to Thailand after the tsunami, we stayed in the same hotel as the families of victims and developed a connection with them. We sat with them at night, drew strength from each other, and shared in their pain and relief when we would find the bodies of their loved ones".

### Ways of processing the daily exposure to trauma

Over the years each of the interviewees have developed ways of coping with the daily trauma they face. They have also use methods of self-care that help them "reboot" in order to be ready for the next event they are called to. "At United Hatzalah there is a special team for the team itself," explains Evelyn. "After particularly traumatic events we conduct



research, talk to psychologists and measure all the functional and psychological aspects of the work we do. There is a closed Whatsapp group which we use to share information, learn and improve, understand and divide tasks." Weingarten tries not to bring his work home. "Two weeks ago, I was called to a serious car accident while my 14 year old daughter was with me in the car. I reported back that I was on my way to the scene at which point she began to panic and insisted that I drop her off at the nearest bus stop where she waited for me until I returned from the accident. That was when I understood that we have a serious problem here and that perhaps our families are also in need of help. Despite the fact that I do not talk about my job with my wife let alone my children, they are still exposed to hearing the reports we receive." Weingarten received support from his colleagues at ZAKA, who trained the team leaders to identify distress and deal with post-traumatic symptoms among volunteers. "We encourage volunteers to share. I cannot talk about what we have seen and experienced with outsiders, but when share them with each other we are better able to process the trauma ".

The wife of Superintendent Harel is an officer in the police force so he can share some of the details with her and says: "The police have structured procedures according to which after every incident they receive a referral from the mental support system. In every event there is the fear that another explosion will happen, or another terrorist will attack always with very intense feelings of uncertainty. In one of the more recent shooting attacks the wounded were treated while still under fire and I shared the details of what happened there with our support staff ".

Weingarten's daughter, who had waited for him at the bust stop, is not the only one. The families of rescue workers also pay a psychological price. "The kids know that from 1:30pm to 6pm I'm just "mom" – there is another team leader that is responsible and I don't leave the house. They understand that we are helping people – that dad puts bandages on people and mom gives love to the heart and that there are sometimes incidents which the 2 of us go to together. There are couples who go out together to restaurants – we arrange for a babysitter and put on our sirens on our way out to another incident." The six year old son of Harel was very proud when he heard that his father received a certificate of excellence from the President of the state and said he wanted to be a paramedic and policeman when he grew up. "I do not think the children understand that I am in dangerous situations," says Harel, who is a father of 3. "They know that I am going out to save lives and when I am called and I need to leave, my son normally asks 'dad, is there a rescue case?' My older daughter asks a bit more. I explain it to them, however if necessary I will also lie so as not to cause unnecessary anxiety".

### **Emotional burnout and tension**

Even with the feelings of emotional burnout and high stress everyone copes in their own unique way. "I love chocolate and my husband loves steaks and we know when we need to 'fill up on gas,' says Evelyn. "I know when and how to say that I need a break and a backup team, however I also give no thoughts to any other profession. I love what I do and when other places from around the world want to learn from us how we operate, it strengthens

my feeling that we are doing something right and important. Yes, it's a huge daily responsibility, but the great satisfaction makes it possible to carry on ".

Superintendent Harel admits that recently "I began to understand that you have to know how to let go sometimes, to turn the beeper off at night when I'm not on duty, or when I'm trying to sleep. In order to not create problems at home between family and work, I announce at work that I am not available when one of my children is celebrating a birthday. My parents raised me to help and give what I can – maybe that's my calling. I believe that even when bad things happen to good people, that person still needs good fortune – for the right person to show up at just the right moment. I have experienced cases where I cannot explain how I ended up reaching them except for the hand of fate that directed me to them. I believe that there is a guiding hand and so I am always ready. My colleagues say that when they see me running down the hallway, they know it's a sign that something has happened." Weingarten admits that he sometimes thinks of retirement, "but from one event to another, I understand how important it is for me to be there. Sometimes I say 'enough – there are young volunteers who will do my job,' but I can't leave. I am part of the ZAKA family, which invests heavily in social cohesion, and this is what helps us to continue – despite the difficulty. We celebrate happy times together and the holidays and sometimes we sing together songs filled with emotion as we laugh and cry together. The light that emanates from everyone at such times is what gives us a lot of strength."

### **How do you deal with this? How do you continue after this experience of trauma?**

Balin: "it always depends on the case. It is important to remember to this is a normal reaction to an abnormal situation. I do not tell people how to react, and they do not need to feel bad about the feelings they are experiencing. When the medic arrives to the field, he comes with a purpose to resuscitate, to treat and to help. We don't arrive with an agenda; we are here to be without any judgements".

"It is clear to me that I am going through traumatic experiences" says Superintendent Harel, and says that "the professional investigation, carried out retrospectively, not only adds to returning to a functional state, but helps him to process his experiences. "I feel that our shared singing evenings help emotions come out and do a 'massage of the soul'. There are people who will start a cooking course or anything else, in order to bring happiness and joy to the soul which needs it.

### **What do you advise to those who want to join the rescue forces?**

"I would tell every woman and every man, 'You can do what you want,'" says Balin. "Every dream can be reached and we must follow it and do everything possible to reach it."

Superintendent Harel answers the question: "Suddenly I asked myself if I had not chosen this profession, what would have happened to all the people I saved on the way? I look at my

professional life, and I have a sense of mission, challenge, interest and rare satisfaction. My son asked me this week to teach him to be a paramedic, and we went through the same first-aid book I read at his age. When we saw that the text and pictures were problematic for his age, he said: 'As a first lesson, prepare a bag for me to take with me to kindergarten, because sometimes there are children who get hit.' I went along with him, and I think this answers the question: Adam knows he has the ability to practice this profession, although I know quite a few people who started their professional training and often stopped. Personally, I would have chosen the exact same path and the same profession. "

Weingarten claims that if he were approached by a person who wants to go in his way, "I would hug and kiss him, because I know that he is going to do very good things for the people of Israel. I would advise him to try to disconnect emotionally and to function at the event as best he could. The connection to the affected families makes it difficult to survive in the profession for a long time, and we reach places where other people flee, so I would advise people who turn to the rescue field - take care of yourself. "

