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This story is presented with the intention to raise awareness and provide information about ELEM's work.

The Anonymous Soldiers Who are at the Front Lines of the Trauma Victim's Battle

Without officially being called up to serve during these terrible days, many women mental health professionals show up for the frontlines of the fight against trauma, investing their souls in order to listen to the horrors and offer the beginning of healing. These unknown soldiers deserve our appreciation and honor

Written by Ori Sherman

The horrors of Simchat Torah sent me, too, to the frontlines. After the eve of the end of the Holiday, when I couldn't get a shut-eye, on Sunday I was drafted with the reserve unit I am part of. I said goodbye to Hadas and the kids and went into what was unknown, but necessary.

Nowadays, at a time which is filled with transitions and changes, uncertainty, and a sense of purpose that comes with constant worrying, the spare time at the end of the day allows me to think about the big picture and write what I have on my mind.

Here are some of the thoughts from the past few days.

During the day, at times of rest, I am in contact with incredible friends, female therapists who launched moving initiatives and participated in support and mobilization efforts for the survivors of the 2023 pogroms. Therapists who showed up at areas of refugees, the survivors of fire and hell, because of their souls' greatest call to arms, which is not written in formal letters.

Those of us who found ourselves in the spaces of human trauma and horror tend to often use sentences such as "a stranger will not understand," "only those who have been there know." The encounter with the frontier and the abyss of the soul and humanity cannot be expressed in words. Words cannot encompass such traumatic and radioactive material, and it slips between them like sand through the fingers, like hot mercury. The direct encounter with those who survived and are surviving the horror is an encounter with the mental anguish that cannot be translated into words but

penetrates the soul of those listening, those who chose to become a container to something that cannot be contained.

This encounter also leaves the listener with wounds and internal bruises. They're exposed to the frontier that exists in all of us, to the shreds of humiliation, betrayal, aggression, guilt, and helplessness that exist in us. It's bruise after bruise, and only constant work on these wounds and their friction can really allow helping those who desperately need someone to lend an ear, a sensitive and honest one. Exactly because a stranger cannot understand, only those who were there, it's hard to exaggerate in regards to the courage and dedication of those who chose to knowingly, with deep consent and true willingness, enter the inferno, without any external order.

A Hidden Abyss

I write these words while wearing army uniforms, my body is protected by a bulletproof vest and next to me is a protective helmet, in case of an emergency. I am a reserve soldier who was enlisted to take part in the effort to protect and defend our society and country. Precisely because of this reality, in which we might at any moment enter the territorial frontier, the one which is visible and physically exists, I find the many similarities between my service and theirs.

Some may wonder: how can one compare physical combat, entering a situation of risking the body and soul, to entering the protected and safe house to which the survivors were evacuated? Sometimes it can even be a pampering hotel full of goods, and how can this be compared to sleeping on the cold and painful benches of the armored personnel carrier? Indeed, it's precisely this bewilderment which tells us something about the courage and dedication of the care and the mental-social-educational assistance workers, and about the appreciation and recognition which they deserve.

It is clear to everyone that us reservists are now worthy of recognition, support and to be embraced. There is a survival need for security and protection, and a tribal and primal need to take revenge and restore the damaged national honor (a need which existence and importance need to be recognized, but also its destructive potential). The military response also provide somewhat therapeutic, a feeling of regaining control, but it also shifts the focus from the unbearable feeling of loss, through the choice to get up and act. In the terrible reality in which we find ourselves at the moment, support for the soldiers is perhaps the broadest consensus: we feel it in every meeting with the citizens who support and pamper us with food, equipment, and words of appreciation.

It's precisely against this backdrop of this broad and important support, that the large gap and the loneliness of the female social workers at the frontline emerge. Most of the time their work will be unknown to the public, since they do not wear uniforms that identify them as the heroes that they are. Most of the time, the public will not understand at all what they are doing there, in meetings with the survivors of the pogroms. Or as I am asked many times: "What can you possibly offer to someone who has gone through

this terrible thing?" The average person's reaction to contact with the trauma will usually be the opposite: why even bother with it, isn't it better to move on?

And in the exact words of Judith Lewis Herman: "The ordinary response to atrocities is to remove them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social etiquette are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word unspeakable." Our automatic tendency when encountering trauma is to avoid acknowledging it. When you understand all of this, you can begin to understand how brave and important is the choice of mental health professionals to enter the frontier areas of the body and mind, against the initial survival instinct. Instead of running away from it, or attacking, comes the courage to be with, to choose the encounter.

And in the complex world of trauma, no encounter is similar to another. It doesn't matter how many team meetings and case consultations I've attended, and how many victims I've accompanied. There will always be the inner feeling of "it can't be", and "I have never encountered such a reality". And this time it's really something we haven't encountered yet. Female friends who are there [working with survivors – ELEM USA], and hear the testimonials from the inferno, speak in terms taken from the Holocaust. Children who hide in closets and see their parents murdered, parents who witness the murder of their children, acts of rape and abuse of those alive and dead. Even writing these lines is intolerable.

And the feeling of difficulty and madness sometimes intensifies exactly because the meeting takes place in the safe, pleasant, and sometimes pampering space where the survivors are. The contrast between the abyss and hell that have been burnt onto the soul in comparison with the daily routine of life sometimes exacerbates the feeling of alienation and the loss of the normality of existence.

Without a Shield and Helmet

And then, after a day of exposure to these radioactive materials, in the spaces of the mind where there is no safety net and no protective helmet - many times the therapist returns home unable to share the horrors. Because 'a stranger wouldn't understand it', and those who weren't there wouldn't understand, and why ruin another person's day, and who would even be able or want to listen, and this is my voluntary work so it's part of the choice I made, and there isn't always someone to turn to.

How lonely it can be on this crazy front. So much pain, helplessness, and uncertainty. So many doubts and anxieties. And how brave and moving is the overcoming of all of the above, and the choice to go to the front of the struggle in the midst of trauma, to alleviate even a little of the unimaginable suffering of the survivors, to give shelter to those who find no shelter, not even in their body and their soul. To be the container that filters and drains even a little bit of this mercury, to alleviate the loneliness of the

survivor and to divert, even a little bit, on that destructive path of trauma, post-trauma, and the reconstruction of the trauma.

When it comes to this effort, certificates of appreciation are not given to outstanding soldiers, there are no fun days for families, an annual grant and salutation events. There is also no unit for those hurt by the treatment of trauma victims, and there is no rehabilitation wing for those who went to the front and came back injured themselves. So, thank you to all the warriors of the struggle against the destructive cycle of trauma. We all need to salute and embrace you and, if only with half the gusto that we, the reserve soldiers, receive.

Ori Sherman is a social worker and the head of *Urshina*, an ELEM center in Jerusalem for boys who've experienced sexual violence. He's also a reservist tank commander who's currently serving.