Cover

The OneFamily of man
Overcoming terror, one Purim basket at a time: OneFamily Fund personally delivers more than 2,500 joy-filled ‘mishloah manot’ packages across the country.

By Sarah Levin

Giving gifts

OneFamily Fund, a home base for Israel’s terror victims to overcome trauma, spreads the joy and healing spirit of Purim.
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"...That [the Jews] should make them days of feasting and gladness, and sending portions of food to one another, and gifts to the poor" (Esther 9:22).

In the Purim story, Esther and Mordecai thwarted one of Israel's first terror attacks—by uniting the nation. They prayed together, fasted together and called upon their community, which then reached out to the poor and needy.

That Purim tradition of sharing is one that Jerusalem-based organization OneFamily aims to emulate, by hand-delivering over 2,500 mishloah manot packages to the bereaved across the country.

"Some people are very alone and not doing great, and they need to be reminded that there is someone there," says Chantal Belzberg, who co-founded the OneFamily Fund in 2001, after the Sbarro pizzeria bombing in Jerusalem, as a liaison for terror victims and a home center for overcoming trauma.

For the past few weeks, the OneFamily headquarters in the capital's Germany Colony neighborhood has been training gap-year students (between high school and college) from MASA's overseas programs in the art of handwriting notes and stuffing thousands of blue and orange, thermal-insulated canvas bags with cookies, crackers, cakes and love.

Personally spearheading the Purim packaging preparations is Rebecca Fuhrman, the fund's communications manager—who herself was one of 50 wounded in a 2011 bus bombing across from the Jerusalem International Convention Center that left one person dead. She delegates, juggles and graciously leads the groups to accomplish their utmost.

"When I say hand-delivers, that means that we are already calling the families to find out when they are going to be home, so that we will be able to meet them and wish them a face-to-face Hag Sameah [happy holiday], and hand them the mishloah manot," she explains. "It’s a huge project, a huge undertaking. But these are the things that help people know that there are other people in their lives who are supporting them and there for them, to bring a smile to their faces."

There’s no lack of manpower to prepare the thousands of gift packages. Volunteers from 26 groups—among them special-needs students from the Darkaynu organization, young adults from Nefesh B’Neftesh, and men and women from, respectively, the Ohr Somayach yeshiva and Midrashet Moriah seminary—have accomplished this team effort with flying colors.

Chaya, a Darkaynu counselor from Melbourne, Australia, says it's important for the girls to do acts of kindness and help out. "This place is different because they are all working together; they usually..."
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work in individual groups. It’s really lively; they really feel like they are doing a really good thing. They keep mentioning that they are helping victims of terror, and they are really happy to be here.”

Rabbi Mark Dratch, executive vice president of the Rabbinical Council of America, whose daughter Bobby learns at Darkaynu and volunteers weekly at OneFamily’s secondhand shop, refers to the effort as “a wonderful chance for them to learn about Israel and learn about the current events, and feel responsible and give. Many of these young women are on the receiving end of people’s kindnesses, and now they have a chance to give back and feel they are contributing.”

While tearing off cellophane for the Darkaynu participants to wrap the Purim baskets, OneFamily logistics coordinator Sharon Lasri says, “These ladies are so good. They do it from their hearts, with all of their hearts and soul. It’s so nice to see it; it’s very warm.”

Spearheading the personal delivery is a colossal task, as OneFamily logistics manager Mindy Levinger details: “We have four coordinators for distribution, between Jerusalem and Kiryat Shmona and down to Eilat. We drive from door to door, day and night. I don’t turn off my phone; we never say no. We are always open to hug them, to kiss them, to say we care for them. Slowly but surely we get it done. It’s very important to show these people no one forgets them. That’s the message. That’s what we do.”

And from the sound of it, that message is well-received.

Viki Jan, whose parents were killed when a terrorist opened fire on a passenger bus north of Eilat, says the gifts “make me feel as if someone shares my pain, that I’m not alone. I feel like a little girl; I didn’t have parents to give me Purim baskets. OneFamily is my family; they have been my family since the day of the attack. There are other people like myself who understand each other. They are my best friends.”

Her cousin, Yaniv Karlenski, who also lost his parents in the attack, refers to OneFamily as “our backbone.” He expresses gratitude for “never forgetting us and for thinking of us always, especially on the holidays.”

SOCIAL SUPPORT is an essential part of coping and adjustment after the occurrence of traumatic events such as terrorism, notes Sally B. Dreman, a professor emeritus and former director of the psychology
A terror victim (right) poses with her Purim bag at the OneFamily Fund headquarters, alongside her husband and a OneFamily staff member.

department's clinical program at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. Such support is often expressed in nurturing behavior, reflected in acts such as donations of personal gifts.

“They feel that someone cares for them, that the establishment, friends and family haven’t forgotten them – as is often the case among survivors of terrorism, as well as those whose loved ones were killed or injured in combat activity,” says Dremen. “Instead, they feel that they are remembered by society at large, which is very important for adjustment. Presents and food are often equated with love.

“It’s giving something that’s nurturing, and people need a lot of nurturing after the dramatic and painful events of terror attacks.”

Living with the effects of terror remains a sadly constant part of Israeli society. In 2013, Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency) statistics showed that Judea and Samaria suffered 1,271 terrorist attacks; 1,042 in Judea, 229 in Samaria, as well as 260 in the Jerusalem envelope, with 11 mortar shells and 63 rockets launched at Israel from Gaza. This year, there were a total of 139 attacks registered in February (38 of them in Jerusalem) and 83 in January (27 in Jerusalem).

Since September 2000, the Foreign Ministry states, 2,240 people have been killed by Palestinian violence and terrorism. According to Dr. Boaz Ganor, founder and executive director of the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism at the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, support efforts for survivors are an important part of combating terrorism.

“Modern terrorism is a certain type of psychological warfare,” he explains. “The terrorists are not interested just in killing people; the killing is actually a tool that is aimed to inflict fear and anxiety on the targeted population. Supporting the terrorist victims – those who were physically and mentally wounded, the families of those who have been killed, people who are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the exposure to terrorist attacks – and the full and rapid recovery from terrorist attacks, these goals should be regarded as a crucial element in any effective counter-terrorism policy.”

Rabbi Ya’akov Salomon of the Aish HaTorah Yeshiva, who is a clinical social worker, notes “there’s always a general sense of fear. Israelis don’t talk about it, either because they are injured or they’re so bold and courageous that it doesn’t even matter anymore. However, you know what it’s like to live in fear. It destroys the fabric of a family. It destroys a person. Israeli citizens are always feeling that people are either out to get them, or something is going to happen imminently... So let’s hope God will protect us all in the State of Israel.”

For those who suffer from the aftermath of these terrorist acts, moving forward, deprived of family and loved ones, is challenging.

“Not everyone has external wounds,” says Mira Feldman, a private therapist. “The effect of living in terror is mostly known by the individual living it, because it’s not on the outside.”

It’s common for such individuals to want to share their experiences over and over again, which can be helpful. Another crucial aspect of recovery is restoring order – reestablishing old routines at work, home or school, occupying one’s mind and avoiding frantic activity. One of OneFamily’s goals is to offer a safe place to begin to do this.

“The victims[ ] want to do the work and get through the trauma, the mourning, the pain, and to face life again,” says clinical social worker Avi Har-Tuv, who recently held a workshop for OneFamily orphans. “That is what they are asking for. I ask the question, in [terms of] time since the attack, where are you? Are you frozen in life, where time stops moving on? Some say yes; others say, ‘sometimes it’s terrible, sometimes I’m back in life.’”

He explains that “as a result of the trauma, you’re going to shut down. And when we go into shutdown, we go into prohibition. The most important question I ask is, what are you still forbidding yourself from experiencing, feeling, being or doing? Prohibition is what I’m not allowed to do: I’m not allowed to be happy, I’m not allowed to make a breakthrough in my career, I’m not allowed to fall in love. What happens is that they can look at where they are, where they want to be, and they can start taking action in terms of healing inwardly and moving outwardly. That works. They start saying, ‘Wow, I’m really stuck, but I want to go back to doing things I enjoy doing. Can I give myself permission to go back to what I was doing? What are those things? When can I get going?’ It’s a simple example, but not simple to partake in.”

OneFamily’s mission is certainly in line with the teachings of Rabbi Yo’ini Arye Refson of women’s Torah institution Neve Yerushalayim. He asserts that “to save the Jewish people is to bring everybody together and share love between the people. That’s what Purim is about, and giving mishloach manot, helping and reuniting everybody, and feeling the connection with these families who have suffered from terror attacks. We tell them that they are not alone, they are with us together.”

Purim is so called because the villain of the story, Haman, cast a pur (lot) against the Jews – but failed to destroy them or the unity of the Jewish people. Refson elaborates: “Haman was an archenemy of the Jewish people for no reason, exactly like the terrorist who attacks for no reason. On Purim, everyone dresses up. It’s not about the way you look. Who cares? You have a kippa, you don’t? It doesn’t matter. We’re all dressed up. It’s all about the soul, the united soul. On Purim, we’re all one.”

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