

**When Our World Is In Peril: Keeping Your Family Cohesive and Secure
When Terror Surrounds Us**

Rabbi Dr. Dovid Fox

Noah builds an ark, safe refuge for himself and family from the dangers outside, and he also provides shelter for the animals and beasts. The midrash then recounts that he gets attacked by some of the very beasts to whom he has offered food and protection. This takes place in the one place on earth that is supposed to be safe and under the watchful "eye" Above.

The paradox of having our families, our children, our loved ones in the Holy Land - in their Ark amidst the world's floodwaters - sheltered by all that is sacred, surrounded by mitzvos and fellow Jews - yet then confronted violently inside their shelter by those who turn on us, attack and maul us.....

I spoke with my son today who is a talmid chacham in Jerusalem, a husband and father. It was evening there and I could hear his little ones in the background. When I asked him how they are coping with the current crisis events, he very wisely said in a calm voice, "this is not the time or place for that discussion." It was not a choice moment to discuss the vivid facts, the painful realities, life outside the Ark. His children were around and he needed to protect their young hearts and innocent souls.

For parents of young people, both those of us living abroad and those present with our families in Israel at this time, the turbulent flood of fear, of danger, or terror is once again seeping into our Ark. As my own son modeled so well this morning, it is so important that we promote for our families a degree of reassurance and emotional shelter, but that we also remain mindful of the reality, the frightening and painful reality, that each one is being exposed to and is bound to hear about, and r'l to face during brushes with tragedy.

Working every day with crisis, with trauma, with losses, in a clinical capacity, provides me with some insights, some focus and some tools for guiding others in the face of terror and in its horrible aftermath. This is the sad but devoted focus of our department - Project Chai of Chai Lifeline.

Let's first discuss the messages we need to send our children:

- Listen to them. Let them talk. Encourage them to share what they hear, what they see, what they're told, and what they think and fear. Give your time and your attention to them.
- Avoid judging them, trivializing their feelings, telling them how they should or should not be reacting. Accept, normalize, validate. In simpler terms, accept means you accept that what they are going through is their current reality and you cannot tell them that their experience is wrong or is not happening. Normalize means that you get it, you are aware that abnormal events lead to extreme reactions, which under those abnormal circumstances are actually "normative" reactions. So - be clear with your children that they are not weird for having intense or subjectively strange emotions and ideas at times like this. And validate means you offer supportive responses that say "I can fully understand that this is how you are reacting right now; your feelings and thoughts are based in reality and fact right now. These are scary times."
- Give your family reassurance that all steps and measures that can be taken to protect them, and to protect our country and its precious people, are being taken. You are looking out for them, you are advocating for them that they will be kept safe, and you are aware of the many resources that are in place to bring this uprising to a close.
- Talk with them about your own faith and how you are exercising that bitachon and trust, by sticking to your routine of tefilla, of tehilim, of Torah and its implementation, and gently guide your children into maintaining their own routines. Even under duress and emotional siege, routine is healthy and helps structure one's sense of having some grip on their reality. Meal times, bed time, waking time, study time, and yes, prayer time can promote resilience and can add to the healing process.
- This leads to a delicate factor: when a young person's assumptions about how the world should operate are challenged or seem to be contradicted by events around them, they probably need to discuss this. If you can take part in that dialogue, offer it. If you can discuss their possible struggles along the lines of faith, do that with warmth and wisdom. If you cannot, help them identify a trusted mature and caring mentor - a favorite teacher, rabbi, or learned spiritual role model - who can hear them and lead them faithfully and lovingly through their dilemmas and questions.
- Children respond to fear with varying forms of anxiety. Older ones wonder and ponder, raising significant doubts and questions. Somewhat younger ones may feel phobic, fears of going out, of the dark, of noise, or amplified worry and scary images. Younger ones may

have physical reactions, appetite change, sleep cycle change, energy bursts or drops....

- Age and maturity, along with degree of awareness, usually shape the forms in which a young person expresses distress. There is no "right" or "wrong" way to emote, and we need to meet each child at their own level, providing comfort, support, encouragement when realistic, and steering them away from catastrophic thinking, generalized fatalism, hopelessness, immobilization.
- When we show support and validation, we need to keep our own fears and sadness in check. Adding to a child's worry by leading them to worry about whether we ourselves can cope is destructive - we do not want a child to refrain from sharing their feelings because they are afraid we cannot take it. Whether or not you are feeling secure at this time, try to model a sense of calm, and focus on the family, rather than forcing the family to focus on you.
- Younger children can often be assuaged by simple answers. Older ones may demand more factual reassurance. Older children can deal with those moments when a parent concedes that "I don't know the answer to that question, but let's both look into it, and find out." Showing your child that you are focused and engaged in the matter in order to problem solve with them is in itself reassuring.

The Torah tells us that at Yam Suf, what fell over people were "aima and pachad" - fear and terror. The midrash says that those close to the horror felt terror. Those distant still felt fear. The form and degree of a crisis reaction is often determined by how close to home and personal the incident was, versus how indirect and remote it may have seemed. As Jews, every danger is close to home, whether we are present or merely hearing about it from others. For children, it is nonetheless important to keep remote sources of information to a minimum. Tone down the radio and media when they are around. Have your adult conversations and phone calls when the children are not nearby. Avoid showing pictures and shocking imagery, and still be mindful that your children may well hear and see things beyond your ability to filter and control for. Ask them to share the sources of their information, dispel rumors, and discourage them from feeding their imaginations with distortions and hearsay. Assure them that they can come discuss all things with you, and whereas you cannot be dishonest, or sugarcoat, or deny some of the realities they are attuned to, you can help them frame and reframe, and monitor where their fearful fantasies run. And outline a clear plan for them if they are exposed to direct danger - they will need a safe haven, phone contacts, and directions for reacting to the unexpected. Be there for them, and tell them over and over again - "I love you."

Speaking about monitoring, be mindful of pronounced reactions. Most people do not "break down" or develop severe disturbance when facing acute stress. Not all trauma breeds PTSD. Nonetheless, should you encounter exaggerated and severe upset in child or self, debilitating fears, sadness, shock, enduring

behavior changes, and lack of functioning which lingers, contact a skilled mental health professional.

As my strong son said earlier today, there is a time and place when these matters can be properly addressed. Ki eis tzara hi l'Yakov u'mimenu yivashe'ah. May the days ahead reveal yeshuos and may the chutzos Yerushalayim be filled with the sound of joy and inspiration.

Rabbi Dr. Dovid Fox
Director of Interventions and Community Education, Project Chai
dfox@chailifeline.org

Zahava Farbman, MSW
PhD Candidate
Associate Director Project Chai
516 993-0430
zfarbman@chailifeline.org