

Living Beyond Terrorism:  
Israeli Stories of Hope and Healing



Zieva Dauber Konvisser

## Reading Guide and Questions

Zieva Konvisser wrote about the genesis of her book:

My interest in terror survivors in Israel began years ago as I heard the extraordinary stories of survivors of the Holocaust, in particular those few members of my own family who had survived. More than thirty of my relatives – my grandmother’s parents, brothers and sisters and their families, as well as six of my grandfather’s seven brothers and sisters and their families, and numerous cousins – were murdered in Vilna, in what is now Lithuania.

Most of my family members who survived left Europe for Palestine or the United States in the early 1930’s, including my mother’s parents who were ardent Zionists and moved to Jerusalem with their three children.

A few cousins remained behind and lived to tell their stories. Sima Shmerkovitz Skurkovitz, as a seventeen-year old girl, lived through the hell of the Vilna Ghetto and Nazi concentration camps but managed to survive without losing her humanity. Her singing gave hope to her companions in the terrible darkness of the Nazi Holocaust.

Izaak Wirszup, his wife Pera, and her daughter Marina also survived the Holocaust. Izaak lived through the Vilna Ghetto and the camps and came out believing that he was spared in order to make a difference. He encouraged me and others to “try for the maximum.” Out of their struggle came a survivor’s love of life. Izaak expressed it this way: “We have seen how love, friendship, and help can transform the most fragile souls into individuals stronger than steel.”

The drive to write *Living Beyond Terrorism* emerged from two questions that evolved from her personal experiences as a second-generation witness to the Holocaust when she participated in an international leadership intensive at Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1995, followed by a visit to Israel in October 2002 at the height of the Second Intifada: **How can we learn from our experiences to prevent genocide? And how can we move beyond the trauma of such an event?**

- **What questions arise for you in your reading of *Living Beyond Terrorism*?**

*Living Beyond Terrorism* examines “politically motivated violence” during the Second Intifada from numerous angles and is divided into two sections. The first six chapters cover locations in Israel where terrorist attacks took place through the eyes of their survivors. The second five chapters cover thematic concepts like personal injury and loss and mothers’ perspectives on the loss of their children. The image on the front cover of the book of the fragile *rakefet* or cyclamen

flower pushing up through the crack in the hard stone wall and symbolizing rebirth and new growth reflects the thematic reality of this book. Though it is a collection of stories that encompass the most horrifying evils, it is still a book about life. It is a book about living. It is a book about finding the courage and resistance to continue on despite and in spite of the world around us.

- **Do you think these stories from the Second Intifada are still relevant and important to share ten or more years later and why?**

The individuals in this book are otherwise ordinary people performing ordinary activities—Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Druze riding in buses, dining in restaurants, shopping in markets, studying at college, visiting hotels, or walking on the street—who suddenly become victims of suicide bombings, shooting attacks, and rocket attacks. Their responses and coping mechanisms ranged widely. A minority experienced difficulties that linger and disrupt their ability to function. Most coped successfully with difficult situations, recovering within a short period of time, and functioning normally, although they may continue to experience some concomitant distress as well.

While they may experience severe distress, including physical limitations, stress symptoms, and anxiety, at the same time they develop visions for the future, identify new possibilities, and actively seek solutions for dealing with challenges, rather than waiting passively for something to happen. In struggling to make sense of the event, they realize a greater appreciation of their existence in the world, along with a sense of reordered priorities. They manifest growth as warmer, more intimate relationships with others or with God; recognition of new possibilities for life; a greater sense of personal strength; spiritual and existential change; a greater appreciation of what is really important and meaningful versus what is trivial; and a better understanding of who they really are.

In the face of overwhelming disaster, many of the stories of these otherwise ordinary people describe how they called forth, from the depths of the human spirit, courage they never knew they possessed, found meaning from their deeds, experiences, and attitudes, and turned tragedy into triumph, allowing growth and wellness to thrive. They have become survivors! And they discovered for themselves that the meaning does not lie in the disaster, but in the way they respond to the disaster!

- **What lessons can you learn from these survivors that you might cultivate to master any crisis in your own life?**

Each story is unique and there is no right or wrong way for dealing with these crises – or any life crisis. The people in this book who have survived and thrived share some common qualities – ones that we may cultivate to master any crisis. Twelve common qualities or themes evolved from these stories:

- Struggling, confronting, and ultimately integrating painful thoughts and emotions
- Adjusting future expectations to fit the new reality and focusing on the important things in life
- Calling on inner strength, core beliefs, and values

- Staying in control and not falling apart
- Moving forward with strength gained from past experiences and prior adversity
- Grappling with fundamental existential questions through religion and spirituality
- Staying healthy and focusing on body image
- Finding the silver lining and creatively giving back—moving forward with action
- Staying connected and seeking outside resources to help survive rough times
- Telling their stories and making sense of their lives
- Being hopeful, optimistic, and celebrating life
- Discovering who they are

- **Which of these resonate with how you might address adversity in your life?**

For parents, there is no greater grief than losing a child; but when a child dies suddenly as the result of a terrorist attack or in the service of one's country, it is the parent's worst nightmare. There is no time to prepare for the worst or somehow make their farewells. The parents in *Living Beyond Terrorism* may have had a very difficult time in finding closure; yet some have demonstrated incredible resilience, strength, and determination. They have turned their grief into doing good for others, turning the most negative episode in their lives into something infinitely positive. They have responded to pain and suffering by building, growing, making meaning out of suffering, and choosing life. They have learned how to “live next to” and “move forward with” their feelings of grief, pain, and helplessness

To fill the big holes in their hearts created by their losses, these parents have channeled their grief, pain, anger, and helplessness into life-affirming activities of remembrance, education, and activism, honoring the memories of their beloved children and truly making a difference in their lives and the lives of others. They have found meaning in their suffering by creating foundations to help other families and by speaking out to educate others and build public awareness about the impact of terrorism. Through these acts of healing others, over time, these bereaved parents heal their own hearts and souls, and leave a legacy for future generations.

- **What lessons can you learn from these bereaved family members and how they have responded to their grief and pain?**

Many of the bereaved family members echoed similar experiences: “Some people see me in the street and go to the other side. And this is the biggest humiliation that you can get. They don't know how to behave or how to make contact. I think in a country like Israel that has seen so many *piguim* [terror attacks] and so much pain and with soldiers in the army, people have to know how to react.”

- **What are some of the strategies that the bereaved families in the book used to educate people on how to behave with survivors and bereaved family members and how might you apply these in your own lives?**

Commemoration, the creation of memorials, can be a significant part of the bereavement process as it continues the commitment to a loved one after his or her death in a world that has been challenged by loss. Furthermore, commemoration helps us to bear witness and leave a legacy so

that the victims and the survivors will not be forgotten. As so eloquently expressed by Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor, Nobel Poet Laureate, and Founding Chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: “Not only are we responsible for the memories of the dead, we are also responsible for what we are doing with those memories.” And as engraved in stone at the Museum’s entrance – “For the dead and the living we must bear witness.”

In Israel, the commemoration process is known as *hantzacha*, which means perpetuation or immortalization, and has been described as remembering. It may be spontaneous, as in the placing of flowers, pictures, and memorial candles at the site of a terrorist attack, or in the handwritten messages of love and remembrance painted on nearby stone walls. Later, the family and friends of the person who died may design and fund private commemoration at the place of the attack, in schools or playgrounds, on the internet, in the synagogues, and elsewhere, allowing people who never met the fallen to know something about them and, more importantly, to remember them. Finally, public municipal and state commemoration allows the society as a whole to mourn and remember, for example at the national cemetery at Mount Herzl in Jerusalem on Yom Hazikaron (Israel’s national memorial day for the fallen soldiers and the victims of terror).

- **What practices do you or might you follow to commemorate the loss of your loved ones, as well as those who have fallen protecting the Jewish homeland?**

Although terror disrupts social and economic societal functions, there is evidence that the continuous threat of terror on Israeli civilians may have only marginal impact because individuals, families, and larger social groups have adapted their preparedness behaviors so as to minimize its impact. Although suffering cannot be prevented entirely, practically, preparedness means strengthening people’s knowledge of emergency procedures, the expected reactions in themselves and in their families, and ways to help themselves and others, as well as increased emphasis in schools, hospitals, and emergency rooms.

- **Do you have a preparedness plan for your family or community in case of an emergency or disaster, and, more broadly, for building resilience?**

Dr. Konvisser has selected a narrative approach to her research, giving voice to the individual “stories” – oral histories or testimonies - as a way to humanize the people whose lives have been destroyed, to help them heal, as a gift to them and their families, and as a legacy for others to remember and learn from their experiences.

- **What is your favorite selection from the book and why?**
- **Is *Living Beyond Terrorism* a book you would recommend, why, and to whom?**

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