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Why the life and death of lone soldier Michael Levin still resonates, a decade after the war

'If anything happens to me, I just want to say that I love you and miss you and wish you all the best,' Levin said in a voicemail, just before something happened to him

By **JUDAH ARI GROSS** 15 August 2016, 11:25 pm



Michael Levin receives a package of Tastykakes, soon after he was drafted into the IDF, on March 20, 2005. (Tami Gross)

On the night before Staff Sgt. Michael Levin was killed, I was sitting at his family's kitchen table, eating lasagna made by his mother Harriet.

That night, there was a rally at the nearby Shir Ami Conservative synagogue in support of Israel, during what would later become known as the Second Lebanon War.

At the rally, Harriet was called up on stage, publicly honored for having a son in the Israel Defense Forces, risking his life to protect Israel's northern communities.

I didn't know Michael very well. He was a few years older than me, more my sisters' age than mine. But I knew his family. His sister Elisa was a staff member for the youth group I was active in at the time. And his mother Harriet was my mother's friend and coworker, their desks right next to each other.

So when my mother came to visit me during the semester I spent in Israel in 2005, she offered to bring Michael a special treat from home: Tastykakes.

And when there was an Israel rally at a synagogue near the Levins' house, Harriet offered to let me eat dinner at their house and then drive me to the event.



Dozens gather at

Jerusalem's Mt. Herzl military cemetery for the tenth anniversary of Michael Levin's death on August 11, 2016. (Judah Ari Gross/Times of Israel)

I was sitting at their kitchen table, mouth full of pasta, when Michael's twin sister Dara came down from her bedroom, holding her cellphone.

Michael had left her a voicemail, she told us, saying he was going into Lebanon.

“If anything happens to me, I just want to say that I love you and miss you and wish you all the best,” he said in the voicemail, just before something happened to him.

On August 1, Michael, who had delighted his family with a surprise visit the month before, was killed, shot in the head by a Hezbollah sniper during a battle in the Lebanese village of Ayta ash-Shab.

Harriet says Michael’s death was “*bashert*” — destined, in Yiddish — and I’m inclined to agree.

Michael’s shrine

When Michael died, I was a teenage Zionist, writing woefully incoherent articles in my high school newspaper about the disengagement from Gaza and dreaming of the day when I could move to Israel.

Ten years later, I’m a card-carrying Israeli and I’m still writing articles — hopefully more cogent ones — so on Thursday afternoon, I sat down with

Harriet and Mark Levin at the Harmony Hotel in Jerusalem to try to figure out why Michael's story resonates so deeply with people.



Michael Levin's grave at Jerusalem's Mt. Herzl military cemetery on

August 11, 2016. (Judah Ari Gross/Times of Israel)

Later that evening, dozens of people would gather at Michael's grave on Jerusalem's Mt. Herzl military cemetery.

In the decade since his death, the grave has become something of shrine for Birthright trips and IDF soldiers.

It's covered in rocks and Philadelphia sports memorabilia, in flowers, water bottles and every IDF unit tag imaginable, in hats, cards, lanyards, yarmulkes, drawings, wristbands, flags, bandannas, pins, medals and cotton plants.

Mark says it looks “like a thrift shop.”

Some of these totems have meaning — for example, cotton doesn’t change once it reaches maturity so it’s supposed to represent Michael’s life cut short — but the rest are mysteries.

In addition to the friends and family, the ceremony on Thursday night would be attended by IDF Chief Rabbi Brig. Gen. Rafi Peretz, Jerusalem Chief Rabbi Aryeh Stern and Col. Yaki Dolef, who took over Michael’s unit, the Paratroopers’ 890th Battalion, in 2007 and now commands the Northern Gaza Brigade.

Afterward, the mourners would head to the dedication ceremony of the Michael Levin Lone Soldiers Center’s newest location on 51 Jaffa Road in downtown Jerusalem.

Within Israel, most of the people who know about Michael know about him through the center, which provides both physical and emotional support for the IDF’s lone soldiers (including this one, once upon a time).

Historically, this meant soldiers from foreign countries who moved to Israel by themselves, but increasingly it means native-born Israelis who are no longer supported by their parents, especially soldiers coming from

ultra-Orthodox communities, who are disowned by their families for joining the IDF.

Michael was not the first lone soldier to die for Israel, nor was he the last, but he has become the most famous.



Michael Levin's grave at Jerusalem's

Mt. Herzl military cemetery on August 11, 2016. (Judah Ari Gross/Times of Israel)

‘A Hero in Heaven’

In the days and weeks after Michael's death, his story spread like wildfire.

Newspapers, websites, television stations in Israel and the United States featured articles about Michael, this idealistic 22-year-old who gave up his life defending his homeland.

Four months after his death, Sally Mitlas, a friend of Harriet's who ran a film productions company, completed a documentary about Michael, "A Hero in Heaven."

The film was first released at the United Synagogue Youth's international convention in December 2006. Since then, "over 1,700 copies of the movie have been sent to youth groups, synagogues and organizations around the world," Mark says.

It now plays on Israeli television every year on Memorial Day.

A bootleg copy of the full 40-minute documentary on YouTube, as well as shorter variations of it, have each garnered tens of thousands of views.

Mark estimates that, by now, millions of Jews have heard Michael's story.

But why?

Why did Michael's story catch? Why can nearly every Birthright participant tell you about Michael Levin, yet far fewer have even heard of Lt. Alex Singer, originally from White Plains, NY, who died in Lebanon in 1987?



Staff Sgt. Jordan Bensemhoun, 22-years-old, killed in action during

Operation Protective Edge. (IDF)

In 2014, three foreign-born lone IDF soldiers were killed during the Gaza war: Staff Sgt. Nissim Sean Carmeli, Staff Sgt. Jordan Bensemhoun and Sgt. Max Steinberg. Yet during the dedication ceremony for Jerusalem's lone soldier center, Deputy Minister in Charge of Public Diplomacy Michael Oren — perhaps the second most famous lone soldier in Israel's history — could only recall two of them.

To his credit, Oren did remember Sgt. Shlomo Rindenow, born and raised in New Jersey, who died in a weapons malfunction last month and has all but faded into a distant memory in both Israeli and American media.

But Michael remains.

Why Michael?

To his father Mark, Michael's story resonates because he was a "paradigm" of the Israeli spirit.

Much like Israel, Mark says, Michael was tiny — "118 pounds, after he'd eaten" — but on his 5-foot, 6-inch frame, he carried the gumption and troublemaking capabilities of 10 men, Harriet adds.



Michael Levin (Lone Soldier Center)

No summer at Camp Ramah in the Poconos was complete without a conversation with the director about something Michael had done, Harriet says.

That mischievous spirit not only got him into trouble, but allegedly into the army as well. According to the apocryphal story, Michael joined the IDF by literally breaking into the induction center, climbing into a bathroom window from a dumpster next to the building after the guard at the entrance turned him away.

When Michael got permission to travel to the States in July 2006, he could have let his family know ahead of time or surprised them by simply bursting in through the door (as many foreign-born IDF soldiers do, often posting videos of the emotional reunion on Facebook). But instead, he asked Dara to help him hide in a box outside their front door so he could pop out and spook his parents when they came home from work — a double surprise.

But in addition to the goofball spirit, Michael had an unwavering devotion to Israel, Harriet says.



Michael Levin (Lone Soldier Center)

On July 18, 2006, after the news emerged that Israel was engaged in a war on the northern border, the family drove Michael to JFK Airport ahead of schedule because he felt he had to rejoin his unit.

“We knew he was going back to a war zone to do what he had to do,” Mark says.

Two weeks later, the newly bereaved Levins traveled back to that same airport so they could fly to Israel and bury their son on Jerusalem’s Mt.

Herzl military cemetery on the Ninth of Av, a traditional day of mourning and fasting that commemorates the destruction of the two Jewish Temples.

Mark and Harriet, concerned there wouldn't be 10 people in attendance for them to say the mourner's kaddish prayer, were overwhelmed when thousands arrived for Michael's funeral.

As I spoke with Michael's parents, hazarding guesses as to why his death struck a chord with people while other fallen soldiers' stories didn't, it became clear that there wasn't an obvious, comprehensive answer.

But to Mark and Harriet, it doesn't seem to matter why Michael's story became so famous, nor do they regret having their personal tragedy becoming a public matter. Through it, they've been able to bring attention and support to something their son cared about — lone soldiers.



IDF lone soldiers from the US enjoy a Thanksgiving dinner on November 26, 2015. (Simona Weinglass/Times of Israel)

Before Michael Levin died, the concept of the “lone soldier” was barely known in Israel, including within the IDF. Today, the rules and benefits for this special population are more standardized — though they are still occasionally subjected to the whims of individual commanders — and officers-in-training are specifically taught how to deal with lone soldiers.

As the number of native Israeli lone soldiers grows, their mission is becoming all the more important, Harriet says.

According to Michael Levin Lone Soldier Center National Director Josh Flaster, Israeli-born lone soldiers now make up “nearly half” of the people they help.



Illustrative photo of soldiers from Nahal Haredi, an ultra-Orthodox battalion in the Israel Defense Forces (Abir Sultan/Flash90)

Unlike their foreign-born counterparts, who, though in Israel alone, often have the emotional and financial support of their parents, many of the soldiers coming from within Israel have no such safety net, she says.

Harriet has a special connection to the soldiers coming from the ultra-Orthodox community. Fluent in Yiddish, she can speak to them in what is often their native tongue.

One such soldier was seriously injured during the 2014 Gaza war. The army called his parents, but they refused to see him and forbade his siblings from visiting as well, Harriet says.

“So someone from the [lone soldier] center went to the hospital to be with him,” she says.

I don’t know why the “legend” of Michael Levin took hold in a way that Alex Singer’s or Max Steinberg’s didn’t; I do know why it resonates with me.

It resonates with me because he was also from Philadelphia. Because he also came to Israel during high school and then again right afterwards. Because my mom brought him Tastykakes sometime after he finished basic training, but before he earned his red paratroopers' beret.

And because 10 years ago I was a teenaged wannabe Zionist, sitting in his kitchen, eating lasagna.