

## Optimism During Personal and Communal War: It's All Tough

By Julie Gillis

Today is day 228 of the war that began October 7, 2023. This week, on *Yom Hazikaron*, Israel commemorated their fallen and then moved to *Yom Haatzmaout*, Independence Day. I wrote this article when I was visiting my son in Israel. Like then, the hostages, alive and dead, are still being held in Gaza. The war continues.

With the war, life also continues. The resilience of the Israeli people will enable them to move forward with strength and inspiration to rebuild peace, safety, and trust. As life continues, children continue to be diagnosed and deal with cancer. I had a glimpse into how, even in wartime, Israelis of many cultures, creeds and religions work to heal together.

These are my thoughts.

The day is January 12, 2024. I am in Israel, visiting my son. The country is at war in Gaza and intermittently along its Northern border with Lebanon. I have been invited to observe the volunteers and employees of the Israel-based organization *Maagal Giborim* ("Heroes' Circle"), which is affiliated with Kids Kicking Cancer, a global nonprofit organization that teaches martial arts to children battling cancer and those facing other serious life challenges. Using meditation and breathing exercises, the organization's therapy techniques have been successful in decreasing the pain of pediatric patients.

The CEO of Maagal Giborim, Michele Kaplan-Green, and I enter the tower of Hadassah Medical Center in En Karem, Jerusalem. Walking into the large and bustling hospital lobby, one would never know the country is currently at war. Doctors, nurses, hospital workers, and others, their heads adorned with *hijabs*, *yarmulkas*, headscarves (and many with no head covering at all) scurry about the lobby. Whether there to work, to receive treatment, or to visit patients, people walk quickly and purposefully. While thoughts of the war, of politics, of the 132 hostages still being held in Gaza at the time must be lurking somewhere in their minds, you wouldn't know it. The people at Hadassah Hospital are busy. In the hospital, people work and battle their illnesses side-by-side. They have a common goal: to get well. Ethnicity, religion, and cultural difference don't have a place when overcoming cancer or when another serious illness is the challenge.

Kaplan-Green and I are greeted in the lobby by volunteer martial arts instructor, Elana Amminadav. Speaking in a quiet, calm tone, Elana tells me she made *aliyah* (Hebrew term commonly used to mean "immigration to Israel") from New Jersey many years ago, and now lives in Jerusalem with her family. As we chat about our backgrounds in America, Elana shyly describes herself as "a peace worker." It has been 100 days since Hamas invaded Israel, provoking a war. The topic of "peace" at that very moment seems like fairy dust, and describing oneself as a peace worker must feel like

describing oneself as the tooth fairy. Nevertheless, Elana's sincerity and quietly steadfast nature are palpable. Regardless of the chaos in Gaza, in the north of Israel or east of Jerusalem, she is centered on her goal of doing anything within her control to bring peace to the world. Peace work is who Elana is, not just something she does.

With 16 years of experience in martial arts, Elana volunteers with Kids Kicking Cancer twice a week. She and the other martial arts instructors are currently studying Arabic. Elana contends that even the basic Arabic she has mastered thus far has become significant to her work, enabling her to communicate basic concepts, like breathing techniques, to her patients. Elana talks of "breathing in the light" and "breathing out the darkness," which is based on the work of Rabbi Elimelech Goldberg ("Rabbi G."), founder and global director of Kids Kicking Cancer. Breathing principles are foundational to the martial arts system.

The coaches of Maagal Giborim/Kids Kicking Cancer Israel work with adults and children who are navigating significant challenges from trauma, stress, and anxiety. According to Kaplan-Green, "the specially trained martial arts coaches use our Power-Peace-Purpose Toolkit to teach their *heroes* to manage, overcome, and move beyond their challenges. Based on breathing, guided imagery, and group discussion techniques rooted in traditional martial arts, the Toolkit gives our heroes the opportunity to take control of their challenges and to teach others to do the same. Our core populations include sick kids, youth at risk and their families, wounded soldiers, and medical/paramedical teams. Our goal is to strengthen and grow the wider circle to encompass the public, who are dealing with their own challenges. We learn from the examples of children dealing with cancer. The young heroes become teachers."

Elana and I take the elevator to the Pediatric Oncology Hematology Unit lounge. Elana and the head nurse (with whom Elana has built a strong working relationship), together review the schedule of children expected to be at the hospital that day. Our first patient of the day is a boy about seven or eight years old with only a few wisps of hair remaining. Elana smiles at him and he smiles back. She teaches him deep breathing exercises and martial arts movements. Elana ends the session with *shukran* ("thank you" in Arabic), as they look directly and kindly into each other's eyes and bow. She rewards him with stickers for his efforts.

As we walk the floor of the ward, Elana observes that in addition to Maagal Giborim with its breathing and movement techniques, other Hadassah Hospital volunteers also visit children at the hospital. For example, one volunteer comes to play music, and another brings virtual reality headsets.

Elana walks the floor of the ward looking for any patients available to work with her, leaving no stone unturned. We come across several children who do not feel well enough that day for movement exercises. "The children are sometimes too tired to work with me. Some days they don't want to do anything. I teach their parents the exercises, so they can help their kids later."

We walk into another area of the hospital where we find a *haredi* (ultra-orthodox) family - mother, father, and their toddler boy, who is fixated on his iPad. The mother and father sit quietly while the boy receives intravenous treatment. Elana asks the parents if the boy is up to some exercises. Hesitant, skeptical, and private, the father barely makes eye contact with us at first. Yet it's difficult to resist Elana's kindness and purpose. The mother encourages the boy to give it a try and watches attentively as Elana engages her son. After a few moments, the mother says: "I think this is really good for him." Watching his son actively engaged in movement exercises, the father warms up to us, even providing Elana the boy's treatment schedule, so she can look for him during her next round at the hospital.

Reflecting the composition of the hospital staff and of Israeli society itself, the children treated at Hadassah, and those receiving visits from Maagal Giborim, are from a wide range of social, religious, and ethnic groups, including ultraorthodox, modern orthodox, and secular Jews, as well as Christians, Israeli Arabs, and Palestinian Muslims.

Elana observes that children facing illness, understandably, tend to exude a high degree of tension and anxiety. For example, she recently worked with a boy who simply wanted to punch. One of her patients had constant headaches, and feared he would be in pain the rest of his life. Other children wonder what will happen when they go back to school after long periods of illness and treatment. While these feelings would be daunting and difficult for anyone to process, they are especially difficult for children.

Elana relies on fundamental martial arts principles, like breathing, mind-body connection, movement, and visualization to help her patients dispel their tension and alleviate pain. "Moving our bodies helps us adjust the circumstances inside and outside ourselves." Offering techniques to work through not only physical pain, but also fatigue, anxiety, and anger, Elana encourages patients to *visualize* and *describe* their pain, fears, and anxiety.

According to Elana, what makes her approach unique is that it gives children *words* to describe their feelings, whereas most programs use *distraction* methods. "If you are struggling with something that is long-term, distraction is just a means of pushing it away temporarily. I invite my patients to instead go into the pain and *describe* it. What color is it? What sound does it make? Does it have a smell? Focusing on the pain lowers the anxiety associated with it, because you're not focused on getting rid of it. Violence, anger, and aggression are harder than fear, sadness, and grief. Humans readily jump into anger and fight back. It's easier to seek revenge than to say: 'I feel broken and sad.'"

Elana candidly acknowledges that although she has a proclivity to working with adults, she feels strongly that her work with Kids Kicking Cancer is important in combatting the hopelessness felt by terminally ill children and their families. "Working with children seems to make a difference. For a few minutes, the kids smile or forget what is making them feel so badly."

Elana believes her work is having a positive impact, however small, on the broader regional conflict. “Peace comes on an individual level. Lasting change comes when people become less afraid and more capable of feeling gratitude, which in turn enables people to become better neighbors. Any work that allows people to interact with their feelings is important work. If an individual does not feel optimistic at that moment, it’s okay. The goal is to develop skills that enable one to gain a feeling of control, to find a calm and peaceful way to handle a challenging situation, whether that situation is caused by external factors, or by an illness like cancer.” The heroes and instructors of Maagal Giborim/Kids Kicking Cancer aim to teach the world to breathe in the light and breathe out the darkness, to gain control over pain, and to face life’s challenges with calmness and serenity.



The **Breath Brake™** is an important skill that helps to reduce pain and stress hormones. Let your child ‘remind you’ of this skill 2-3 times each day.

**It takes less than a minute...**

1. Sit in a relaxed position.
2. Start with your hands on your lap, cupped, facing upward
3. Slowly breathe in through your nose (if you can), let your hands rise, stretch the top of your head toward the sky and imagine you are filling your body with LIGHT.
4. When your hands reach your upper chest and your body is almost full, sip one more quick breath.
5. Hold your breath as you turn your hands over and count 1...2...3...
6. As you blow out through your mouth, imagine you are blowing out a DARK cloud. Let your body relax as you lower your hands.
7. As your hands approach the starting point, push out a breath downward and then blow out once more, like you are blowing out a candle.



Julie lives in New Orleans with her family. She is a business analyst for a manufacturing company. Julie believes that an individual's power is based on their willingness and ability to help others succeed.