

JULY 24, 2009

THE JERUSALEM POST
UPFRONT

No ordinary mitzva



**ZAKA volunteers,
in their yellow vests,
have been working
death scenes
for two decades.**

**Not everyone
could do their job,
and deep religious belief isn't always enough
to protect them from the grisliest sights imaginable**



“These are the photos from our road trips,” Dano Montokovitch says ironically. He’s flipping through the album in his living room, making sure his son, sitting at the computer, isn’t looking. One photo shows a woman’s severed head lying on the floor of a destroyed restaurant – a suicide bombing. Another shows a young man lying dead in a bathtub after hanging himself. Another shows a blood-drenched wall and carpet. “A garage owner got deep into debt and put a grenade in his mouth,” explains Montokovitch. “Can you handle really terrible pictures? I’ve got one that shows his face in pieces.”

This is therapy for him – the black humor, the grim satisfaction over memories of especially trying cases, the amazement and admiration he elicits in an outsider. Montokovitch, 40, lives with his family in a haredi neighborhood of Jerusalem and manages the medical supplies division for the Ezer Mitzion charity, but the first call on his time belongs to ZAKA.

ZAKA, an English transliteration of the Hebrew acronym for “Disaster Victims Identification,” is the volunteer organization of haredi men who collect the remains of the dead for burial. For the 1,500 volunteers,

that means all the remains – every bit of flesh, every drop of blood, no matter how many hours it takes, no matter where they have to climb or crawl.

Montokovitch, one of the organization’s top men in Jerusalem, has been with it from the beginning in 1989. Since then his beeper has been on 24 hours a day, except when he’s on vacation overseas with his family, which he tries to do a couple of times a year to get away from this all-consuming duty. “I’ve gone out on hundreds of calls, at least,” he says. “When I get a call, I go. My wife doesn’t ask any questions.”

ZAKA became famous here and among haredim worldwide during the second intifada, when the bearded volunteers in their yellow reflector vests became a visual marker of bus bombings and other major terror attacks that were filling TV screens. However, the volunteers don’t show up only for terror attacks; they are on the scene of every unnatural death – fatal accidents, murders and suicides. They also collect the last remains of people who were alone in the world and whose corpses weren’t discovered for quite a while – an unimaginably grisly task.

“Once we got a call about a corpse that was discovered in an apartment. The body was bloated; maggots were eating it; there were flies buzzing around; the smell was overpowering,” recalls ZAKA chairman Yehuda Meshi-Zahav, the former haredi riot organizer whose second career with ZAKA has won him newfound “consensus”

popularity. “I was there with a young volunteer who didn’t have much experience, and I could see he was having a hard time. Tissue had leaked from the corpse onto the floor; we were walking around in it. Finally we went to move the body, and it exploded all over us. I could see the other volunteer was about to faint, so, by instinct, I took his hands and we started dancing around the body, singing praises to God. Then we were able to go on with our work.”

“When I got home,” he recalls, “I took a bath in Lysol for four hours.”

THE MEN of ZAKA do what seems to be the hardest job in the world. Many of the deaths they handle are extremely rough on their psyches, especially those of children. “I don’t think the experience has changed me for the better,” says Montokovitch. “I don’t get so excited about things anymore, good or bad. I don’t want my children to volunteer in ZAKA. I’ve done enough.”

This emotional flatness Montokovitch alludes to is fairly common among ZAKA veterans. The time, effort and preoccupation that go into their work obviously plays hell with their families. A few volunteers suffer long-term symptoms such as flashbacks and nightmares. After a major event like a terror attack they receive group psychological counseling and some require individual treatment.

“Anybody in ZAKA who tells you it doesn’t do any-

IN THE FACE OF TRAUMA

• By **LARRY DERFNER** | Photos by **Jonathan Bloom**

***This story contains graphic descriptions of death scenes**

ZAKA, a haredi organization dedicated to honoring the dead by allowing them to be buried as whole as possible, gained public renown during the second intifada. Bombings have become thankfully rare, but deaths – accidental and otherwise – have not. ZAKA's work continues, and the horrors its volunteers witness take no small toll on the men and their families



Avraham Gelbman



thing to him is lying," says Yossi Landau, a haredi father of 10 who, like Montokovitch, has spent half of his 40-year life as a volunteer. I talked to him by phone after driving to see about a man found dead in a moshav field near the alley in Lod known as drug dealers' row. Landau and two volunteers from Kfar Chabad had just left.

The corpse was stiff, bloated, the right arm eaten to the bone by animals. Policemen and ambulance crews were coming and going while little Arab kids, disregarding the police cordon, went up close for a look, holding their noses.

"The body was found by a security guard at the moshav, who called the police, who called ZAKA," said Landau. There were no remains to collect aside from the corpse, and they couldn't bag the corpse for burial until a Magen David Adom doctor showed up to pronounce death, so, since they were the first on the scene, they busied themselves trying to identify the corpse.

"We turned him over and saw that his face had been eaten away, too," said Landau. "We found his ID card in his pocket – a Russian guy, about 47, from Jerusalem. We also found a bag with syringes in it. The police said he had a lot of prior convictions. Evidently he was a drug addict who'd bought drugs in the alley, went into the fields to get high and overdosed."

Police decided that since the deceased had been a drug addict, the volunteers might contract some disease if they handled the corpse, so after an hour

and a half they sent the ZAKA men home and called a private ambulance attendant to come bag the corpse.

Landau said the gruesome-looking stiff was "nothing" compared to some of the deaths he's seen. Owner of a

'Anybody in ZAKA who tells you it doesn't do anything to him is lying'

– Volunteer Yossi Landau

freight-forwarding company with a branch in New York, he was doing business in a 36th-floor office in the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, when the first plane hit. "I was trying to get people out when the floor collapsed," he recalled. "When we landed there were dead bodies all around, like bugs. An FBI agent and I spent seven hours crawling out of the rubble."

Landau's years in ZAKA prior to 9/11 helped him weather the psychological effects. But a fatal traffic accident he handled as a volunteer a couple years ago wounded him even more deeply, sending him to psychologists for months afterward.

"It was Purim eve, and a mother and her two children were killed when their car hit a bus. The boy in the back seat looked the same age as my son, and he was wearing a policeman's uniform just like my son was wearing that day. I tried to pull the kid out of the seat and his brains just spilled out on me. In that moment I saw my son in front of eyes and I fainted."

Two hours later a couple of hundred guests came to his house for Purim. "Everyone was singing and dancing, they didn't know what I'd been through. After everybody left, the volunteers who'd been with me, about 10 of them, sat up with me talking about it and crying until five in the morning."

LANDAU HAS also been through the single most traumatic experience a ZAKA volunteer can endure – collecting the remains of a person he knew. "I had a friend who was hit by a train; he ended up in about 15 pieces. It was a summer day and I worked for hours. I ended up in the hospital with third-degree burns on my back from the sun." Nevertheless, Landau is still attached to his ZAKA beeper, still going out day and night to collect the remains of the dead. >



ZAKA chairman Yehuda Meshi-Zahav

> Faith...

Why do they do it? It's a mitzva, they all say – to show respect for the dead by making it possible for them to be buried as whole as possible. Their work comforts the families, they add, even nonreligious ones. And it's no ordinary mitzva they perform. "I'm doing something not many people can do," says Montokovitch, "so it's really an opportunity to contribute. A privilege. A duty. I'm able to do it, so I must do it. If I don't, it's a crime."

Being able to do such a demanding job also gives them tremendous self-esteem. They're a kind of "Say-eret Matkal," an elite commando unit, within the otherwise sedentary haredi world, notes clinical psychologist Dr. Rony Berger, an expert in trauma treatment and emergency preparedness who's counseled ZAKA volunteers for several years. They've won the respect of secular Israel, which ordinarily has little good to say about haredim.

Their own community, though, is ambivalent toward them. "They have high status, but there's also an element of wariness toward them, as if the 'angel of death' hovers around them," says Berger, director of community services for NATAL – Israel Trauma Center for Victims of War and Terror.

Chaim Mackler, a ZAKA volunteer in Beersheba and former IDF mental health officer, agrees that many haredim see the volunteers as strange birds, but adds that haredi youth commonly see them as heroes. "During the intifada," he says, "one of the most popular Purim costumes for haredi kids was the ZAKA volunteer with the yellow vest."

Asked to describe the profile of a volunteer, Montokovitch replied: "Somebody who's spontaneous, who's always ready to go, day or night. Like a combat soldier."

These men like action – they get excited when the beeper goes off and they've got an address to race off to. Many if not most are also MDA ambulance medics. Berger speculates that ZAKA volunteers fall into that "10 to 15 percent of the general population that responds positively to high-stress situations, that gets a rush from it, that can, in a way, become addicted to it."

OF ALL the tragedies ZAKA has attended to, the worst by



'I could see the other volunteer was about to faint, so, by instinct, I took his hands and we started dancing around the body, singing praises to God. Then we were able to go on with our work'

– ZAKA chairman Yehuda Meshi-Zahav, recalling a particularly difficult incident

far, says Meshi-Zahav, was the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004. "Before that the most dead bodies we'd ever dealt with at one time was 34, I think. This was 300,000. The human mind just can't absorb it. Imagine driving from Tel Aviv to Haifa and there are tens of thousands of blackened corpses lining the highway. That's what we saw," says Meshi-Zahav, 50, sitting in ZAKA's nerve center on the second floor of an old building near Jerusalem's Central Bus Station.

Most of what the volunteers did during the tsunami was identify the dead – the 30 deceased Jews along with hundreds of gentiles.

"All the bodies looked the same – black, bloated, completely unrecognizable," he continues. To identify a dead pregnant woman, ZAKA volunteers had to perform a cesarean section on her to extract DNA from the dead fetus. To identify a dead boy, they had to go through hundreds of children's corpses until they found one wearing a swimsuit like his, then spend hours sifting through muddy bags of recovered teeth until they found the filling that matched his. "The families were there waiting for the news. When we told them we'd identified their loved ones among the dead, they hugged us," recalls Meshi-Zahav.

One of the ZAKA volunteers working the tsunami "ended up sitting awake one night talking incoherently," he adds. "He hasn't really recovered since."

A few days before our interview, Mackler, a social worker and Chabad follower from the US, got a call from the wife of a ZAKA volunteer who said her husband had lost his appetite and become very tense in the two months since handling an especially difficult death. "I told her to get him to see me for a referral to a psychologist. From the way it sounded, the man needs help."

Mackler, 64, trains ZAKA volunteers to look out for one another's mental health – to notice when a colleague is acting strangely and make sure he gets psychological help. He gives the example, well-known within ZAKA circles, of a volunteer who taught school in civilian life and one day took his class on a field trip to a cemetery.

Another volunteer who had worked the March 2002 bombing of the "children's bus" in Jerusalem found that six years later, while working the terror attack at Yeshivat Mercaz Harav, he became immobilized and couldn't function. "He was having flashbacks from the bus bombing," says Mackler. >





Avraham Kop
(in vest)



Dano Montokovitch

> Faith...

A few days after the Mercuz Harav massacre, Mackler held a “debriefing” for the roughly 40 ZAKA volunteers who’d attended the bloody aftermath. “We sat around in a circle and everyone talked about what he saw, what he did, how he felt. That was a particularly painful incident. The men identified very, very strongly with the victims. It was like those boys were their sons. There were volunteers who left the scene in the middle of their work; they identified so strongly with the victims that they couldn’t function.”

MACKLER ALSO conducted a debriefing for about 10 volunteers who went to the Chabad House in Mumbai after the massive terror attack last November. “Mumbai was a very, very unique situation. The volunteers were in fear for their own lives because Chabad House was still filled with explosives when they went in to work – the



police hadn’t cleared out all the bombs that the terrorists had left, they were letting people come in, it was very dangerous. After they finished, the volunteers sat on the floor and sang and cried.”

For all they go through, ZAKA volunteers have shown remarkable psychological resilience. The exact “washout” rate isn’t known, but everyone interviewed said it was extremely low. “If you can’t handle this work,

you’ll find out on your first call,” notes Montokovitch, adding that most people come to ZAKA after serving as volunteer ambulance medics, so they’ve already had a lot of exposure to death.

Recently there was a suicide in the woods outside a centrally located town – a young man had hanged himself from a tree in a badly littered clearing where teenagers came to smoke drugs. The body was discovered by a hiker, and Avraham Gelbman, a haredi resident of the town and 15-year MDA medic and ZAKA veteran, was the first on the scene. Showing us a photo of the victim on his cellphone, Gelbman, 38, described the incident in the spare, authoritative tone of a policeman. With no remains other than the corpse, there was little for him and another ZAKA volunteer to do besides bag the corpse and give it over for burial.

With a clear note of pride in his voice, he recalled some of the hardest cases he’s worked on – the recent car crash near Beit Shemesh in which six people were killed, a suicide victim found weeks later in his home inundated with worms, a Jerusalem terror bombing in which Gelbman climbed to the top of a gas station sign to see if there were any remains up there. “It was like three stories high. I didn’t know how to climb up, but I found a way. There were two fingers up there. It was like 100 meters



away from the bomb. You have no idea of the impact of those things. You have to look everywhere."

Soon Gelman, a food salesman in civilian life, got another message on his beeper: The mother of the young suicide victim had just been informed of his death, and fainted – MDA medics were needed at the family's home. Hurrying to his car, Gelman took off his yellow ZAKA reflector vest, opened the trunk, took out his orange MDA reflector vest and drove off.

IN BRITAIN, Mackler notes, a study was conducted of the psychological effects on "first responders" to disasters, and it found that those with strong religious faith were best able to recover from the initial shock and stress.

Berger, who has worked with first responders and trauma victims at any number of major disasters all over the world, and who works with a wide range of emergency crews in Israel, says ZAKA volunteers show unusual strength in the face of trauma.

During the second intifada, he and psychologist Dr. Zahava Solomon, an expert in combat stress, studied 87 ZAKA volunteers and found that only two suffered long-term post-traumatic symptoms. "Several possible explanations for the resilience of the subjects are altruistic and religious rewards, respect and admiration from society and a tendency for sensation-seeking," the researchers wrote.

Berger suggests another reason why ZAKA volunteers seem to be tougher over the long haul than other people who deal with death for a living, such as police bomb squad members. "This is a self-selected group," he says. "They volunteer for this work, they're not under orders, they don't do it for a living. They know what they're getting into and choose to do it anyway because they get something very important in return." ■

THE 2008 NUMBERS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES



YOUR SUPPORT WILL ENSURE THAT THEIR SACRED WORK CONTINUES



5308 13 AV. # 121 Brooklyn N.Y. 11219 USA
Tel. 1917.676.6903 info@zaka-usa.org www.zaka-usa.org



ZAKA USA

1303 53rd St. #170
Brooklyn N.Y. 11219
718-676-0039