

THINKING things through



Racheli Fraenkel shares her unique perspective on the very personal events that touched and united us as a nation

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN

PEOPLE OFTEN LOOK UPON THOSE WHO ARE RELIGIOUSLY observant as simpletons, mindless zombies, who “drank the Kool-Aid”, were brainwashed, or, perhaps even worse, simply flipped their thinking caps to “off”. The irony is that, at least when it comes to Judaism and particularly Torah observance, just the opposite is true: a person’s mind has to be switched on at all times. Our Sages teach that the only way for a person to be pious is to study,

as one cannot be scrupulous in walking in Hashem’s ways and performing his mitzvos if he doesn’t actually know and clearly understand what’s required of him in any given situation, especially how to decide the right course of action when competing issues come into play. Various authorities even maintain that secular studies (at least in terms of science and math) are essential prerequisites for Torah study.

What came through over-and-over again in my conversation with Racheli Fraenkel was her thoughtful approach to life, not mindfulness, but mind fullness – processing events and emotions slowly, deliberately, and dispassionately through her mind’s eye. Admittedly, it wasn’t entirely surprising, as after all, this was the woman who a little over a month after burying her beloved son Naftali, a”h, sat down with television host Sean Hannity and told him in one and the same breath, “We’ve suffered a terrible tragedy and that’s the personal issue, but on a national level, it might have saved dozens of lives”, referring to the subsequent discovery of the Palestinian terror tunnels that resulted from Operation Brother’s Keeper, launched as a search and rescue

operation to find her son and the other kidnapped boys, Gilad Shaer, a”h, and Eyal Yifrah, a”h. It’s not uncommon for Jews to process world events through the lens of: “Is it good for the Jews?” But to witness someone answering that question, while effortlessly pivoting between such an incredibly painful, personal perspective still so raw with emotion over such a profound loss, and a collective, national Jewish perspective regarding how we as a people may have gained from it, is nothing less than remarkable. It’s this constant presence of mind, the ability to take a step back from an emotionally overwhelming situation, to take control of her emotions, and see and process things rationally that sets Racheli apart. She’s quick to downplay things, however, and claim that there’s nothing special about her, stressing that she is not unique and that, in Israel, many people react in this way to such things.

“I was once speaking to a group of girls and my sisters were there because we hap-

Racheli Fraenkel in action.



pened to have been together for Shabbat and they said, ‘Okay, let’s hear your talk!’ And someone asked me: How do you prepare yourself for dealing with stuff when it comes, and I said, ‘You know...I’m nothing special and you just deal with stuff as it

comes.’ And when we were walking out, one of my sisters told me, ‘You know, you’re right, you’re really nothing special, but Aba and Ima, they are special!’ And thinking of my parents, they’re so optimistic and full of life, I can’t point to anything



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“I DON’T NEED THE WORLD TO REMEMBER MY SON. IT’S VERY IMPORTANT FOR ME THAT HE STAYS ALIVE WITHIN FAMILY AND FRIENDS WHO KNEW HIM. I WOULD LIKE US, AS A PEOPLE, TO REMEMBER WHO WE WERE AT THAT TIME, TO REMEMBER WHAT WE ARE CAPABLE OF AND WHAT WE CAN STRIVE FOR; IF THAT COMES WITH THE NAMES OF THE BOYS ATTACHED, THEN THERE’S A SPECIAL SENSE TO IT.”

specific – things that were said or the way that we were brought up – but the combination of both of them probably accounts for the presence [of mind] that we get.” She emphasises the incredible support of her family and community for helping her to get through such a difficult time, sharing as well the mental refrain that saved her from breaking down during the most challenging moments, “I just kept telling myself, ‘You can always fall apart later,’” and that in itself – knowing that she could break down if, and when, she needed to – was its own comfort.

It was their exceptional mental control that helped all of the parents get through the seemingly endless days of not knowing what was and would be with their children. “There were so many dark places to go to and to think about. Are the boys being fed? Are they together? Are they going insane? Are they dead? When I would go to such dark places, all of my energy would be drained in a second – it was like touching electricity. I learned very quickly to control where my thoughts went. We once discussed it, the six of us (referring to her husband, Avi, and the parents of Gilad and Eyal), and we were all quite surprised to learn how much control we have over where our thoughts go. It doesn’t mean suppressing emotions because eventually you deal with everything – but you also don’t have to dwell on the places that aren’t useful for you.”

Recognising her own limitations was one of the greatest lessons and comforts for Racheli. “I think one of the domi-

nant things – in a positive way – [that I learned from the experience] was a sense of vulnerability, fragility, and exposure, getting some of our protections, the padding around us, peeled off. In a world of faith, to me it’s about totally being dependent, about understanding that the things I want more than anything are totally out of my control. Some things are in my control; my response is in my control. Over the last two years, I’ve spoken to a lot of people who went through a lot – and I learn from each of them and it definitely keeps things in perspective. People have gone through a lot worse.”

“The essence of this for me was the dependence – the things being out of my control and, in that way, it brought me closer to Hashem; it didn’t distance me.” Racheli mentions the famous poem of unknown authorship titled, “Footprints,” which tells the story of someone looking back on his life, seeing only a single set of footprints in the sand during the most difficult times, and wondering where G-d was during those moments of greatest need, only to be told by G-d that it was during those times that He carried him. “In the most difficult times, Hashem’s hashgacha (supervision) is the most obvious and brazen. I experienced it that way. By me, it was obvious; you could see it with your eyes. Anyone looking [at the situation] could see it. I know there are other versions of such an experience and sometimes it’s a matter of perspective. Like when people say, ‘It’s all a gift,’ and it’s a terrible cliché to say ‘It’s all a gift’ –

and losing someone is certainly not a gift, but there’s always the wider picture. I believe that it’s there and sometimes if you open the door to it, you experience the special grace that is in difficult situations. People are in desperate need of grace, but sometimes all of the difficulty and anger and other things you deal with block you from seeing it. And these are legitimate feelings as well – fear and anger and everything.”

Racheli herself didn’t experience anger but, listening to her, it’s obvious that this was primarily an intellectual decision, once again her intellect taking the reins on her emotions. “People feel like if they feel anger it’s some kind of heresy. To me it’s just a waste of energy. That said, it doesn’t mean that I won’t experience anger tomorrow. At this point in my life, anger and hate and the stuff that eats you from within – I don’t want to be there. I have other things to do – we all have limited energy.” She describes how, when anger starts, “You feel your energies running away. There was one point where I was coming back from somewhere, it was a Thursday night after 10pm, and I got into my car, put on the radio, and started driving, and my stomach was turning and I couldn’t understand what was going on. Then I realised that I was listening to the radio programme that can be heard in the background of the phone call that Gilad made. [The kidnappers were dressed like religious Jews and they had tuned into a religious programme in order to complete the impersonation.] So

I suddenly recognised the voice and I realised it's the same programme and then for a couple of minutes I felt all of that: 'Why? Why all of this?' I don't know if I managed to get to a state of anger, but it was very negative energy and, within seconds, I felt like I was becoming a rag doll and I felt that I had a choice not to be there, that it wasn't right for me. I'm not judgmental of anybody else's choice; it's just not the right choice for me."

Part of that cerebral view of things also means that Racheli is able to avoid the natural human tendency to blame the entire Palestinian people for the heinous actions of those few responsible for what happened. She smiles, with a twinkle of pride in her eyes, as she tells a story about her son's kindergarten teacher, who spoke to her a couple of months ago during a wave of terror. The teacher related to Racheli how, "The kids in the class were playing 'terrorist/guns' and my son was trying to explain to the other children, 'You've got this all wrong, it's not like

that...there's the bad Arabs, there's Hamas, but there's the good Arabs,' and he was trying to explain the complexity of the situation." Racheli explains, "I don't want my children growing up on hate – it doesn't create anything good in the world. On the other hand, their beloved brother was murdered by Hamas terrorists and I really believe in naming evil otherwise we cannot fight it. Turning every Arab into the villain is just not true and it's not a right choice for me, but being naïve about the situation is fooling myself."

Racheli describes her relationship with Hashem as "very dynamic", admitting that, "like most people" in such a relationship, "sometimes it feels extremely close and sometimes it feels further away and sometimes it feels almost estranged, but it's a relationship and I accept that it's part of the relationship and I hope Hashem accepts that too." Perhaps the hardest part of any relationship is staying in control of our emotions and our senses, and avoiding their phenomenally

strong pull, trying to rush us to judgment and to draw erroneous conclusions. Trusting in Hashem at all times, especially during those darkest and most painful of moments, being able to see His footsteps in the sand, His hands lovingly holding and guiding us in the profound darkness, maintaining an eye on our own personal narrative, while struggling to see how that personal narrative fits into a larger, national narrative simultaneously playing out on the very same stage in front of us – this is what it means to be a Jew. I am indebted to Racheli for, however briefly, allowing me to share the seat next to her and to experience her incredible perspective on the story that has unfolded and continues to unfold before her, and before all of us.

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