For 46 days, a refugee Kfar Aza family ‘sits shiva’ for its dead and awaits its hostages

November 21, 2023

By Jessica Steinberg

The Times of Israel

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/for-46-days-a-refugee-kfar-aza-family-sits-shiva-for-its-dead-and-awaits-its-hostages/>

For the last 46 days, Omri Almog has been living at the Dan Panorama hotel in Tel Aviv, “sitting shiva,” he said. He and his parents, Shlomit and Giora Almog, are observing the traditional seven-day mourning period — indefinitely.

They’re sitting alongside Varda and David Goldstein, the parents of his brother-in-law, Nadav Goldstein-Almog, because they all “have nowhere to go,” Almog told The Times of Israel this week.

The Kibbutz Kfar Aza homes of this extended family were all but destroyed.

Nadav, 48, and his eldest daughter Yam, 19, were killed by Hamas terrorists on October 7, in the safe room of their home in Kibbutz Kfar Aza.

Nadav’s wife, Chen Goldstein-Almog, and their other three children, Agam, 17, Gal, 11 and Tal, 9, were all taken hostage to Gaza.

The families are sitting in the Dan Panorama lobby, a drafty, high-ceilinged space on the hotel’s second floor. On this Sunday night, it was crowded with other evacuees of the war, families from Sderot and Kiryat Shmona, eating fried *sfinj,* doughnuts dripping with honey, served in foil pans by a visitor.

It took several days for the Almog and Goldstein families to find out what happened. The two sets of grandparents were out of the country on October 7, as part of a kibbutz roots trip to Bulgaria over the Sukkot holiday.

Kfar Aza, according to Almog — who lives with his wife and three kids in the north, in Moshav Sde Eliezer in the upper Galilee — became a battlefield.

“Here someone was killed, there someone was killed,” he said, having visited the kibbutz several times this month.

The youth quarter, where the terrorists began their killing spree, “is a valley of death, with the scent of death,” he said. The Goldstein-Almog home is a ruin, full of bullet holes, Nadav’s crutches tossed on the floor, their bicycles mangled at the entrance of the house.

Between 52 and 60 people were killed at Kfar Aza, and another 17 are believed to have been taken hostage.

On the morning of October 7, the Goldstein-Almogs were in their safe room together, in touch with their family members on Whatsapp.

Nadav, 48, a champion triathlete recovering from a bad bicycle fall in July, was still hobbling around. Eldest daughter Yam, a commander in the Computer Service Directorate, was home for the weekend and texting with the rest of the family.

One of Nadav’s sisters along with her husband and four daughters had already left the kibbutz that morning at 6:30 a.m. They heard the rockets and after seeing terrorists crossing the kibbutz fields in cars, they quickly drove off, evading the terrorists’ guns and taking shelter in a nearby moshav.

Almog’s sister’s family stayed put, as 136 terrorists rampaged through the kibbutz, “carrying out a massacre over hours,” said Almog. “They went to where they heard voices, they just conquered Kfar Aza.”

The safe room of the Goldstein-Almog home — “a beautiful house, always kept tip-top,” said Almog — exited into a utility room, with the washer and dryer. That’s where the terrorists entered, killing Nadav and Yam and abducting the others, around 11:45 a.m.

The next day, Sunday, October 8, the family was notified that Nadav and Yam were probably dead, but it took until Tuesday, when the grandparents returned home and could bring DNA samples, before the two bodies were officially identified.

According to the LA Times, investigators were able to determine their identities through the metal plate in Nadav’s hip and Yam’s distinctive tattoo of two butterflies.

The family didn’t want to bury Nadav and Yam until they knew what had happened to Chen, Agam, Gal and Tal. It took another 10 days before the family discovered Chen and her three children were officially considered hostages in Gaza, according to army intelligence.

On October 23, they buried Nadav and Yam in Kibbutz Shefayim, where most of the Kfar Aza residents are staying for now. The funeral was held, with cruel irony, on Chen’s birthday.

“Chen, my sister, is a widow, a bereaved mother and kidnapped with three kids in Gaza,” said Almog. “That’s her status, if she knows. I believe she does. She left the house, she saw what was happening.”

Chen and Nadav were high school sweethearts who met when they were 14, married young and made their home in Kfar Aza, a place they never thought about leaving, no matter what was happening in the Gaza border community.

“My brother-in-law always said, ‘You don’t leave your home,'” said Almog. He recalled that when visiting his brother-in-law in intensive care over the summer after his riding accident, Nadav told him, “Hope dies last.”

“Today that saying has a different feeling,” said Almog. “We have to bring them back, we can’t lose hope.”

His sister, Chen, is strong, Almog said, with enough strength to watch over her three remaining children. They’ll move Nadav and Yam’s graves to Kfar Aza when the family returns there, which he assumes they will.

Nadav’s parents, Varda and Gogo, settled in Kfar Aza in the 1960s and raised their family there. Almog’s parents moved to the community about 20 years ago, when Nadav and Chen settled down.

Nadav was the vice president of business development at Kafrit Industries, Kfar Aza’s publicly traded plastic manufacturing company. Chen, a social worker by training, is a stay-at-home mom because Nadav traveled frequently, said Omri.

“We’re all waiting for them to come back. We’re all sure that they will,” he said.

Omri Almog comes off as stoic and strong. Sitting on a hotel lobby couch as the evacuated families around him lounge in their pajamas, he relates what he knows about the murder and abduction of his sister’s family with little emotion.

It’s when he starts discussing the reactions of the world, the reasons why the events of October 7 unfolded, that Almog’s tone becomes more heated and urgent.

Throughout the last six weeks, Almog, along with several other families of the 240 hostages, has met with representatives of the European Union, with UNICEF’s representative in Israel, and with the Belgian foreign minister.

He doesn’t have much hope for aid from any of those organizations.

“The EU is a business, it legislates about human rights but does nothing,” Almog said. “Here’s a chance to do something, or at least say that they want to do something, but that something is hard.”

Speaking to those organizations, said Almog, was “like talking to a wall.”

“All the families spoke to UNICEF Israel, they met them at [Israel’s] Foreign Ministry and told their stories and cried. I stood and said, ‘Why are you here? Why did you come here, you’ve never done anything for us before,'” said Almog. He said that terrorists’ medical equipment found in Kfar Aza was plastered with UNICEF stickers.

“You have to explain to the world that there’s a terrorist group and so many pipelines leading to it that gave it oxygen,” he said. “Israel can be blamed, too. For 20 years, nothing was done and a monster grew and grew and got ideas and set out on an evil mission like what was done in the Middle Ages.”

He doesn’t blame the IDF, either, knowing that it follows the government’s policy, which he said, included paying off Hamas “with suitcases of money.”

And while some members of the extended Goldstein-Almog family go to the rallies, and other families of the hostages want to meet with the war cabinet, Almog said he’s not interested in sitting at the same table as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu or Defense Minister Yoav Gallant.

“It doesn’t interest me to see them, they should bring everyone back and then we’ll deal with them, we’ll deal with them,” said Almog in a quiet, steely tone. “We’ll deal with them, they won’t be able to walk around freely in the Land of Israel.”

As for Almog, an elite marathoner, he takes out his anger in running, which he does every day and last weekend was joined by 100 other marathoners, running in the hostages’ names, along the Tel Aviv seashore.

“I put my anger into other things,” he said. “I go out and run. My parents go out too. The loss is a huge loss, but we can’t stay in here all day, even though they have nowhere else to go.”