

Good Shabbos Everyone. This week's Parsha Shlach teaches us the importance of being positive under the most trying circumstances. The spies went to check out the land of Canaan and tragically 10 of them came back with a negative report saying they didn't think that we could take the land because the inhabitants were too large and powerful, while two of the spies Yehoshua and Calev were optimistic. The 10 pessimistic spies were punished while the 2 optimistic ones were rewarded. We see from here the importance of maintaining a positive attitude under difficult circumstances.

The involvement of Israel in a war Lebanon a few years ago left many wounds and endless scars. One of them is the gaping emptiness in the communal heart of the town of Gan Ner, an agricultural settlement in the verdant valleys of Israel's Galilee.

The hostilities were nearly over when the army team knocked on the door of the Abutbul family with the bitter news that their talented, much-admired Yossi was no longer among the living. Yossi was the Abutbul's first-born. His winning smile and sterling character had won him a place in the hearts of everyone in Gan Ner and the surrounding settlements, although many resisted his efforts to win them over to his own religious faith.

Yossi was no slacker, either. Lightly wounded in the early weeks of the war, he was sent home to recuperate. As soon as he felt up to it, he returned to the ranks with his comrades. He met his death in a tragic accident shortly before the termination of the hostilities.

The Abutbuls' loss was traumatic not only for the immediate family. Everyone who knew him shared the pain. So many people came during the week of the shiva to comfort the family that neighbors set up a large tent in front of the house to accommodate them.

Among the visitors were two faces familiar to all: Rabbi Yosef Zarka and Rabbi Mordechai Einhorn of Arachim. Both had been close to the family for years, and when Yossi was away at yeshivah, they had often brought packages from home to him, together with warm regards. They had formed deep bonds with Yossi as he grew up, often spending hours in discussions that lasted late into the night.

Like his parents, they had looked forward to seeing him under the chupah and raising a house-full of lively, lovable youngsters like himself. The hopes and dreams had been shattered. The pain in their hearts gave them no rest; they must do something "for Yossi."

But what? For years the two had been Arachim activists in the area. Dozens of families from surrounding settlements had attended Arachim Seminars at their urging, but in Gan Ner, the Abutbuls were the only religious family. The tireless efforts of the head of the family, Nissim, to convince his neighbors to attend an evening shiur or to sign up for an Arachim Seminar, had borne little fruit. "It's not for me," one said. "I'm not interested," another would respond.

But the pain in the hearts of the two Arachim workers did not let them rest. "Do it for Yossi," they urged. "He wanted to establish a fine Jewish home, to raise a houseful of children loyal to Torah, but Heaven intervened. At least let there be other families who become aware of their heritage in his merit."

Their words pierced hearts that were broken by the tragedy. From Gan Ner, seventeen families signed up for what became known as "Yossi's Seminar" in Zichron Yaakov. Another forty members of the extended Abutbul family joined them.

Today, Gan Ner is starting to change. Just ask Reuven Sabag, who serves with the border patrol and is the community's local policeman. He also heads the "Safe Schools" project aimed to countering violence in the school system. Reuven has long been convinced that Torah and mitzvos are the way to go, but his wife, Sigal, the director of the local Kupat Cholim health service, was outspokenly against anything that had to do with religion.

Every time her husband, or anyone else, suggested a lecture or a Seminar, she gave the same answer: "I already know enough about the religious community from the media. It's not for me!" When Gan Ner was mourning its fallen son, Rabbi Zarka decided to try once more.

This time, at least, he was allowed into the house; the words "Yossi Abutbul" served as the ticket that gained him entry into the living room. Mrs. Sabag didn't actually join the discussion; she sat at her computer, with her back to Rabbi Zarka, and one ear tuned in to his words.

The Arachim volunteer sensed that this time, the pain in Sigal's heart had opened a crack in her defenses. He decided to take a gamble: "Try out a Seminar; it will change your lives for the better. You know what? If I'm wrong, don't pay us a cent!" It was an offer that even Sigal couldn't turn down. The Sabags both took part. It was an eye-opener for them both. When the Seminar was over, late Saturday night, the couple loaded their baggage into the trunk of their car for the trip home. "That's it," Sigal told her husband. "We're turning over a new leaf." The Sabags are not alone. Their neighbor, Itzik the drummer, was an essential part of every wedding and celebration in the area. At the Seminar, he put on tzitzis for the first time. A short while after the Seminar, he was asked to play at a local event, but refused. The distraught parents came to his house to beg him to enliven their evening. "What happened? You never said no to anyone until now; why are we any different?" they asked. "Now I have tzitzis," he explained. "How can I sit there and play — wearing tzitzis — when you have mixed dancing?" The message was clear. Others are koshering their kitchens, and now there is a daily gemora class in Gan Ner, for the first time. Families transferred their children to the religious school in nearby Kfar Gideon. Things are changing, and changing for the better. What does Nissim Abutbul have to say?

"Yossi is happy with it all, I am sure. I know," he says with a bittersweet smile. "I can feel it in my heart." **Good Shabbos Everyone**