

Mother of two fallen IDF soldiers inspires CJA donors

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Not one, but two, of Miriam Peretz's sons were killed in combat while serving in the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), yet today she is able to smile and find meaning in life.

Her mission is to comfort her fellow bereaved families, to instill courage in today's Israeli soldiers and to inspire Jews around the world. She accomplished that at Choices, the major Women's Philanthropy campaign event of the Combined Jewish Appeal, held on Nov. 4, where she spoke.

Tissues were placed on each table, but Peretz had not come to make anyone cry. On the contrary, her message to the 700 women present was that despite what Israelis have endured and continue to confront, they have not lost their faith and hope – nor should Jews in the Diaspora.

"With my pain and sorrow I could cry over my fate, or choose not to get up in the morning," she said. "For me, that was not an option. I thank God every day for what I have, that I have managed to stand on my own two feet...I thank God to be able to be here today."

Peretz has chosen not only to carry on, but also to be happy. "Otherwise, what significance would my sons' [deaths] have if I did not continue to live..."

"My choice is a victory over our enemies who killed my sons. They wanted to break my spirit...I am not broken. No matter how hard the road ahead, our people do not fear the journey."

That is not to say that she wanted to shield her listeners from the anguish she and her family went through, and the pain that will never leave them.

Her presentation began with a video about her two fallen sons, brothers who were especially close. They had a strong sense of duty but were sensitive, modest men, content with their lives.

Both were officers in the Golani combat brigade. Uriel, the eldest of her six children, was killed in 1998 in Lebanon at age 22; while Eliraz, 32, died in 2010 in Gaza, leaving a wife and four young children.

"They did not relish combat, but when called to defend their people, they did not hesitate," she said. "They said, 'Ima, it is our turn.'"

Their father, Eliezer, died of a "broken heart," a few years after Uriel's death.

The heart-rending video captures Peretz's agony at each of their funerals and her despair that the family has had to pay such a heavy price.

It was hard to reconcile those images with the charming, confident woman who addressed Choices. Her attitude since those devastating losses has been a matter of choice, she stressed.

Peretz came close to giving up on life,



Miriam Peretz

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she admitted. When three IDF officials came to her door on the eve of Passover 2010, "I grabbed their hands and begged them don't say the word, just let me have my son for one more minute. As long as I don't hear those final words, he still lives," she recalled.

But with time she realized that to give in would be a victory for Israel's enemies, Hezbollah and Hamas, and dishonour her sons' sacrifice in fighting them.

Peretz was born in Morocco and arrived in Israel as a child with her family in 1964, spirited out by the Jewish Agency. Her father kissed the soil when they arrived in Haifa.

As her sons' coffins were being lowered, Peretz, too, knelt and kissed the earth that covered their bodies. They lie on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem only two metres apart.

Her dilemma every time she visits is which son's grave to "hug" first. She swears

she hears the other grumble whichever one she goes to first.

"This is not right, it's not normal; it's not a choice a mother should have to make," she said.

The "reverence and longing" for Eretz Israel that she felt as a child in Morocco has never weakened, she said, despite what her family has gone through, including being uprooted from the Sinai after the peace treaty with Egypt.

"I want you to know that we do not live in despair," she said. "In Morocco our heads were bent in fear. In Eretz Israel we stand tall and proud and unafraid."

Her unfaltering belief in God has given her the strength to carry on, for the sake of

her remaining children and grandchildren.

"I choose not to deal with the question 'why me?'"

They not only died for Israel, but for Jews everywhere, she reminded the audience. "So that you can live peacefully knowing that you always have a home in Eretz Israel," said Peretz, an educator and writer who was the principal of a Tali school for 23 years. Today, she is a supervisor with the education ministry.

She recently published a memoir *Shirat Miriam* (Miriam's Song), which explores the power of faith in overcoming personal tragedy.

"We can live happy lives despite loss," she said. "The choice is in our hands." ■

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