

Tefillin of Hope

How former hostage Bar Kuperstein's mitzvah inspired a nation



L-R: Rabbi David Lau, Bar Kuperstein, his father, Tal, and Rabbi Shlomo Raanan at the special mass tefillin event in Hostage Square on Friday

For two years, as Bar Kuperstein languished in captivity in Gaza, thousands of Jews in Israel and around the world put on *tefillin* as a merit for his release.

Meanwhile, in the dark, dank terror tunnels, Bar, barely able to breathe, turned to Hashem and *davened*. Not for food or a shower. Not for clean clothes and a comfortable bed. No. Bar *davened* to be able to put on *tefillin* one more time.

On Hoshana Rabbah, when the final group of hostages emerged from Gaza after 738 agonizing days, a single statement by a young man echoed for eternity. "My dream while in captivity," said 23-year-old Bar,

"was to put on *tefillin*."

Those words, simple yet thunderous, crowned a story that had already captured the heart of *klal Yisrael*—a story of courage, faith and a mother's love. A story about the power of one mitzvah to bind a nation together across oceans, ideologies and generations.

Bar's dream became reality last Friday at Hostage Square in Tel Aviv, where hundreds joined him for a mass *tefillin*-wrapping event.

A FAMILY TESTED

Four years before that terrible Simchas Torah, tragedy had already tested the Ku-

perstein family. Bar's father, Tal, a United Hatzalah paramedic, was racing to an emergency call on his ambucycle when a severe collision crushed his leg. During surgery, a stroke left him paralyzed and speechless. Overnight, Julie Kuperstein, mother of five, found herself caring for a disabled husband and struggling to keep the family afloat. She turned inward and upward, deepening her connection to Torah and *emunah*, a journey that had begun a decade earlier.

After Tal's accident, with no income and bills mounting, 17-year-old Bar—the eldest sibling, mature and responsible beyond his years—stepped forward to become the

breadwinner. Bar took on long shifts at restaurants and security posts, and though he tried to keep Shabbos as his mother urged, he was not always successful.

When the Nova music festival hired him as deputy head of security, he could not have imagined that it would place him at the heart of the darkest day in modern Jewish memory.

COURAGE IN CHAOS

Just after dawn on October 7, as rockets streaked across the southern sky, Bar stood scanning the horizon as the pulse of techno music dissolved into the whistle of death.

As gunfire rattled across the dusty fields, Bar never considered the option to flee. The same sense of responsibility and bravery that had prompted him to support his family told him to stay and help others. Amid the shooting and screaming, Bar organized evacuations of terrified festival-goers, coordinated with the police on his crackling walkie-talkie, and, in his capacity as a paramedic, administered emergency medical care to the wounded.

Not for a second did Bar think of abandoning his post to save his own life. Amid constant Hamas gunfire, Bar shuttled injured people away from the danger zone, going back and forth numerous times. He saved many lives that day.

With hundreds of terrorists closing in, Bar hid in some thorn bushes. He tossed away his security equipment and walkie-talkie, knowing that if he were captured and suspected of being a soldier or a police

officer, he'd be murdered instantly.

Soon afterward, Bar's hiding place was discovered. The terrorists bound his hands and feet, tossed him into the back of a pickup truck and drove to Gaza. There he was paraded through the streets as swarms of Gazans beat him with fists and sticks.

That night, Bar's family saw a shocking video clip showing him tied up and lying on the floor, terrified but alive.

CAPTIVITY

In Gaza's tunnels, Bar was stripped of his freedom and dignity but not his spirit.

The terrorists noticed his army boots and demanded to know if he was an IDF soldier. Thinking fast, Bar replied, "They're just work boots."

Bar was mocked, beaten and starved, but he harnessed his mental discipline and trained his mind not to think about the pain.

Bar found other ways to endure this nightmare. He built small comforts in the tunnel—a water channel, a waste pit, even a semi-private sitting area. He refused to let the darkness define him.

But most of all, he turned inward to his spiritual core. His thoughts turned to the Torah he knew by heart—*Shema Yisrael* and a *perek* of *Tehillim*.

When the terrorists forbade him to make any noise, he *davened* silently, "from my heart, my gut, and the deepest recess of my soul."

Every Friday evening, Bar recited *Kiddush* on a cup of water. He closed his eyes

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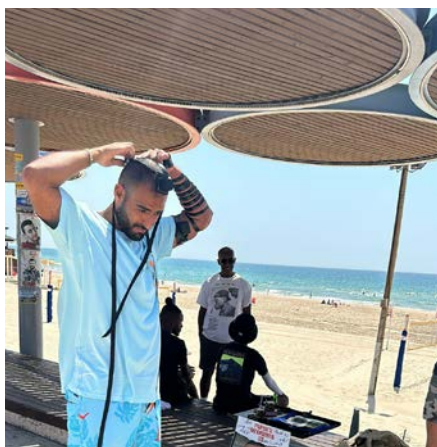
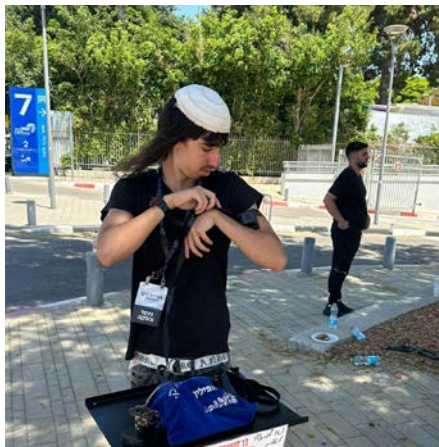
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Bar's tefillin being worn in his zechus at various events and locations during his captivity

and imagined being with his family at the Shabbos table.

In that impure dungeon, Bar and the other hostages cried out to Hashem and sang “*Shalom Aleichem*,” “*Eishes Chayil*” and “*Bar Yochai*.”

As a merit to be saved from many life-threatening situations, Bar took upon himself the mitzvah of *tzedakah*. He had 200 shekels in his wallet at home, and he pledged that when he got out of captivity, he would donate it.

When the terrorists tried to convert him to Islam, he not only refused but flipped the tables on them. As the Muslims around him bowed toward Mecca in prayer, he resolved, *If they pray, I must pray even more. If they pray for death, I will pray for life.*

Over and over again, Bar strengthened himself by reciting *Shema Yisrael* and “*Afili Bhasharah*,” a song his mother loved,

the words of which were written by Rebbe Nachman of Breslov 200 years ago: “Even in concealment, Hashem is with you.”

Bar says, “These two years made me realize how important Judaism is. My faith grew stronger. You understand from that place how much it matters. My faith rescued me from there.”

A MOTHER'S FAITH

Back home, Julie refused to surrender to despair. She knew that Bar's survival and freedom would depend on spiritual merits. But what to do?

Soon after, Julie visited Hostage Square in Tel Aviv, the national center of pro-hostage activity. The plaza was alive with chants, drums and handmade signs, but Julie felt invisible, a *frum* woman in a secular atmosphere. She straightened her spine, lifted her chin and said to herself, “My son is

also a hostage. I deserve a place here, in my own way.”

Julie soon found the support she needed. Rabbi Shlomo Raanan, head of the Israeli *kiruv* organization Ayelet Hashachar, dispatched Riki Siton, a longtime activist who lives by the credo “*Kol Yisrael areivim zeh bazei*” in assisting the hostages' families.

Riki connected with Julie and became a constant companion and friend, offering empathy and *emunah* that were a lifeline for her.

Julie and Riki together were an unstoppable force. They erected a “Tent of Tefillah and Maasim Tovim” in Hostage Square. For nearly two years, this Torah space hosted *minyanim* and *hafrashas challah* events. Soldiers stopped by to say *Tehillim*, and each night a *kollel* studied Torah under a string of LED lights.

How did Julie and Riki manage to hold

up throughout this ordeal?

“Many times we were emotionally and physically exhausted,” Riki relates. “But we understood that our situation could not be worse than Bar's. So if we wanted Bar to continue to have hope, we had to be strong for him. And we'd ask Hashem for the strength to continue our efforts.”

Thousands of Jews around the world *davened* for Bar. Fischer's Yeshiva in Moshav Matisyahu, for example, visited Hostage Square in Tel Aviv, where they met the Kupersteins and pledged to “adopt” Bar. Day after day, the *yeshivah bachurim* *davened* and did *mitzvos* as a *zechus* for Bar.

For the Kuperstein family, the message was loud and clear: The Jewish people are not spectators to each other's pain; they are participants in a shared story, eternally bound to one another.

BIRTH OF “THE TEFFILIN BAR”

Soon after Bar was taken hostage, someone donated a pair of *tefillin* that would await his return. But Julie said, “Why wait?” She sent out a message that she was looking for someone who was currently not putting on *tefillin* and would do so as a for Bar. Within a day, 100 people responded, including an 89-year-old Holocaust survivor who had never worn *tefillin* before.

Julie made a decision that ignited something much greater than she imagined. With help from Ayelet Hashachar, over 200 pairs of *tefillin* were distributed to Jews who pledged to don them daily. Each was matched to a different hostage as a *zechus* for them.

In Hostage Square, they set up a *tefillin* stand cleverly named “The Tefillin Bar.” Soon the idea expanded to locations around Israel.

Concurrently, Bar's own *tefillin* became the focus of a special campaign. A young attorney named Tzvika Graiber heard of Julie's appeal. Though not outwardly *frum*, Tzvika had always felt drawn to *tefillin*; he had once opened his own *tefillin* booth after seeing an antireligious protester harass a Chabad rabbi. Now he felt the same fire again.

“When Julie asked for someone to take

Bar's *tefillin*,” he recalls, “I felt that she was talking to me directly.” That day he wrote to Julie, “I'll commit one hour a day to putting Bar's *tefillin* on Jews who will pray for his safe return.”

That first day, Tzvika headed out to the promenade of Bat Yam, where the rolling waves mixed with the sound of gulls. One young man stopped to inquire, and Tzvika told him Bar's story. “He walked around with the *tefillin* for half an hour, trembling, talking to G-d, praying from the heart,” Tzvika recalls. “I later found out he was a Nova survivor.”

From Haifa to Beer Sheva, the energy built. Because it was a hostage's *tefillin*, Tzvika was able to convince many more people to put them on, a number of whom had never put on *tefillin* before. Soon people were lining up at beaches, markets and bus stops across Israel—surfers, soldiers, taxi drivers, Birthright groups—all wrapping Bar's *tefillin* and whispering his name: Bar Avraham ben Julia.

When Tzvika traveled abroad to Los Angeles, Miami and Montreal, Julie insisted that he take the *tefillin* with him, and thousands more wrapped Bar's *tefillin*.

Everywhere he went, Jews, some of whom hadn't *davened* in decades, felt something inside them stir. Each person who put on those *tefillin* became part of a living chain, a circuit of holiness connecting one Jewish soul to another.

Throughout the two-year ordeal, Tzvika updated Julie regularly, sending her videos and pictures of Jews putting on Bar's *tefillin*.

Tzvika, the founder of a robotics company, relishes his involvement in helping to bring Bar home. “In the startup world, the dream is to make an ‘exit,’” he says. “When Bar came home, it felt exactly like that—as if I had made the greatest exit of my life!”

Tzvika has a message for the thousands of Jews around the world who put on Bar's *tefillin*: “You all have a share in this ‘exit,’ one that is worth more than all the money in the world.”

IN HASHEM'S HANDS

Soon after October 7, someone remarked to Julie, “Your son is in the hands of Hamas.”



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Taken aback, she replied, “No. My son is in the hands of the *Borei Olam*.”

These simple words, “*Tamid b’yadayim shel Borei Olam*—always in Hashem’s hands,” became Julie’s mantra.

One evening, her phone rang. The voice on the line was that of a terrorist, chilling, mocking and cruel. “Do you want to see your son again?” the caller warned. “If so, protest against your government. Go to The Hague. Blame the IDF.”

Julie took a deep breath and replied with calm defiance, “You don’t decide what happens to my son. Only G-d decides. Bar is in G-d’s hands.”

Then, with pride and faith, she added, “And so are you.”

A long pause. Then the terrorist muttered, “*Kol hakavod, geveret*.”

THE LOTTERY

The expression “Always in the hands of the *Borei Olam*” became another astonishing spiritual connection between Bar and his mother during those 738 dark days. Underground, Bar whispered those words during the most terrifying episodes of his captivity.

Once, when he was being held in a group of six hostages, the terrorists came and said, “The IDF killed three Hamas fighters today. We will now kill three of you, eye for an eye.”

The hostages were told to select “who will live and who will die,” but they refused to participate in this sadistic game. So the terrorists randomly picked three—Bar among them.

As their rifles clicked, Bar closed his eyes and repeated the words “I am in the hands of the *Borei Olam*.” The terrorists then forced the three to record a video begging for their lives.

After they completed the video, the terrorist revealed that the idea to murder them had been psychological torture, a charade to ensure they would record an emotionally dramatic video.

BAR’S FATHER TAKES A STAND

Meanwhile, another miracle of hope and

The Tent of Tefillah and Maasim Tovim set up by Julie Kuperstein and Riki Siton in Hostage Square



resilience was taking place in the Kuperstein home. Bar’s father, Tal, refused to remain passive in the battle to bring Bar home. “If Bar can survive Gaza,” he told himself, “I can stand for him.”

Determined to fight for his son, the man once trapped in silence embarked with renewed purpose on a painful regimen of therapy. Inch by inch, word by word, he reclaimed his speech—and then, miraculously, his ability to stand.

Deep in the tunnels, Bar spoke of his father to a fellow hostage, Elkana Bohbot. To lift his spirits, Elkana drew a picture of Tal standing tall, walking free of his wheelchair. Elkana also wrote a message that carried Bar through the long Gaza nightmare: “You are the power for your father. Stay strong, and he’ll be strong for you.”

Upon Bar’s release, his father, who had spent the past 738 days fighting to stand again, rose to his feet as Bar entered the room. They embraced, weeping. It was the first time Bar had seen his father stand in five years.

THE RADIO

At one point, the hostages were given a cassette player to listen to Arabic music. The device was also a radio. What chance was there that a radio would work 100 feet underground?

Late one night, Bar was fiddling with the radio when he heard a faint signal. Ap-

parently, the primitive wires that brought electricity into the tunnel were somehow serving as an antenna for the radio. Hour after hour, Bar played with the dials and managed to tune into Arabic- and Turkish-language stations.

One night in the stale darkness, a crackle of static became a miracle. Impossibly, Bar had tuned into an Israeli broadcast. He was ecstatic. A window to the world!

Soon afterward, Bar heard the announcer declare, “Today is Bar Kuperstein’s 23rd birthday.” Never imagining that his words were reaching the tunnels of Gaza, the announcer continued hopefully, “Bar, if you can hear us, stay strong!”

Later that day, Bar got an even bigger surprise. His mother was on the radio inviting the entire nation to join in a prayer event at the Kosel as a *zechus* for Bar.

For Bar, it was a direct message from Hashem that he was being guarded and protected.

MIRACULOUS RELEASE

For months, rumors of deals for the release of the hostages rose and fell like waves, hope followed by heartbreak. Then, on Hoshana Rabbah, the *tefillos* were answered. Bar, among the final 20 hostages released that day, emerged thin and shaken but alive, his piercing green eyes radiating light.

When he was reunited with his family, Bar draped over his shoulders a large Is-

Bar Kuperstein at the tefillin event with the author



raeli flag emblazoned with the words “Always in the hands of the *Borei Olam*.”

“Over the past two years, there were difficult moments when I had questions and lost strength,” Bar said. “But every time that happened, I reminded myself that I must not lose who I am.”

Since his release, Bar has been appearing in interviews and meeting with Jewish leaders. Last week, he visited Bnei Brak and rode through the streets in a United Hatzalah ambulance, surrounded by the cheers and applause of residents who lined the streets. At City Hall, Bar attended a city council meeting and received a standing ovation.

Later that day, at the home of Rav Moshe

Hillel Hirsch, he received *brachos* for strength and recovery.

HOSTAGE SQUARE LIGHTS UP

After his release from captivity, Bar revealed his dream of putting on *tefillin* and announced a mass *tefillin*-wrapping event in Hostage Square.

Last Friday, hundreds of Jews of all backgrounds gathered under a sunny blue sky to celebrate Bar’s release. Hostage Square—the plaza that had echoed with protest chants—now pulsed with *tefillin*, *tefillos* and *shofar* blasts.

Bar stood on stage, a *tallis* draped around his shoulders, its *atarah* embroidered with the words “Always in the hands of the *Borei Olam*.” Around him, hundreds of Jews tightened the black straps around their arms. *Kohanim* recited *Birchas Kohanim*, and Bar led a communal recital of the *Shema*.

Bar’s father, demonstrating a resilience that inspired so many, wore *tallis* and *tefillin* and recited the *brachos* word for word.

Rabbi David Lau, the former *Ashkenazi* chief rabbi of Israel, spoke about *Shema Yisrael* as the foundational words of Judaism. “On October 7, families stranded in communities overrun by terrorists knew that soldiers had come when they said *Shema Yisrael*. This is the eternal cry of faith of *am Yisrael*.”

In the crowd stood Tzvika Graiber, the man who had carried Bar’s *tefillin* around the world.

Rabbi Raanan reflected on the crowd that day in Hostage Square and all of the *tefillos*, Torah and *mitzvos* performed as a *zechus* for Bar and the other hostages. “Bar’s story is symbolic of a profound shift taking place in Israeli society,” he says. “There is a new openness to Torah and a genuine thirst for connection.”

Looking forward, “The Tefillin Bar” campaign promises to grow larger. Riki Siton explains, “When Bar was in captivity, we told Hashem: Whatever mitzvah activities we do, we’re committed to doing them tenfold when the hostages are released. That promise begins now.”

In Hostage Square, as Bar recited *Shehecheyanu*, thanking Hashem for bringing him to this moment, the crowd responded with a thunderous “*Amein*” that seemed to shake the Tel Aviv skyline.

Julie stood beside her son, looking out over the crowd. The sunlight caught her tear-streaked face, and the air hummed with the murmur of *tefillos*. As the voices rose in the chant of “*Hashem Hu HaElokim*,” the message was clear: even in concealment, Hashem is there.

Even in the deepest darkness, the light of a single mitzvah can ignite and unite a nation. ●

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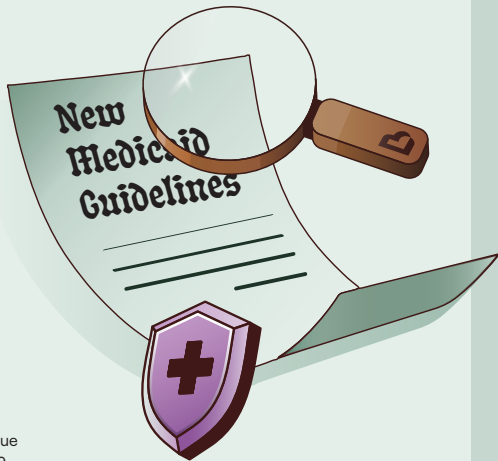
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