

In the courtyard where Hersh Goldberg-Polin danced, grief and anger reign after his death

by [Deborah Danan](#)

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Shira Ben-Sasson, a founder of the Hakhel synagogue in Jerusalem, lights a candle in memory of Hersh Goldberg-Polin on September 1. (Photo by Deborah Danan)

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Three hundred and thirty-two days after Hersh Goldberg-Polin danced in the courtyard next to his Jerusalem synagogue on the holiday of Simchat Torah, more than a thousand people gathered there in grief and prayer to mourn his murder by Hamas terrorists in Gaza.

During the Sunday night vigil, the courtyard railings were lined with oversized yellow ribbons to symbolize advocacy for the hostages, Hapoel Jerusalem soccer flags—the

23-year-old's favorite team—and posters that read, “We love you, stay strong, survive,” a mantra coined by his mother, Rachel Goldberg-Polin.

Just hours earlier, one of the posters had been hanging over the balcony of the home of Shira Ben-Sasson, a leader of Hakhel, the Goldberg-Polins' egalitarian congregation in the Baka neighborhood of Jerusalem.

“We were sure we would take it down when he came home,” Ben Sasson said.

The community wanted to unite while respecting the Goldberg-Polins' desire for privacy, she said, prompting them to organize the prayer gathering.

“But it's like a Band-Aid or giving first aid, it's what you do in an emergency. I don't know how we go on after this,” she said.

She added that the community, which has a large contingent of English-speaking immigrants, was not prepared for the high holidays, which begin in about a month. She said, “Seeing his empty seat is hard.”

For Ben-Sasson, who wore a T-shirt bearing the Talmudic dictum “There is no greater mitzvah than the redeeming of captives,” the tragedy is especially painful because, she said, it could have been avoided with a ceasefire agreement that freed hostages.

“Hersh was alive 48 hours ago. We think a deal could have saved him. There is no military solution to this,” she said.

That feeling of bereavement, often mixed with betrayal, pervaded gatherings across Israel on Sunday, as the country struggled with the news that six hostages who may have been freed in an agreement were now dead as negotiations continue to stall. Speakers at protests in Tel Aviv blamed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who himself apologized for not getting the hostages out alive but blamed Hamas for obstructing a deal. The country's labor union, the Histadrut, called a national strike on Monday to demand a deal.

Some at the Jerusalem gathering, including the relative of another former hostage, said Netanyahu had chosen defeating Hamas over freeing the captives.

Josef Avi Yair Engel, whose grandson Ofir was released from Hamas captivity in November during that month's ceasefire deal, expressed shock over Hersh's murder

but said he was not surprised, given the wartime policies of Netanyahu's government.

"We knew months ago this was going to happen. Bibi's formula, to dismantle Hamas and return the hostages, wasn't logical. It's an either/or situation," Engel said, referring to Netanyahu by his nickname. "He's tearing the country apart. I'm afraid that in the coming months there won't be a state at all."

Engel said he felt a close bond with Hersh's father Jon Polin, not only because of their joint activism in the hostage families' tent outside the prime minister's residence, but also because of their shared identity as Jerusalemites.

"There aren't many of us in the hostage circle," he said. "We're like family."

Sarah Mann, who did not know the family personally, said the weekend's tragedy reminded her of October 7.

"This day has sparks of the seventh, which created numbness and an inability to talk. Just complete shock," she said.

Part of the reason for that, Mann said, was Rachel, who she described as a "force of faith." Goldberg-Polin's mother emerged as the most prominent advocate for the hostages globally and became a symbol in her own right as she crisscrossed the world calling for her son's freedom.

"Millions of people around the world held onto her. Once that was cut, people's ability to hold onto faith was knocked out today. But even though this has shattered us, we need to keep holding onto God," Mann said.

For Susi Döring Preston, the day called to mind was not October 7 but Yom Kippur, and its communal solemnity.

She said she usually steers clear of similar war-related events because they are too overwhelming for her.

"Before I avoided stuff like this because I guess I still had hope. But now is the time to just give in to needing to be around people because you can't hold your own self up any more," she said, tears rolling down her face. "You need to feel the humanity and hang onto that."

Like so many others, Döring Preston paid tribute to the Goldberg-Polins' tireless activism. "They needed everyone else's strength but we drew so much strength from them and their efforts," she said. "You felt it could change the outcome. But war is more evil than good. I think that's the crushing thing. You can do everything right, but the outcome is still devastating."

Guy Gordon, a member of Hakhel who moved to Israel from Dublin, Ireland, in the mid-1990s, said the efforts towards ensuring Hersh's safe return have been an anchor for the community during the war.

"It gave us something to hope for, and pray for and to demonstrate for," he said. "We had no choice but to be unreasonably optimistic. Tragically it transpired that he survived until the very end."

Gordon, like many others in the crowd, wore a piece of duct tape marked with the number of days since October 7—a gesture initiated by Goldberg-Polin's mother. Unlike on previous days, though, his tape also featured a broken red heart beside the number.

Nadia Levene, a family friend, also reflected on the improbability of Hersh's survival.

"He did exactly what his parents begged him to do. He was strong. He did survive. And look what happened," Levene said.

She hailed Rachel Goldberg-Polin's "unwavering strength and belief in God," adding, "There were times I lost faith. I suppose I was angry with God. But she just kept inspiring us all to pray, pray, pray."

Jerusalem resident Leah Silver rejected politicizing the hostages' deaths.

"Everything turns political so quickly. I came here because I felt that before all the protests, we need to just mourn for a moment and to pray. And show respect for each other," she said. "We've become confused about who the enemy is. It's very sad."

But not everyone at the gathering joined in to sing Israel's national anthem at the closing of the prayer gathering.

"I'm sorry, I can't sing 'Hatikvah,'" Reza Green, a Baka resident who did not know the Goldberg-Polins personally, said. "I'm too angry. We shouldn't be here."

—Forward