

Expressway: Every parent's nightmare

Published in Newsday, July 23, 2011 by ANDREW MALEKOFF, p. 27



Andrew Malekoff lives in Long Beach. (Photo with Jamie when he was younger)

I have not been able to stop thinking about Leiby Kletzky, the 8-year-old boy taken from a Brooklyn street corner earlier this month and brutally murdered. My boys are now in their 20s and they are not Hasidic Jews, but there is something about Leiby's photo that reminds me of them when they were children.

I get chills when I recall a day when I took my boys to the multiplex theater at the Sunrise Mall in Massapequa. Darren was 3 and Jamie was 7. After a movie, we went downstairs to Nathan's for hot dogs and French fries. When we were finished, Jamie told me he thought that he left his Batman toy in the theater upstairs.

Thinking I would offer him a bit of independence, I said, "Do you think you can go get it and then come back down?" He said yes and stepped on the upstairs escalator. Darren and I waited. After a few minutes, I thought he might be having a hard time at the theater. My eyes scanned the mall. When he didn't return after perhaps 10 minutes, my worry turned to fear.

I picked up Darren so that I could move quickly (or was it so that I wouldn't lose him, too?) and I started to search. Jamie wasn't at the theater. I was frantic and looked into every store. I was sweating profusely and my heart seemed to beat through my chest. My imagination took me places I had never been before; places like the one that found Leiby Kletzky.

Then I approached a mall staff member, who led me to the security office. The security man spoke to someone on his walkie-talkie. After just about a minute, Jamie walked into

the security office with a staff member. I picked him up and hugged him for a long moment.

For me, it was a moment of profound relief. Jamie seemed happy that we were together, but not upset. The time we were separated was not the eternity to him that it was to me. (He even found his toy.) I think I had emotional blinders on and don't recall if I even asked where Jamie was located.

Sometimes I remember that experience for no reason immediately evident to me. Other times it is triggered by a news story with a bad ending. Recalling those 20 or 30 minutes brings back some of the same physical sensations: The hair on my neck stands on end, a chill runs up my spine and my heart pounds.

Maybe I can't stop thinking about Leiby Kletzky because of that frightening experience at the mall. If those moments had turned into a lifetime of what the Kletzky's now face, I don't know how I would have survived. Yet, somehow, people do survive traumatic grief. Maybe it is their faith.

I heard that there were children in Leiby's close-knit community who questioned the presence of God when the boy's fate became known. How could they not? And, while I ask myself this same question that a child asks his parents, I can only hope there is a better place somewhere beyond our world that isn't so capricious and merciless to even the most innocent and precious among us.

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