



BRYNN OLENBERG SUGARMAN holds a copy of 'Speechless,' inspired by Operation Embrace founder Aviva Tessler. (Joel Tessler)

A young PTSD victim finds her voice again

A child's struggle inspires a picture book

• ABIGAIL KLEIN LEICHMAN

If you're three and a half years old and you see a Kassam rocket crash in all its fury right next to your house, the incident is sure to have lasting repercussions.

For Noam Saban of Ashkelon, the post-traumatic stress was especially severe. From that moment during Operation Cast Lead in 2008 until the age of five, the formerly sunny little girl spoke only to her mother and only in a whisper. In 2010 she stopped speaking entirely. She was afraid to sleep alone,

afraid to go to school without her mother, and barely opened her mouth, even to eat.

The nonprofit organization Operation Embrace, which offers a range of supportive services to terrorism victims and their families, sent volunteers to visit and assisted the Sabans – who also have two older children – with alternative therapies, after-school activities, therapeutic days, Shabbat retreats and holiday parties.

Then, in March 2015, Operation Embrace founder Aviva Tessler got a phone call she will never forget.

"It was Noam's mother, Anat. She said, 'I have someone here who wants to speak with you.' I braced myself, sat down and heard this little voice say, 'Aviva, *ani ohevet otach*' [I love you]. I fell over crying. You could hear the soul of this child in her voice. It was so powerful."

Tessler shared the news with her friend and neighbor in Ra'anana, award-winning Anglo-Israeli children's author Brynn Olenberg Sugarman, who volunteers with the organization and had visited Noam with Tessler six months before. She called the Saban

residence herself to hear the miraculous and long-awaited return of Noam's voice, facilitated by homeopathic physician Menachem Oberbaum at Shaare Zedek Medical Center.

Sugarman was so touched by the little girl's triumph that she got the Sabans' permission to write a fictionalized version of Noam's story in English, and began working up a proposal to send to children's book publishers.

Then the project took on an unexpected urgency.

"Aviva said she was having a fundraiser in the Washington, DC area in November [2015] and Noam and her parents agreed to be there. She said it would be great if I could have my book ready to give donors at the event, but with a traditional publisher it takes two years to produce a book," says Sugarman.

"That inspired me to say I would take this into my own hands and make sure to provide 100 copies for the dinner."

Sugarman published her 32-page picture book, *Speechless*, through CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform on October 15, 2015. She hired an illustrator in Japan, Yasu Matsuoka, after looking through 104 proposals that arrived in response to her query on the website elance.com.

"In a picture book, half the power of the book is the illustrations. Yasu had an innate sense of how to capture its essence, and he was very easy to work with."

The illustrations were especially exciting for Noam, now nearing 11 years old, whose artistic tendencies had helped her express her feelings while she was mute. Using a Rainbow Loom given to her by Operation Embrace, she had made several projects that she brought to Washington to show the 170 people at the fundraising dinner on November 23.

Noam drew a bright rainbow for the dinner invitation, and also got up and gave a speech to the group, which Tessler had translated into English and transliterated into Hebrew characters so Noam could present it herself.

"Even if not everyone understood her perfectly, what mattered was hearing her voice," says Tessler.

"Being able to distribute these books really helped all those in attendance understand her story, and I had a lot of requests for additional books because it could empower kids and even adults with many kinds of challenges."

Sugarman says that won't be a problem; copies of *Speechless* are printed on demand through Amazon. She also wants to have the book translated into Hebrew if the Saban family agrees.

"We plan to have a parlor meeting in Ra'anana and/or Herzliya to get more people aware of and involved with Operation Embrace, and we will distribute the books there as well," says Tessler.

She founded the organization in 2001 when she and her husband, Rabbi Joel Tessler of Potomac, Maryland, were in Israel on a four-month sabbatical and

began visiting people hurt in the second intifada. The initiative started with the purchase of a laptop computer for a 23-year-old woman whose legs were severed in a terrorist attack, and it grew organically with the aid of congregants in her husband's synagogue, Congregation Beth Shalom, of which he is now rabbi emeritus. The Tesslers currently divide their time between Potomac and Ra'anana, having made aliya in October 2014.

Operation Embrace's part-time social worker and a volunteer committee assess requests for help that come through municipal social workers and the National Insurance Institute. Among the medical, therapeutic, and rehabilitative programs it offers are therapeutic horseback riding, drama therapy and hospital-based trauma support groups in Jerusalem, Nahariya, Netanya, Safed, Sderot and Haifa.

"Over the past 13 years we've helped close to 7,000 families – Jews, Druze, Arab Christians and Muslims," says Tessler.

At the fundraising dinner, Noam's father, Koby, said he believes that Operation Embrace "has been sent to us by God to give us hope and strength."

He told the donors in attendance that Noam's silence and other post-trauma difficulties nearly caused a family breakdown, as his wife had to quit her job and stay by her daughter's side 24/7 for five years.

"Every week, we traveled far distances to take Noam to see psychologists and psychiatrists at different hospitals. Nothing seemed to help bring back her voice. It is a horrible feeling to not be able to help your child. Many times, I felt great despair and helplessness both as a father and a husband," he related.

"Noam has not had a normal childhood. She did not go on school trips, did not go to birthday parties, did not participate in sports or any after-school activities."

After Dr. Oberbaum "seemed to spark the miracle that we have been waiting and praying for, and our beautiful little Noam began to speak, there was so much excitement and joy. It was as if we had given birth to a new child," Saban said.

Operation Embrace is now working with the municipality of Sderot to create a social business café where survivors with PTSD will be able to find gainful employment and learn coping skills and resiliency in a work environment.

"It will have all kinds of special things to make it a fun and joyful place sensitive to needs of those suffering with PTSD," says Tessler. ■

For more information about Operation Embrace, see operationembrace.org.

Speechless may be ordered online at amazon.com or within Israel from [Wiz Kids \(http://wizkids.co.il/\)](http://wizkids.co.il/) at 8 Ha-Palmakh Street, Ra'anana. The book is priced at NIS 50; Jerusalem Post readers will get a discount. Call 09-746-4224.



NOAM WITH her parents, Koby and Anat Saban. (Stephanie Sporkin)

'Noam has not had a normal childhood. She did not go on school trips, did not go to birthday parties, did not participate in sports or any after-school activities'

COPIES OF 'Speechless' were given out at the Operation Embrace fund-raiser and displayed along with Noam's craft creations. (Stephanie Sporkin)

