FEATURE

He Cut His Leave Short to Fight. Now Thousands of Lone Soldiers Have a Home Base in His Name.

By Yaaqov Lamb

Twenty years after Michael Levin was killed in Lebanon, the American who cut short a visit home to rejoin his unit is the name on the places that look after soldiers who serve without family nearby.

The party was Harriet Levin's idea, thrown at the last minute. Her son Michael, a paratrooper home on leave near Philadelphia, was flying back to Israel in the morning. War had broken out on Israel's northern border two weeks into what was supposed to be a three-week visit, and he had spent most of those days watching the Phillies and calling friends in his unit for news.

The next day he flew out of New York. His sister Elisa later told Tablet he was "itchy to get back." Their last conversation lasted less than a minute. He told her he loved her, in case something happened. She told him he would be fine.

On August 1, 2006, he was killed in a firefight in the Lebanese village of Aita al-Shaab. He was 22. Three Israeli soldiers died there that day, and he was the only American among the 121 Israeli soldiers killed in the war. About 2,000 people came to his funeral on Mount Herzl.

The skinny kid from Holland, Pennsylvania

Nobody would have picked him for a paratrooper. Levin grew up in Holland, Pennsylvania, about half an hour north of Philadelphia, at roughly 120 pounds, and his friends at Camp Ramah called him "Termite." He was a prankster. At 10 he wore an Israeli soldier's uniform for Halloween, and that was about the age he decided he wanted to live in Israel.

He told his family he would join the Israeli army after high school, and in 2002, at 18, fresh out of Council Rock High School, he moved to Israel. His father wanted him to finish a degree first, but Michael protested until Mark gave in.

Getting in was its own story. Legend has it that when the army's induction center turned him away, he climbed a dumpster and shimmied through a window to get inside. The army let him try out for the paratroopers, and he passed.

His Hebrew was shaky. He needed help finishing hikes, and in basic training he dropped a machine gun on his foot. But his commander, Gilad Zvilich, told The Times of Israel that

Michael was the first lone soldier he had ever met and “completely changed the way I think about the army.”

A fax machine and a phone bill

A lone soldier is one with no immediate family in Israel. They were entitled to some benefits, such as a modest housing stipend and more pay, but support was mostly ad hoc and depended on goodwill and luck.

His father later remembered how the idea began, The Times of Israel reported. Michael had army paperwork to fill out and could not find a fax machine. The next week he needed help translating a phone bill. There was no one to ask.

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A couple of months into basic training, he started talking about a center where lone soldiers could get everything in one place. He told his friend Tziki Aud that when he finished his service, the two of them would start one. He did not get the chance.

What carries his name

The Lone Soldier Center in Memory of Michael Levin was founded in 2009. By one 2016 count, the network his parents built has helped more than 6,000 lone soldiers, without government funding. Four organizations now carry his name. The one you can walk into is the Base, in Jerusalem.

Thursday night is when most soldiers head home for the weekend, and when lone soldiers have nowhere to go. At the Base, boots line the entryway the way shoes do in a family home. The supplies closet is open, a washing machine hums in the corner, and a dozen soldiers in uniform sit down to a dinner someone else cooked. The Base holds Thursday night activities every week, a Friday morning breakfast and Shabbat meals, and it serves lone b’not sherut, young women in national service, as well as soldiers.

Dani Weiss, 20, a paratrooper from Baltimore, found his way there in his second month. “The first month I ate cereal for dinner and did my laundry in the sink,” he says. “Then a guy in my unit told me about Thursday nights. Nobody asks if you’re okay. They put a plate in front of you, and after a while you tell them.” The Old Bay he brought from home lives in the kitchen now, and he has opinions about who may use it.

The need has not gone away. In February 2025, Noya Govrin, who directs the Lone Soldiers Program at Nefesh B’Nefesh, said about 3,500 lone soldiers from abroad were on active duty, a quarter of them from the United States.

Twenty years on

On July 30, 2026, Mark and Harriet Levin stood at their son's grave on Mount Herzl, among comrades, former teachers and young people about to enlist. The US ambassador came, and so did Levin's former commanding officer. His father said Michael's death was not the end of the story but "only the beginning."

The last photo of Levin was taken hours before his final mission. His face is painted black, and he is smearing camouflage on another soldier's face. He is helping someone else get ready.

Levin crossed an ocean so he would not miss the fight. Because of him, the soldiers who followed do not have to cross it alone.

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Written as a course assignment. Dani Weiss and the Thursday-night scene at the Base are illustrative.