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A Stroke of Courage | The Promising Israeli Swimmer Who Died Saving Others on October 7

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Ido Rakovsky

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Eden Nimri always aspired to excel – as a swimmer, as a student and as a soldier. As her enlistment date drew near, she faced a dilemma. After having trained and competed from the time she was a little girl and making it to the elite levels of the sport, she had to decide between applying for outstanding athlete status and enlisting as a regular soldier, which meant giving up swimming.

"The tie-breaker was [getting into] the pilot's course," her mother Sharon recently recalled regarding her daughter's choice in 2019. "She was striving to succeed in two lanes, looking for the best and most meaningful one for her."

On Saturday, October 7, Eden found herself fighting for her life and those of 35 or so other female soldiers at a military post in Nahal Oz, when it was invaded by Hamas terrorists. Nimri's quick-wittedness helped save 10, while she was killed in the battle with the terrorists. Just 22, she was a captain in the Sky Riders unit, whose soldiers are trained to fly drones that give ground forces an aerial overview of their surroundings.

"A lot of things she went through as a swimmer – having to cope with difficulties or striving for excellence – you also saw in her as a fighter," her father, Michael, explained. "As with the swimming, she didn't cut corners in the army, either. When you get out of bed, you get out of bed with a weapon."

The soldiers who were saved recounted to the Nimri family Eden's final moments that Saturday. At 6:30 A.M., the soldiers awakened to the sounds of mortar rounds fired from Gaza. They ran to a migunit, a portable bunker made of reinforced concrete. Some 15 minutes later, with the report that terrorists had infiltrated the military post, Nimri placed the four female fighters from the Sky Riders unit who were with her in position to be at the ready.

Almost none of the 30 spotters had weapons. "She stood at the entrance closest to where the terrorists came through," Michael described. "Eden inserted a clip, and they aimed their weapons. At 7:20 A.M., she sent a picture to her team and to the entire company, showing that they were safeguarding this area. They did not know what was coming. No one could have imagined."

At 7:45 A.M., when the first terrorist arrived, Kalachnikov in hand, Nimri and the other fighters succeeded in dispatching him. The terrorists then threw three hand grenades into the migunit. The four fighters succeeded in rescuing six more spotters and sending them to a position to the rear, where all 10 of the female soldiers barricaded themselves in two rooms.

All the while, Nimri continued to wage battle with the terrorists. All of the soldiers that stayed in the migunit were either killed or kidnapped. The 10 female soldiers who managed to be rescued remained quiet in the rooms, until 2:30 P.M., when paratroopers and Maglan fighters freed them.

"They were barricaded in the rooms, with lots of Arabic and shouting all around them," Michael added. "They were somewhere between life and death. All it would have taken was for one guy to peer in and see them."

"Eden's team emerged unscathed," Sharon added. "The fact that she cocked her rifle is what saved them." It was only on Monday, over 48 hours after the massacre, that army representatives arrived to inform the family that their daughter had been killed. "It turned out that [her body] was out there for a whole day," said Sharon. "That saddened us tremendously. All through these two days, you are living in a state of uncertainty, in an unfathomable state of chaos."

Until that Saturday, Nimri had managing her life impressively, excelling at dance, theater, swimming and scholastics.

"She had this thing with excellence," her mother recalled. "I don't know where it came from, because no one pushed her into it." Nimri's first encounter with water began at age 6. As an infant, she had been diagnosed as having joint hypermobility. So, Sharon and Michael sent her to a variety of sports activities, including swimming. They signed her up for an afterschool enrichment class at the Maccabi sports association's water park in Reut, near Modi'in. Nimri's love for competition dovetailed with the demands of swimming.

"It was hard for her, and it got harder the further she advanced within the groups. The difficulty actually challenged her," her mother stressed. "Her teachers who came here talked about how she would arrive at school for first period with wet hair. She didn't ask for any breaks, despite having woken up at 5 A.M. We didn't chase after her. It was all her."

'The harder the event, the better Eden was'

As the head coach at the Maccabi sports association's Reut water park, Carmel Levitan knew Nimri for some 13 years. He also served as her personal coach between the ages of 14 and 18, when she trained with the association's top team. "We were the strongest (youth) team in Israel, partly because of Eden," Levitan said. She began as a backstroke swimmer but added individual medley (200 and 400 meters) and long distances (400, 800 and 1500 meters), and eventually open-water swimming (5 and 10 kilometers). She won medals in the different age groups at Israeli championships, where her parents, Michael and Sharon, served as judges in order to spend more time with her at competitions.

"In general, the harder the swim event, the better she was," Levitan recalled. "She wasn't a sprinter. Her physical capabilities were better suited to all of the longer-distance events. That is characteristic of her physiology, but it was also characteristic of her personality."

Levitan described Eden as "a fighter who does not concede, someone who could suffer pain at levels that other people couldn't." He observed: "That was, essentially, one of her talents, which is a physical and mental talent. She wasn't afraid of anything. Now it takes on the connotation of the battle, but in the pool she was not afraid of any challenge. There was nothing I could deter her from."

Amir Ofer, currently the coach of Israel's open-water swimming team, first met Nimri in 2014. Although she was not a regular member of the top youth team, of which Ofer was the assistant coach at the time, Nimri decided to focus on long-distance and open-water swimming, in addition to her training in the pool.

Ofer mentioned two "special" attributes of Eden. "The first thing is that she set very high goals in relation to what the coaches could see, and the second thing is that she always managed to pleasantly surprise in competitions," he said. "She would somehow manage to put all these things together, which is something that does not work for every swimmer. As swimming coaches, we work with a stopwatch and we run exercises, so we can more or less appraise the swimmer's level, but with her she would consistently exceed our expectations, until eventually it was no surprise that it'd happen. This was an impressive capability. The perseverance and the stubbornness and the ability to come through in a pinch."

Ofer, like Levitan, mentioned the fact that Nimri "would not give up – not in training and not at a meet." He said, "It sounds a little cliched, but I say in this context it's true. It's not as if all swimmers are that way. All of them try, all of them want it, but with Eden it really was something extraordinary when it came to perseverance and stubbornness and belief in oneself. She believed in herself."

'Eden would push the boundaries effortlessly'

Eden's sister Hadar also describes Eden's belief as a tremendous power. "She would push boundaries effortlessly," Hadar said. "She wanted to be a pilot and she believed she could do it because she's a woman. She was not deterred by the fact that only ten percent of cadets in the pilot's course were girls. She understood that the percentages were not because girls aren't capable."

Her father Michael noted that his daughter managed to fly ten times during the course before she was dropped. "She completed the flights with a good feeling," he said. "Her disappointment [at being dropped] was very great."

"She flew ten flights, and couldn't understand what she hadn't done well," added her mother. "She liked it so much, and it was a stinging insult, in comparison with sports, that the army is a very gender-oriented world. She lived in this sort of dream that she tried to fulfill."

'The observation balloon was torn'

From there, Eden switched to a combat track in the Artillery Corps' Sky Rider unit, in which only four young women completed the course out of a total of 30 soldiers. In March 2021, she was offered to go to officer training school, but insisted on remaining a fighter. But after serving for a while in the same base in Nahal Oz, Operation Guardian of the Walls broke out, and it changed her decision. "She was on the ground, and it was frightening," Sharon recalled. "But what was going on then was a trifle compared to what we have now."

After officer training school, Nimri was posted mainly along the northern border. She went down south a couple of times to cover for soldiers going out for holiday furloughs, the last time on the Wednesday before Black Saturday.

"On the Shabbat before Yom Kippur, we went to visit her there," her mother recalled about the previous time Eden went down south. "I was very frightened. We saw the military post; it looked like a scrap warehouse. We saw the observation balloon was torn. There were three balloons that were torn at that time."

Hadar felt the need to emphasize her sister's presence in her life and in the lives of the people around her. "She was the most girlie person you can imagine, and the biggest warrior, the most impressive, the most noble – that is what was so groundbreaking about her," she added.

Michael was reminded of what Sharon would frequently say to him: "My wife always notes the separation that existed in her between the tough fighter that she was, and the 'Barbie' that she was."

Hadar said a lot of people will remember her sister for her smile. "It was really important to her that there be a good atmosphere, and she was also hysterically funny," she said. "She was simply kindhearted, and it was important to her that people around her enjoy themselves. She was an incredible sister, always concerned and inquiring. It goes without saying that she was very busy, but in her own way very encouraging and concerned."

Eden Nimri's mother stressed that along with her daughter's naivete, her success as a soldier derived from her being an outstanding swimmer. "The world of swimming influenced her world of warfare," Sharon explained. "But the world of war is monstrous, and that is something she did not take into account."