

LATE RELIEF

A Phillies shrine in Jerusalem brings comfort to a fallen soldier's family.

By Hillel Kuttler



THE JERUSALEM GRAVESITE OF MICHAEL LEVIN

Friends often call Mark or Harriet Levin at their Langhorne home before traveling to Israel. They want to pay respects at the grave of the Levins' son Michael and ask where in Jerusalem's Mount Herzl Military Cemetery it is.

"We just give the section and say, 'You'll find it!'" Mark says.

It's hard to miss. So many notes, letters, photographs—and Tastykakes (Michael's favorite)—are left that groundskeepers brush them aside to keep the walkways clear.

Since the Phillies' World Series championship last October, people also have deposited team memorabilia, including a batting helmet, a Phillie Phanatic bobblehead and a celebratory red T-shirt proclaiming PHINALLY! "He loved the Phillies, so I'm not surprised they're leaving things on his grave," Mark says.

Soon after IDF Staff Sergeant Michael Levin was killed in battle in the Second Lebanon War on Aug. 1, 2006, his final resting place (Area D, Section 6) became a pilgrimage site, especially for Americans. Young adult groups in the popular Birthright Israel program make Michael's grave a regular stop. Mount Herzl officials tell the family that it is among the most visited places in the cemetery, which includes the final resting places

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of Israel's spiritual founder Theodor Herzl and prime ministers Levi Eshkol, Golda Meir and Yitzhak Rabin.

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The Levins counted more than 700 visitors during the seven hours they spent there last Yom Hazikaron (Memorial Day). "I tell my wife, 'His *kever*—gravesite—is somewhere between a junkyard and a sidewalk sale,'" says Mark, a motorcycle parts dealer. "It's a living memorial. We don't want to clean it up and make it nice. We just take off the Tastykakes because we don't want the ants."

He and Harriet also contributed mementoes. They brought chunks of cement that Michael and his sister Elisa hopped a fence to nab late one night soon after the Phillies' former home was razed. "I can guarantee you it's the only grave in Mount Herzl with rocks from Veterans Stadium on it!" Mark says.

The Phillies held a special place in Michael's heart and, by extension, in Mark's. When he visited Philadelphia for what turned out to be the last time, Michael told his father, "I want to go to a Phillies game." Mark, Harriet, Michael and Elisa (Michael's twin sister Dara did not go) went a few days later.

Mark recalls nothing about the game, the opponent or the result, but plenty about the family experience of "laughing, joking and having a great time." Mark normally took only one child at a time to a game, always on a Sunday. "That's what I remember: how different and how nice it was," he says.

The Levins arrived early and snagged a table at Harry the K's restaurant in the left-field gallery. Michael, who was observant, ate only a salad. As the family got up to head to their upper-deck seats near the left-field foul pole, Mark noticed pillars to his left and right. He stood behind one. "This is what I remember from Connie Mack Stadium," he told them. "My father would take us, we'd sit in left field and it would cut off my view of the field."

Soon after, the war broke out in Israel's north and Michael rushed back to rejoin his paratrooper unit.

Mark has many memories of Michael's sports fandom. He mentions the team pennants that still decorate Michael's room in the family's Langhorne home; the Phillies cap signed by Greg Luzinski;

the Flyers, 76ers and Eagles caps; framed posters of the 1993 World Series team and of that year's Phillies All-Stars. And the baseballs autographed by Lenny Dykstra and Mike Schmidt (Michael's favorite players), Darren Daulton, Mariano Duncan, John Kruk and others whose signatures he cannot decipher.

"We used to go to card signings," Mark says. "There's a great story I just remembered ..."

It was a Sunday afternoon game years ago. He and Michael left the Vet in the second inning and drove to a motorcycle shop in Broomall, where Mark's customer and friend, Stuart Goldis, hosted Schmidt for a card signing. Michael shook his hero's hand, got an autograph and posed with Schmidt for a picture. Father and son returned to the ballpark by the sixth inning. Michael scooted up the stadium ramp and disappeared. Mark still held the tickets, so Michael couldn't be inside. Or could he? The anxious dad searched the perimeter in a golf cart, then was taken to the police station in the basement. As he reported Michael missing, a security guard walked in, grasping Michael's shirt collar. Everyone asked how he'd gotten past the ticket takers.

"Oh, I found a nice family," Michael said. "I walked in with them. They don't stop kids." Mark laughs and remembers another Phillies experience. "These stories are coming back to me," he says by telephone from Michael's room, just days

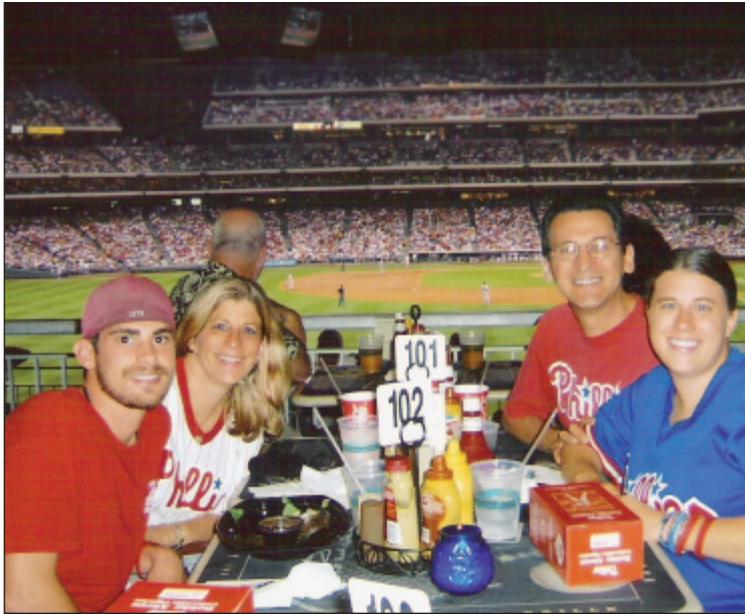
before what would have been his son's 25th birthday on Feb. 17.

"Michael was nine or 10 years old. Our seats were on the first base line, up about 20 rows. I told Michael that I'd taken a glove to every game I went to with my father, and I never caught a ball. Never even came close.

"Michael saw a friend of his in box seats down on the field. I said he could go there for an inning or two, and I'd watch him as he walked down. He waved to me. Later, he returns, reaches behind his back and says, 'You know that baseball you've been waiting your whole life for? Here it is!' He had reached over onto the field to get a foul ball. That was Michael. He did some amazing things. He was extremely generous."

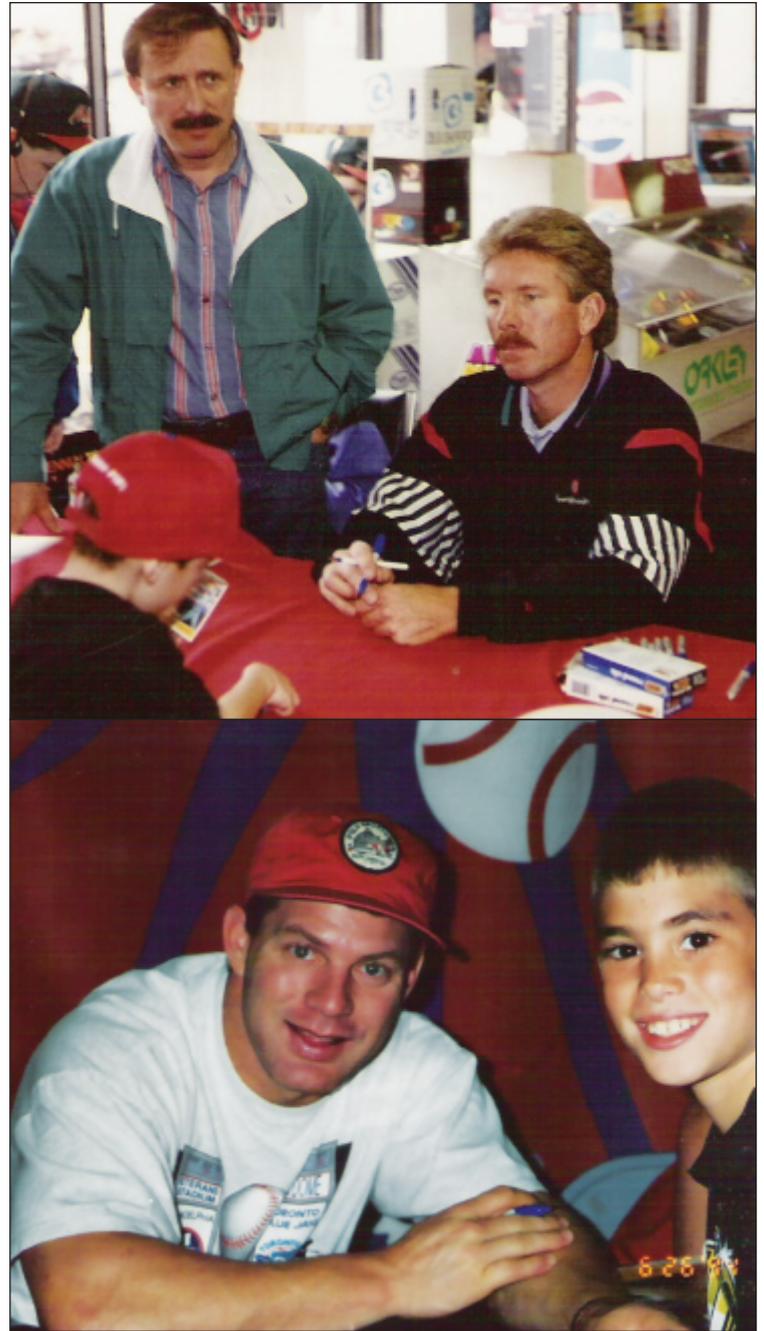
There's more. Lots more. "One game, the Phillies were leading about 15-1," Mark says. "Michael was five or six years old. He decided he wanted a Phillie Phanatic doll. We went to a stand, and a woman there gave it to him. He hugged it. I turned around, and the real Phillie Phanatic was kissing *me*! I couldn't believe it! At home, Michael told everyone, 'The Phanatic kissed my dad

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ABOVE: THE LEVIN FAMILY AT MICHAEL'S LAST PHILLIES GAME.

RIGHT: YOUNG MICHAEL GETS SIGNATURES FROM TWO OF HIS BOYHOOD HEROES, MIKE SCHMIDT (TOP) AND LENNY DYKSTRA.



because he bought me the Phillie Phanatic doll.”

And maybe the ultimate lesson taught by a boy who grew to be just 5'6" and 118 pounds, who made aliyah despite having no close family in Israel, who sneaked into the Israel Defense Forces through a second-floor window after the IDF dismissed his effort to enlist: Never give up.

Of the 15 or so games he and Michael attended, which is Mark's most memorable? "It was when Michael and I had a discussion—he was 12 or 13—and he said, 'One thing you never do is leave a game early, even if your team is losing by a lot of runs.' So we went to a game and the Phillies were losing by six runs in the ninth inning. It was spring, it was cold and the wind was blowing. I was not enjoying myself. We left early and listened to the game on the radio.

"The Phillies won on a grand slam in the ninth, and he never let me forget it. He would say, 'Remember, we're not leaving early.'"

Mark relishes the chance to talk about Michael, and to promote the values he lived by: love of God, Judaism and Zionism. The Michael Levin Memorial Fund for Israel that Mark and Harriet established helps ease the absorption of other "lone soldiers" who immigrate to Israel without a family support system nearby. A 2007 documentary, "A Hero in Heaven," and the accompanying lesson plan teach students worldwide about their son's life.

Many of Michael's possessions from Israel are displayed in his childhood bedroom next to the sports items and tributes from then-

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Gov. Ed Rendell, Sen. Arlen Specter and Michael's army buddies.

Letters and photographs arrive all the time in the mailbox, via email, on Michael's Facebook site and through aheroinheaven.com. The Levins save everything.

"We feel very connected to all these people. It makes us feel great. We love to hear from them," Mark says. "It seems that, more and more, word spreads about Michael. It's a wonderful legacy. We miss him every day, and we're very, very proud of him." □

Hillel Kuttler is a Baltimore-based freelance journalist who writes often for Inside.