

JOSH KADISH

My name is Josh Kadish. I was born and raised in the San Fernando Valley in Woodland Hills, lived in West Hills most of my life. It's where I live now with my wife and my daughter.

It's strange. I don't really have a lot of strong core memories before the shooting, or, as my family used to refer to it, "the incident." We had, as far as I know, a normal, middle class, American family. My dad is from the Valley. My mom is from Cleveland, but most of my childhood was spent with my grandparents, who were immigrants and Holocaust survivors. They lived close by, right down the street from where I live now. They were our daycare before we did preschool. My parents would drop us off every morning, me, and my brother. My brother is about three and a half years younger than me. We would play with them.

I was in elementary school; my brother was about to start. We transitioned from [my grandparents] being the primary caretakers to preschool, daycare, and then public school. I started attending the JCC, the Jewish Community Center that was local to us. They had a good daycare program and preschool and there was the heritage component as well. It was nice because we had a community. I was going there after school regularly. They also had different kinds of extracurriculars. I did musical theater when I was a kid there which was fun. That's kind of where my life was at before the shooting.

I almost felt like I was outside of myself.'

The shooting took place at a JCC satellite campus, the North Valley JCC in Granada Hills. We were doing summer camp there. I went all day, as well as my brother. I was nine years old when it happened, almost nine and a half, and my brother was five. It was a very hot day, early August. We got to the camp. Because [my brother] was kindergarten age, he was doing some kind of activity in the building. I was going on a planned field trip to the California Science Center. The shooting happened at 10:07 a.m. We were being loaded onto buses. I remember hearing a pop, like one or two or three pops. Everyone started looking toward the campus. There was a lot of confusion. All of a sudden, there's a switch that got flipped when the counselors realized what was happening. They got very intense and started saying, "We need to get on the bus. Everybody get on the bus immediately." The buses took off.

I had a feeling that something was up. The buses pulled over at a park nearby and [the counselors] gave us our brown paper lunches. I remember sitting with my two friends and I started saying, "There's something up. What's going on? We're being fed lunch at 10:30 in the morning. We're not going to the Science Center." I remember talking to them and feeling like my brother was involved in some way. I don't know why I had the instinct, but something was telling me that. We were at this park for a little bit [then] we

were taken to a safe house. We were set up in this home that was empty for hours. I remember having this weird sinking feeling like, *they're trying to distract us*. Everyone had too much of a smile plastered on their face; it was kind of feeling like they were trying to hide something.

I'm pulled aside along with this other kid. They said, "Your brothers – we want to let you know they both have been involved in a little accident. Your parents know you're here. They're both at the hospital. Would you like to go be with them?" I said, "I would like to go be with my parents." That was the only detail they provided. They didn't say it was a shooting. They didn't say what it was motivated by or anything like that. I was escorted by police, taken in a police cruiser to Providence Holy Cross Hospital where my brother was being operated on.

I almost felt like I was outside of myself, like I was observing something from a distance in a strange way. I remember very slowly making my way down this hallway to a waiting room and my mother and my father were there. My mom was a puddle; my dad was too. I remember the feeling of them hugging me for the first time. I remember my cheek felt like I had gone into a pool after I came up for air because they were so inconsolable. Another big thing I remember is that my dad's hand was filled with business cards from lawyers, rabbis, priests, fire department heads, police officers, police captains. People who were trying to lend their support in some way and to be there for them in some kind of capacity. I don't really remember the moment when I was told what happened. It was probably during that meeting with my parents. I think I kind of understood it. I remember vaguely knowing that it was motivated by a hate crime because we were Jewish.

'He was targeting Jewish people.'

The shooter, who is in maximum security prison to this day serving consecutive life sentences, fled the scene. He was a former member of the Aryan Brotherhood in Washington State. The story I know is that his ex-wife or ex-girlfriend was married to a member of the Aryan Brotherhood who ended his life in a firefight with the FBI. She supposedly said to [the shooter], "You're never going to amount to something that spectacular in your life." That was a big factor that motivated him to do something that made a big impact. He traveled down from Washington, bought a van and a massive arsenal of weapons – both legally and illegally. He came down to California, to Los Angeles, specifically because he knew there was a big Jewish community here. His words were, "I wanted to send a wakeup call to Jews," when he was interviewed or deposed. He first tried to target the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the Skirball Center (a Jewish Heritage Museum), and the Wilshire Boulevard Temple or another big synagogue. He realized that the security was too tight at all those places; he couldn't get in. The story goes that he was driving in the valley,

getting gasoline, happened to look up and saw that there's a Jewish Community Center. It was completely unguarded; you could walk right in.

The next day he walked in and sprayed the hallway. He sprayed his [gun] magazine everywhere; more than 70 rounds were fired. He shot a receptionist who was working there, this elderly woman in her 60s; Josh S, who was six years old, was shot in the leg; a camp counselor named Mindy F, who was 16, was also shot in the leg; and a kid named Zach was also shot. He was targeting Jewish people, but he had a lot of hate for anyone who didn't look, sound and talk like him. He followed a Filipino postal worker on his route and murdered him in front of someone's home. Everyone at the [JCC] survived; my brother wound up being the most critically injured of everyone at the campus. He was shot through his femur and through his abdomen and came extremely close to losing his life. He lost a third of his blood. He was very, very close to not making it.

From there, [the shooter] fled. Supposedly, he got a haircut of all things, went to get a sandwich at Subway. Then he booked a taxi to go to Las Vegas. Upon getting to Las Vegas a day later, he turned himself into the FBI headquarters there and said, "I'm the one that shot the Jews in California." The FBI agent who interviewed him after he turned himself in asked him, "How does it feel to shoot children? Are you targeting children?" His response was, "You have to aim lower." He's a very sick person and clearly needed help.

I kind of grew up almost overnight.'

[My brother Ben] needed seven hours of surgery at Holy Cross. Their triage and trauma team helped stop the bleeding. [Ben] was airlifted overnight to Children's Hospital in Hollywood. [Later, Ben] was in the ICU recovering and a social worker came [to see me] with a plastic baby doll. It had all kinds of like wires and tubes on them, all the things that you would see on a patient recovering in the hospital. She tried to explain to me, "Your brother's going to look like this." She asked me if I wanted to go see him and I said, "Yes, I do. I'm ready." I remember being kind of snippy. I felt like I kind of grew up almost overnight. Like, *you don't need to dumb things down for me anymore*. I was kind of mean to her. She was very understanding, and kind and she was doing her job. But I was defensive, I guess.

My brother was in a pretty big room from what I remember, with a sliding door. I went in there and I didn't see him at first. All I saw were stacks and piles of stuffed teddy bears and balloons and flowers. It was unbelievable. I couldn't see him in all of it. He was so tiny among the sea of toys and gifts that people had sent overnight. I remember approaching him, going up to the bed – he was asleep – saying his name and seeing a tear come down his face. He was in the clear. He had a long road of recovery, but he was going to make it. He was going to survive.

I remember going [to the hospital every day]. That would be my after school ritual. The space my brother stayed at for a couple months at this hospital was incredible. It was like an indoor playground that had video games and books, a library, and a whole kitchen that you could go to and get treats anytime of the day. It was amazing to a little nine-year-old. All the staff was aware of the situation as well, so they were extremely kind to my brother, my family. [Ben] had a lot of incredible nurses who took care of him.

He was at Children's Hospital then he got transferred to the Kaiser close to our home in Woodland Hills. He was there for a week or two. There was a big procession that was made about him going home. The media put their own spin on it with a news story. The local fire department drove us home in a fire truck; he [Ben] got gifted a fire engine helmet. We had a party when we came home. I think I was a little jealous but I was also craving something more suburban, more normal, even though nothing was the same.

I don't think that our lives were ever the same.'

[Ben] had to live downstairs because he couldn't walk. He was in a wheelchair. As far as the physical recovery, he had to wear an external fixator for many months, which is the series of metal rods that go into your leg to set the bone straight again so that it can heal because his femur was snapped in half. We used to refer to them as "pins" and had to be cleaned regularly, which the nurses could only do by waking my brother up around the clock. He also had to wear a colostomy bag because he was shot right through the abdomen. His digestive tract was completely knocked out and he's had a lot of issues with that since then. He had to learn to walk again. It was a multi-tiered process.

Because I was young, it's almost like a lot of my core memories were wiped away from before [the shooting]. It was such an extreme experience that took up so much emotional real estate in my mind. In the months after this happened, because the story was covered nationally, there was a lot of attention and a lot of stories. These news organizations and journalists would send [tapes of the coverage] to our home. We still have all these old VHS tapes of the story being covered. As a coping mechanism, my brother would watch them and fall asleep to them for years. I know [Ben] had a lot of difficulty sleeping by himself. My mom would sleep in his bed until he was 9, 10, 11 years old. Sometimes she would come in my bedroom if I was scared. I remember before never caring if my door was open or not at night, and after [the shooting] my door has always been closed because I was afraid of someone coming into the home. It's gotten a lot better since then, but I did for a while react to loud noises and surprising things like that. Various images and things sometimes trigger me and make me have panic attacks.

When I saw the media coverage, the constant regurgitation of it, that was where I was much more aware of the severity of what happened. I connected to, *oh, this is because of my identity. This is because of who we are. It was a hate crime.* All those kinds of monikers and descriptors were used constantly in the media; it

created a narrative. The thing that I've struggled with and continues to bother me is that the media packages things in a very concise way. In my brother's circumstance, thankfully, he survived. But they used that as an opportunity to narrativize and made it seem like, *okay, he's better now. He's able to walk again. What a beautiful, joyful story of hope.* That was exactly how every story packaged it. Meanwhile, I don't think that our lives were ever the same.

"There's a lot of unresolved stuff."

My family's dynamics with each other are still pretty chaotic. I think there's a lot of unresolved stuff. There have been moments where we talk about it pretty openly, then there's moments where we skip over it. There's a lot of complexity. My brother to me seems very checked out these days. He doesn't open up a lot. Occasionally, he'll talk more deeply when we do go back and talk about this trauma, usually because the date is approaching, the anniversary of the shooting. "Tragiversary," that's a much better phrase. My mom is kind of obsessed with it. Every year since it happened, she coordinates a barbecue or some kind of a get-together with us or a trip to get away. Something to be together as a family. Even though we're not necessarily talking about it, not necessarily reliving things, it's the elephant in the room.

There are days where it helps me to talk about it. It helped me to become more involved with organizations, like Everytown [for Gun Safety], where you meet other people who have gone through similar tragedies, and that's your community. You create that community. You can relate to one another because your circumstances are so similar. I think for me there's always been this weird dichotomy because so much of the experience is connected to my identity, my faith. Then the other part of it is, it was a mass shooting. It was a gun violence crime. I think there's this element where I can't fully equate my experience to many people.

I've had debates with my wife and discussions about how we approach it when it's time to talk about this stuff [with our daughter]. *How much is too much?* The long-term trauma is not really thought about, remarked upon, examined, or explored. I feel like I'm the one who has to do the work, to approach other people, talk about it, and understand it and actually make an impact. I don't know what the county would do specifically to help with that, but I think the short term is given much more credence and thought and care than the long-term kind of ramifications.

There's too much. These events wind up becoming just another story in this news cycle. I think there's a corollary, a parallel, to how veterans are treated after wars. In the immediate aftermath, they're given a lot of access, care, and everything like that, but there's zero to no exploration of how they deal with things a decade later, two decades later. People are abandoned more often than not. If you don't have a close family and support system, you're out of luck. Even if you do, it's not always a guarantee.

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I think in some ways I was more impacted mentally and emotionally by this [than Ben]. My brother, obviously, went through a lot of emotional and mental stuff, but his trauma was more physical. When you're nine or 10 years old, you have a better understanding of social and community implications about things, and your identity and how you fit in the world than a five-year-old would. It's just different. Because of that, I view advocacy as more important and integral to my identity. I dove headfirst into film and media and entertainment. I think that was me trying to understand *how would I frame my story?* How would I help change people's minds to show them it's not just the experience of going through the shooting itself and the immediate recovery, it's living with it. Living with those experiences afterward and how that affects every relationship in your life, every facet of your life.

