

Braking Hard



DROP IN DEATHS:
348 people were killed
on Israeli roads in
2009, compared with
709 in 1994

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Israel has succeeded in reducing fatal road accidents. But there's still a way to go.

Lawrence Rifkin

SOME 40 YEARS AGO, NOT long after the Six Day War, a young American Hebrew school teacher enthusiastically regaled his class about a recent trip to Israel. A passionate Zionist, he could look at the worst facets of Israel's collective persona and somehow craft a picture that was still positive and appealing.

One of his stories was about a deeply tanned *sherut* taxi driver in shorts and sandals, who drove at breakneck speed up the winding road to Jerusalem in an ancient black Checker cab with a dozen suitcases and two spare tires strapped haphazardly to the roof. But what was really scary, he said, was looking out at all the other people driving the same way.

"Israeli drivers are nuts!" the teacher exclaimed. "They think they're in tanks headed to Cairo!"

Times have changed. The Checkers are gone, much of the road to Jerusalem has been widened and even straightened out, and Israel has a peace treaty with Egypt. And despite a

recent spate of horrific, high-profile smashups that have taken out entire families, traffic deaths are down.

Indeed, at a March press conference, Transportation Minister Yisrael Katz announced that 348 people had been killed on the roads in 2009, compared to 449 the year before and an all-time high of 709 in 1994. "It's hard to speak of success when even one person dies," Katz said at the time, "but we have shown an unprecedented drop in fatalities, and we are pleased with that."

Tourists and other visitors to Israel – and even many Israelis – might wonder what Katz was talking about. After all, isn't this the land of the Israeli Driver? You know, the one at the traffic light who leans on his horn at the first sign of green? The one on the highway who, seeing another driver ahead of him signal that he's about to overtake a slower vehicle, speeds up to pass first? The driver who refuses – but absolutely refuses – to be anyone's sucker?

Probably not, says Dr. Tova Rosenbloom, a psychologist and criminologist who heads Israel's Research Institute of Human Factors in

Road Safety. "Many think that in the U.S. or Europe, drivers are better mannered," she tells *The Jerusalem Report*. "But there are no studies that show this. They are worse than us in road fatalities – per capita, per vehicle, per mile, no matter how you look at it."

Or Yarok (Green Light), a private interest group that seeks to raise traffic safety awareness through lobbying, workshops for teens and even the donation of patrol vehicles for traffic police, says the decline in fatalities was due to improvements in numerous areas ranging from safer cars and roads to better law enforcement and rescue services.

But they're still not satisfied with these results. "We as people have a tendency to rest on our laurels," Avi Naor, Or Yarok's founder and chairman, tells *The Report*. "I feel awful when I see accidents on TV. At a personal level I feel that we didn't do enough. We must do more."

Naor has good reason to feel this way. His son, Ran, was killed in an auto accident while on leave from the army 15 years ago, and ever since, the businessman, who once headed the high-tech giant Amdocs, has devoted a consid-

erable part of his time and fortune to changing the situation on the roads.

“The first year or two I did what I did chiefly out of emotion,” he said. “I used my business trips to learn about road safety abroad. I learned that other countries were achieving remarkable results in reducing fatalities and severe accidents. What they had in common was government accountability and the ability to run multidisciplinary programs involving more than one government office. Since then, Or Yarok is not just a memorial to Ran, but a vehicle to push this government to learn from the experience of others.”

SOME EXPERTS SAY THE “experience of others” should include an emphasis on reducing traffic density, which reflects the number of vehicles per mile of paved roadway, something they claim is a key to traffic safety.

“Israel has 11,000 miles of roads and 2.4 million vehicles,” says Prof. Shlomo Maital of the Technion’s **S. Neaman Institute** and a columnist for this publication. “That comes out to just 21 feet per vehicle. At that rate, Israeli traffic density is twice that of Europe and three times as dense as the U.S. If every vehicle were traveling at the same time, our roads would be one big parking lot.”

Like many planners, Maital feels the answer lies in mass transit, especially trains. “There’s a race between roads and cars,” he tells The Report. “It’s a race that roads can never win.”

But such paradigm-changing remedies take time. What about the here and now? One answer is existing infrastructure, particularly in densely populated areas, and a Transportation Ministry spokesman has told the media that the government has already spent the equivalent of over \$2 billion in improvements in this realm since last year. Another is legislation, says psychologist Rosenbloom.

“Here, seatbelt violations are a primary reason for police to stop cars, whereas in other countries they’re secondary, meaning a driver must be stopped for something else before being cited for non-compliance,” she explains. “Also, there are numerous reasons a car can be impounded on the spot. One is in instances of DUI [driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs], of course. But it can also happen when a driver runs a red light or is caught driving with a license that’s been suspended or revoked. No questions are asked. The car is simply taken away.”

Police spokesman Yigal Habsor says traffic cops work hard to enforce the law. “We pay attention first and foremost to road offenses that endanger lives, such as speeding, ignoring

red lights, reckless driving and overtaking in no-passing zones,” he tells The Report. “But it’s also in our interest to merely demonstrate a presence. That’s why we have our flashing lights on all the time. When motorists see us, they tend to drive better.”

Indeed, the traffic force seems to be looking more and more toward psychology to guide its policies, and at the beginning of April it announced a new approach to issuing warnings instead of summonses.

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**– Or Yarok Chairman
Avi Naor**

“We studied 10,000 drivers over a two-year period starting in 2006 and ending in 2008,” Habsor says. “Five thousand were given tickets, and the other 5,000 were issued warnings. Interestingly, we found that those who had received warnings were twice as likely to commit another traffic offense.”

Under the old policy, warnings were issued at an officer’s discretion. But since April 1, the only drivers eligible for warnings have been those with at least 10 years on the road and five years with a clean record. Everyone else is hauled in.

“We assumed that people would heed the warnings and take advantage of a chance to correct their driving behavior. The results of the study proved we were wrong,” Habsor acknowledges.

He also laments the budgetary constraints that traffic police operate under. “In 1995, a blue-ribbon committee recommended that Israel have 450 traffic cruisers on its roads at all times,” he said. “There is actually only half that amount; there’s clearly a need for more personnel and vehicles.”

JUDGING FROM RECENT EDITORIAL letters to the editor and talk show comments, authorities must also punish violators more harshly.

Over the years, citizens have been left numb from the relatively light fines and sentences meted out to many serious offenders, especially those with political and social connections.

In 2006, in one of the most celebrated cases in recent memory, Avigdor Klagsbald, one of the country’s most prominent lawyers, caused an accident that killed a young woman and her 6-year-old son. After prosecutors dragged their feet, they finally charged Klagsbald with negligence rather than manslaughter, and the judge, clearly reacting to the resulting clamor, sentenced him to 15 months in prison and revoked his driver’s license for 10 years, a relatively stiff punishment for negligence. However, an appeals court later reduced the sentence by two months – citing reverse discrimination. For good behavior, Klagsbald was ultimately freed after eight months.

More recently, though, a judge in Tel Aviv sentenced a 27-year-old driver to 20 years behind bars – believed to be the toughest prison term ever imposed for traffic manslaughter in Israel.

The man, who was intoxicated, had been a passenger in an SUV whose driver had gotten out for a breathalyzer test. He took the wheel and, together with another passenger, sped off. Several minutes later, after running a red light, he plowed into two young women, killing one and critically injuring the other.

“The time has come to make it clear to drivers who are under the influence of alcohol,” wrote Judge Zvi Gurfinkel in his recommendation for sentencing, “that they are to be judged according to the same standards as someone who indiscriminately opens fire with a weapon, even if they do not hit anyone.”

Gurfinkel described the driver’s behavior as “not negligent but reckless and criminal.” He gave the other man in the SUV five years for having abandoned the victims.

In a post-sentencing statement, Or Yarok, the interest group started by Avi Naor, said it hoped the punishments meted out by the judge would “establish a new threshold” that was “less lenient” toward traffic offenders.

Naor says soberly that he knows that none of this will bring back his son. Yet he’s heartened by what he sees as new attitudes toward traffic safety and road behavior in Israel.

“Has there been an improvement? Absolutely, yes,” he tells The Report. “The improvement is due to increased awareness, to government decisions. The police have improved their work dramatically, focusing on drunk drivers and speeding. There’s now an understanding that road accidents aren’t just a matter of bad luck. They’re something we as drivers – and as members of society – can prevent.”