

# Abigail Elizabeth Litle

21.8.1988 - 5.3.2003

April 5, 2003

Dear Friend,

It is hard to believe that our oldest daughter, Abigail Elizabeth Litle, was killed in the Haifa bus bombing one month ago on Wednesday, March 5<sup>th</sup>. During the past month so many people have called, sent cards and come to see us to express their sympathies. How thankful we are for the many friends whom God has given us and for the wonderful body of the Messiah.

Abigail's absence the past month has highlighted how precious she was to us. We've begun to experience what it means to miss her presence. We miss hearing her voice in conversation and laughter with us and with others around our home. We miss seeing her sitting in our living room working on homework, one of her many special projects or reading a book. We miss having her sit with us at the table during meals when we were so often together as a family. We miss seeing her beautiful smile.

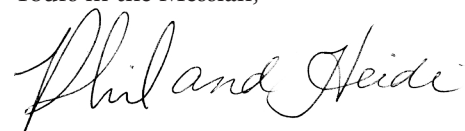
When Abigail was present she added something to our lives. We miss her questions. We miss her eagerness to learn, her hunger for knowledge. We miss her caring heart and her attention. We miss her desire to impact and influence her world one person at a time.

Many people recognized the great inner strength that existed in Abigail. There was a beautiful, quiet determination in her that had been born as her stubborn self-will, but had been yielded to the love of Christ. She wanted her life to make an impact and have meaning. Her personal calendar – in which she recorded occasional homework assignments, friends' birthdays, drew cute pictures and scrawled notes to and from friends – included a page in which she had written her paraphrase of Chris Rice's song *The Power of a Moment*. Underneath she had drawn a picture of a tree in full leaf with two clouds touching over the sun (or moon) as it's raining. That page expressed the cry of a heart that desired to be used by God.

The measure of our love for Abigail can be found in the depth of our pain. How it hurts that we can no longer hold her, that our partnership in the dreams she dreamt is broken and that our dreams which included her being here on earth with us are over. But we are finding comfort and strength in the Lord through the prayers of the multitudes who are interceding for us – many who we have never met. We are thankful that we can know that we will hold her once again as we share together in our Heavenly Father's Kingdom.

We have tried to record some of the events and our experiences beginning with the moments we first heard of the bus bombing in Haifa. Our desire is that the Lord would encourage your hearts and strengthen you as you pray for us in the weeks and months ahead.

Yours in the Messiah,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Phil and Heidi". The ink is dark and the script is fluid and personal.

## March 5

I was sitting here at our desk at home trying to finish up a letter to you. I'd finished explaining *Purim* and *Passover*. Heidi was helping me by looking for pictures to include. She'd found a broad choice of pictures of the children dressed up in their *Purim* costumes. I especially wanted to include a picture of Abigail in kindergarten dressed up as Queen Esther. I remembered how eager she was to look royal.

The phone rang. It was about 2:30 pm. The call was from a friend who asked, "Are all the children OK? There has just been a *piguah* (a terrorist attack) in Haifa!" I turned to Heidi to check the home status, to which she replied, "Yes, they're all where they should be." We then dropped what we were doing and turned on the news to find out what had happened.

Heidi had just returned from taking Josiah to Irit, the special language teacher he, Noah and Abigail all met with weekly. Noah was home, although he was supposed to have walked from school to Bible Club with Elishua. He had forgotten and come with Hannah instead. Where was Abigail? She was to finish school at 2:05 and then take her time to get a bus to arrive at her lesson with Irit that started at three.



The initial news reports were confused. At first it was reported that bus 129 had been bombed and showed a map placing it near Horev Center. But it also talked about the bombing occurring in the Central Carmel. We knew traffic in the area would have ground to halt, so at 2:45 Heidi called Irit to tell her that we weren't sure where Abigail was, but that due to the bombing we didn't expect that she would be on time. We were growing

concerned, but Irit was sure that the bus was headed toward the Central Carmel – the opposite direction from where Abigail was going – so Abigail was fine.

Then the first pictures from the scene began to air. Our concern quickly grew to worry. It was obvious that this was a bus headed from Central Carmel toward our home and Abigail's lesson. When they aired the bus number – 37 – we began to fear the worst. She would either take the 022 with her friend, Maram, or else the 37.

"Would she take such an early bus to get there?" I questioned.

Anytime a terrorist incident occurs in Israel, the phone starts ringing. Especially if there is even the remotest chance that someone you know might have been at the scene. I needed to confirm not only where each of the children were, but also where the staff and STINTers were here in Haifa. The cellular network was overwhelmed and I couldn't get through. I called on the regular phone lines to our

pastor, Shmuel, to see if he had heard about the bombing and to say that we didn't know where Abigail was.

From the moment our friend first called until 3:00 there was a constant stream of phone calls asking about Abigail. No one knew where she was and we couldn't help them. We tried calling Maram, hoping Abigail had gotten on the bus with her, but there was no answer. By 3:00 Heidi insisted we start calling the emergency numbers listed for each of the three hospitals. She got through to two of the local hospitals who told us that Abigail wasn't on their lists of the injured. But the third hospital's line was too tied up to get through.

Pastor Shmuel then called back. He asked what we had heard from the hospitals and wondered if we had called them back since they would be updating their lists. I told him that we hadn't been able to get through to Rambam Hospital and he volunteered to drive down and check the list personally since the hospital isn't far from his home. I agreed and asked him to let us know if he found out anything.

The minutes seemed to stretch out as we persistently tried to get through to the hospital and answered calls from the children's friends. Maram arrived home and called. She asked about Abigail. They had finished school and she had gotten separated from Abigail when she went to buy a sandwich. She told us that when she got to the bus stop to catch the 022 bus Abigail hadn't been there. Apparently she had caught the earlier 37 bus.

It was becoming very clear that Abigail had probably boarded the bombed 37 bus. We began preparing to head to Rambam Hospital, assuming that either Abigail was injured to the point that she couldn't identify herself – or worse. Heidi grabbed Abigail's passport, made a last call and got through to the hospital. After describing Abigail, they recommended we come since there were several unidentified people in critical condition.

On our way to the hospital, the Lord was gracious to put songs of praise in our hearts. Just before we arrived, we got a call. A social worker from Rambam was with Shmuel. They asked us to come immediately to the hospital. We knew that she had been found though probably not in good condition. Thankfully we were only three minutes drive away.

The nurse directed us to a hallway off the Emergency Room. There we saw Shmuel with a social worker named Adi, who asked us to sit down. There in the hallway we heard from Adi that Abigail was dead. Shmuel confirmed that he had identified Abigail – and that she was dead.

Shmuel said, through a miracle, Abigail's body was whole and she had not been injured by shrapnel. One of us, as parents, needed to identify her for the police, but both of us really wanted to see our girl. We waited with Shmuel outside the morgue and were joined by Erez. While we waited, the doctor who examined her upon arrival came to speak with us. He indicated that apparently she had been very close to the blast and had suffered internal injuries from the shock wave generated by the bomb. She may have been alive when the paramedic team arrived, but died on the way to the hospital. They had worked to revive her, but were unable to do so.

We were finally ushered in to view her body. It was her! She looked as if she might have fallen from her bicycle – a few minor cuts and scrapes on her face. Her hair was a bit blown back, but otherwise in place. Her beautiful teeth were clearly displayed between her open lips. She had a look of peace on her face. We just touched her cheek and cried for our baby, our girl, whose life had left her body.



They showed us her hands. Soot rested on her wrists, but the hands were whole and the nails painted in the translucent pink I remembered. On her hand was her baptism ring with the words of the verse we'd chosen for her at birth engraved in Hebrew. Heidi removed the ring and read it, "Joy and gladness will be found in her." She wanted to keep it, but we had to put it back. They then showed us her other hand and we identified the familiar silver lighting bolt ring which she always wore.



And then we had to leave. The police needed a signed statement for their files and the hospital needed to fill out their report to send to the Interior Ministry which is responsible to issue a death certificate.

We waited in the hall for a social worker to accompany us back home to tell the children. I had turned my mobile phone off because it hadn't stopped ringing since the bombing. Thankfully, Erez and Shmuel were handling many calls and questions. They told us that Jena was at home with the children waiting for us to return and tell them what had happened to their sister.

Shmuel drove our car home for us, bringing Tzvika, the social worker assigned to help us, while Erez took his own car. When we arrived at home Heidi and I sat with one child in each of our arms and I explained that Abigail had been on the bus and that she had died. We had some time together to weep and then I felt led to read John 11:17-44.

The news of Abigail's death spread very quickly. We weren't alone as a family for long. Soon our neighbors, friends and members of our believing community were with us, grieving with us, crying with us and seeking to help meet our needs. The phone started ringing again and others started answering for us – fielding questions and giving us the chance to speak with close friends wishing sympathy. I knew I needed to call family in the States and let them know. Between the calls and visitors I was able to touch bases with Heidi's and my parents, brothers and sisters.

After everyone left that first evening, the reporters began to come. The largest circulation Hebrew newspaper came first, asking for a few details and a picture. We were able to insure that they got a good recent picture of Abigail and that they spelled her name correctly (in Hebrew at least). After this first reporter left, everyone went to bed while I checked the many voice mail messages on my cellular phone. The door rang, but I didn't have the

strength to answer it. Josiah and Heidi got up and spoke to a number of reporters. The news was getting out.

It was late when we got to sleep that first night, but both Heidi and I awoke early the next morning. I just wanted to get back to routine, but it was even earlier than usual. So I quietly stepped into Abigail and Hannah's bedroom. Looking at the pictures on the wall, the books on the shelves, the knickknacks, and all of Abigail's things – I just began to weep. She wouldn't be coming back again. There wouldn't be the sound of her voice saying good morning, there was going to be a permanent hole in our family and in my heart where she was supposed to be.

## Shiva

Thursday and Friday were weepy days of mourning for us. Since family members desired to attend the funeral, we chose Sunday, March 9<sup>th</sup> instead of an earlier date as Jewish custom would have it. In Jewish custom the family "sits" *shiva* in the home of the deceased following the funeral while friends come by to express their sorrow and support for the family. Because of the delay in order to let family arrive, we began to sit *shiva* immediately and the house swelled with children, teachers, members of our congregation and many, many friends.

Heidi and I cried with our friends as we remembered Abigail's life. Someone found a corkboard and hung it up in the living room. It is still there filled with pictures of Abigail at various stages of her life. Others began organizing food and bringing drinks. People we hadn't seen for years came by. Neighbors we barely knew dropped in. And our closest friends stuck close by, answering the ever ringing phones and offering comfort and practical help.

Lots of classmates came from each of our children's classes to visit. The teens sat in Josiah's room or in the girls' room and talked, while the smaller ones hung out in the little boys' room or outside. The combination of believers and non-believers was just amazing. God was clearly being glorified by Abigail's life and the 'seeing' of our hope in Yeshua in her death.

A well-spring of sorrow was poured out at the site of the bombing as well. Friends of each of those killed put up pictures and wrote notes on the stone wall by the bus stop. They sat, sang songs together, lit candles and remembered their friends. Friends put up a large picture of Abigail with the words of Job 19:25-27: "I know that my redeemer lives..."





## The Funeral March 9

More than 1400 mourners – Messianic believers and nonbelievers, neighbors and schoolmates – whose lives had been touched by Abigail's life or death, gathered to comfort us and to honor her memory at the Messianic cemetery in Haifa. They were joined by the mayor of Haifa, the US ambassador, and MK Yuval Steinitz, who came to share official condolences with the family and those gathered. Radio and TV reporters were present to cover the event. But this was not to be just another terrorist-victim funeral.

The service began with a cloudy sky casting an appropriate pall over Abigail's casket, which was draped with Israeli and American flags and perched above its final resting-place. But even as our pastor, Shmuel, opened by sharing his own sense of loss and grief over the tragic death of Abigail, a thread of hope wove its way into the fabric of the day. This "goodbye" was not to be the end.

Songs of praise to God that Abigail particularly liked were sung. I addressed those gathered, at times my voice breaking, and spoke of dreams for Abigail's future which would never come true and the immeasurable void which her death left in my heart, and in the heart's of each of us. I confessed our unshakable confidence that though Abigail's body lay in the nearby coffin, Abigail was not present with us today. Rather she was fully alive and enjoying the presence of the Lord Yeshua, into whose hands she had committed her life as Savior. I will deeply miss Abigail, but we will also surely meet again, face to face and forever. Shmuel then spoke and every heart's questions and aches were heard and answered by God's Word.

And then Abigail's coffin was lowered into the ground. As in Jewish custom, the grave was then filled in. It had rained earlier so the dirt was hard to move. Many men took turns moving it. Josiah also helped. It was a difficult site to see him help fill in his sister's grave.

A companion from the puppet ministry in which she participated, and non-believing friends from her school all testified to the impact that this young girl's faith and love had on those around her. Phil's father shared how each member of the wider family would experience their grievous loss. Even those who had not known her personally could not help but be convinced that Abigail had something very unique to give, and that she gave it freely.

Pastor Daniel Yahav, speaking "as a Jew, as an Israeli, as a Zionist, and as a follower of Messiah", served as a representative of the local Messianic Jewish community in embracing us in our grief and loss and affirming our unity of faith and destiny in Yeshua the Messiah.

By the time the visiting dignitaries had their turn, the clouds had cleared and bright sunlight flooded the cemetery. Death had been swallowed up in victory; grief tempered, even sweetened, by the confident hope of a future joyous reunion. God had been magnified and glorified and His Son Yeshua powerfully presented as the true source of life and hope for all men.

Member of Knesset Yuval Steinitz recognized that we had linked our fate with that of the Jewish people and its national "redemption", and shared in the price of that redemption with the tragic loss of our daughter. Both he and the US ambassador spoke of our family as somehow symbolic of the linkage between America and Israel, but Steinitz clearly saw that it was our Messianic faith which had given us a special love and commitment to the Jewish people. He welcomed us, and the Messianic congregations generally, as partners in the Israeli national cause.

Heidi and I, and then each member of the family placed a single rose on the cross over Abigail's grave. And then the many, many

wreaths and flowers from those present and those from around the world were placed over her grave.

Following the ceremony, one after another of the non-believers present expressed their awe at what they had just witnessed. A TV correspondent who had covered many such funerals confessed that this was the first time she had been brought to tears by what she saw and heard. The police commander supervising security arrangements, a confident unbeliever, could not help but acknowledge the *truth* of our faith. Similarly Steinitz, with whom Shmuel had shared the Gospel as he prepped him the day before the ceremony, had to acknowledge that he had glimpsed a true faith that went far beyond mere religion.

The correspondent for an Israeli radio station insisted that his editor interview Shmuel for the evening news magazine program, broadcast between 5-6pm. Following a clip from when I spoke during the funeral, Shmuel was asked "What is a Messianic Jewish congregation?" His clear, sensitive reply was a wonderful testimony to the Messiahship of Yeshua, His atoning work, and the commitment of those who believe in Him to Israel and the Jewish people.

Please pray that the ongoing testimony to the saving power of Yeshua the Messiah – as a result of these events – would continue to fill Abigail's death with meaning and significance.



Abigail Elizabeth Litle

21.8.1988 - 05-03.2003

Joy and gladness will be found in her,  
singing and sound of a melody.

Isaiah 51:3