

A Life Worth Living

Ten years after his death in battle, Alex Singer's heroic life remains for many a Zionist inspiration.

By Robby Berman

While in an officers' training course, Alex Singer, a young American who made aliya in 1985 and joined the IDF, wrote in his diary "... as I progress toward

the course's end, I feel a pang of fear. If a war comes, when the war comes, I will have to lead men to die... I will have to have the calm power to yell to them or to whisper - *Kadima* [Forward]. And, I will have to have the calm power to step forward myself."

When the time came, Alex Singer had that calm power. He was killed in combat in Lebanon on September 15, 1987, his 25th birthday.

"Throughout the years we continue to receive telephone calls and letters from people who just want to share with us in what way Alex touched their lives," says his mother, Suzanne. "Some of them never even met him."

Though it's a decade since his death, Alex's spirit lives on in his writings and drawings, and through an organization founded in his name. His parents have published a collection of Alex's letters, journal entries and skillful sketches in a book entitled *Alex Singer: Building a Life*. Alex's artwork, after many years of exhibition in different countries, is soon to be on permanent display in Jerusalem. And next month, the Singer family will commemorate the birth and death of their son by flying here from their home near Washington, DC, and leading a hike through the hills of Jerusalem, ending with a memorial service at Alex's grave at the Mount Herzl military cemetery.

"The Jerusalem hike is a fitting memorial activity," says Alex's father, Max. "It symbolizes Alex's love for the land, his love for walking."

Max Singer is a public policy analyst who

has been involved with several public-policy think tanks. He cofounded The Hudson Institute, one of the first conservative think tanks, served as director of Jerusalem's World Institute, and in 1983 established the Potomac Organization. Suzanne Singer is managing editor of *Biblical Archeology Review* and of *Moment* magazine.

"In 1973 we moved to Israel for what was supposed to be one year," Max Singer recounts. "That one year turned into four."

As a result, their four sons spent their adolescent years here, and all ended up making aliya. Today Saul is an editorial writer for *The Jerusalem Post*, Benji runs a Japanese restaurant in Tel Aviv and Daniel is director of marketing for a Judaica company.

Before Alex made aliya, he finished the thesis that helped him earn his BA summa cum laude from Cornell University. Entitled *Letters from the Diaspora*, it consisted of personal letters he wrote while traveling through Russia, Spain and England. They expressed his feelings about visiting these countries and considering their past history, and present attitude, in relation to Jews.

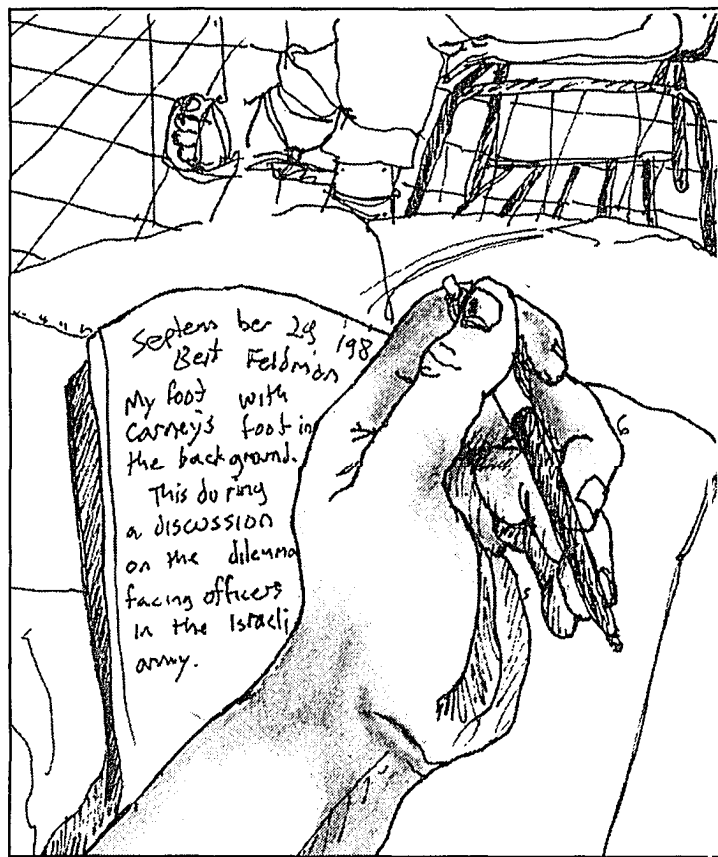
"Alex had completed his junior year abroad at the London School of Economics, and it was during that year in England when he traveled through the rest of Europe," his father says. During two of his collegiate summers, Alex attended The Brandeis Bardin Institute, a camp in California where participants explore the significance of Judaism in the modern world.

"It was the Brandeis Bardin Institute which was fundamental in turning Alex on to Judaism," his mother recalls. "Alex was critical, but proud."

But who was Alex Singer? "He had this really zany sense of humor," says his brother Daniel, who can't help smiling when picturing Alex. "He was an individualist. He did things his own way."

C.B. Ghast, who at the time of Alex's death was, like him, a *hayal boded* (lone immigrant soldier), remembers him warmly.

"Although Alex was a physically tall,



The writings and drawings Alex Singer left behind in his diary constitute a moving testament to a life cut short by terrorist bullets in Lebanon.

PHOTOS COURTESY THE ALEX SINGER PROJECT

imposing guy, his easygoing attitude made it great to talk to him. We both lived on Kibbutz Ein Tzurim when we were off duty from the military. I was six months behind Alex in the army and he knew exactly what I was going through. One weekend, I told Alex I was having a particularly tough time, and he was really supportive."

A few days later, when Ghast was back in the army in the middle of a desert training exercise, he received a care package.

"I was shocked. Here was one lone soldier sending another lone soldier a care package. At first I thought it was funny. But then it really touched me."

Not everyone remembers Alex as a zany, easygoing guy. While Amit Korakin, a soldier who served under Alex, recounts the military details of the fateful September night, he interjects a personal note.

"Alex was very serious. Don't get me wrong. Alex was with us for only four months and already we loved him. But he was strict on discipline. What soldier likes discipline? He wanted us to do things the best way they could be done. He had the mentality of a paratrooper, and we didn't."

He was also a writer and a painter. But the image of Alex Singer that has persisted is that of a young, motivated Zionist who made aliya from exile and died defending his country.

Alex Singer: Building a Life is peppered with his thoughts on Zionism and Judaism, and it retains its power to engender idealism, inspire thought and encourage concern for friends and nation.

Committing his uninhibited stream of thought to paper was not only enjoyable for Alex: "When I write I feel like I've just bitten into a York Peppermint Patty." It was also cathartic: "Writing what I have written here has helped me immensely - draining the emotion out of me, and given me the peace needed to allow me to rest."

Though Alex would often record his thoughts about religion, homeland, death and idealism, he would chide himself for periods of "not thinking/writing enough about the big issues."

His writings reveal that he constantly

challenged himself to understand his heritage better. The list of Jewish issues with which he grappled was as long as he was tall. It was his tenacious analysis of Jewish issues that sired his strong appreciation for the depth and power of Judaism: "My connection to this country is only strengthened as my knowledge of, and commitment to, Judaism grows."

On his own perfunctory religious observance he wrote: "My kippa goes from my pocket to my head like a yo-yo. But I don't think compromise on appearance has to be compromise on values."

Although he was far from being a jingoist, his connection to the people and to the land of Israel was unyielding: "This country is my home emotionally, religiously, and in every other way except for the location of my family... I feel more at home here than I can ever describe... Don't read any of the above as blind nationalism. It is not. There are many things about this country that I truly hate."

His writings are palpable evidence that he considered and weighed the many facets of difficult issues - aliya being one of them. Yet, he never allowed deliberation to paralyze him. In the end, he made decisions. As his oldest brother Saul said when he eulogized him, "Your message to me was 'Do! ... Do what is right. Only then will you have the power to affect the world.'"

Alex did what he felt was right. After moving here, he immediately joined the IDF and was given special permission upon graduating a sergeants' course to go directly to an officers' training course. He became a lieutenant in the Paratroops. In his correspondence, he writes about his dream of commanding young soldiers, teaching them, bettering them and contributing to making a better Israel. But as an officer, his first assignment, to his chagrin, was to improve the fighting capabilities of reserve soldiers who protect Air Force bases.

His loneliness is prominent throughout his writings. During basic training he scribbled: "Some of the pain is physical and some (more) comes from making new friends and

then being separated from them.”

Yet his letters have their share of light moments. One evening, while writing to his grandparents, he tried to describe a lunar eclipse. “An eclipse of the moon means we’ll see the shadow of the earth pass over the moon. This means that if we go to the edge of the Earth and wave we should see our shadow. But I’d rather not go to the edge of the Earth tonight.”

In most Israeli wars, the paratroopers didn’t parachute into combat, but a paratrooper “knows the fear of stepping out into open space and that knowledge might make him fear battle less.”

As a private in basic training, Alex suggested to his superiors an improved method of motivating the soldiers. He and his comrades felt that after they had volunteered for the elite paratroop corps they were no longer being treated as volunteers but as soldiers who were stuck in an incredibly difficult training program. Alex suggested that, instead of threatening drastic punishments to encourage good behavior and performance, “the soldiers should be reminded that their efforts were helping to guarantee a privilege to stay in the Paratroops.”

As an officer he was concerned that his men be good people as well as good soldiers. He knew patrolling the territories was a necessary evil and he made sure his fellow soldiers realized it too: “The reason for unfairness must never be forgotten by those being unfair or they get carried away.”

He felt acutely the five-year age difference between himself and his fellow soldiers. Writing letters was an antidote to loneliness. In one missive he ends: “And now I don’t feel lonely. I feel good. Writing calms me and lets the clouds settle – especially writing like this. I must stop now because it’s getting too dark to see.”

The coarseness of army life all around him and the heavy responsibility of his command hanging over him did not blind Alex to the beauty in front of him. “...it struck me how incongruous the army is in the hills of Samaria. The hills right around the base are sensual with their curves and crevasses; and everything should move at a pace which is in closer synch with the hills. But whenever we enter the hills we move like marines, and snort and pant and sweat, when we should be lying under an olive tree drawing and sleeping.”

As a realistic Zionist, Alex knew life in Israel was difficult and sometimes frustrating. But he always put its negative side into perspective. “Home is home and it will take more than irritation to force me to leave. I want to make this place better – not to leave it.”

For Alex, Zionism was “a decision that Israel is home, which once made, allows you to view the country’s cons as problems with your home, to be ignored or solved or suffered but never leading to divorce.”

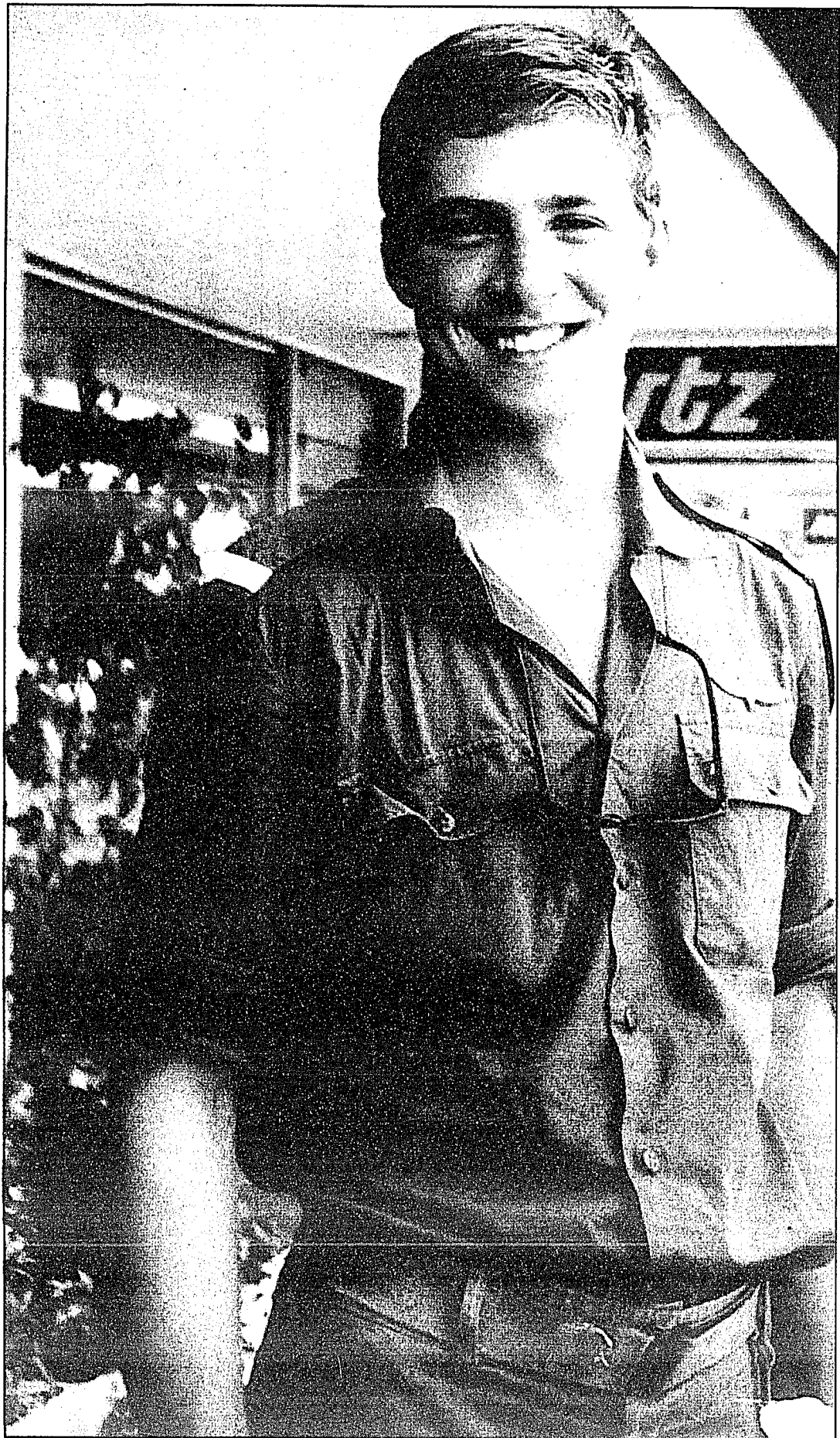
Giving support to his brother Benji’s decision to make aliya, he wrote: “... don’t let the clouds of dust thrown up by the Bad here allow you to lose sight of the ground or the people who love it here.”

After eight months of repeatedly requesting a combat position, Alex finally got one. A Givati platoon attacked by PLO terrorists at its swearing-in ceremony at the Western Wall needed a new commander. Alex was chosen.

He spent four months improving their combat skills, raising their morale and teaching them to function as a unit. Ghost reports that Alex was “beaming with pride” when he told him his platoon had received orders to protect a segment of the northern border.

In 1987 the Lebanese front was relatively quiet. But “two weeks into Alex’s new command, the army had reason to believe that terrorists might try to infiltrate Israel through a place called Christofani inside the security zone adjacent to Mount Hermon,” says his brother Daniel, also an officer in the IDF.

On September 15, company commander Ronen Weissman and platoon commander Alex Singer were to lead a hand-picked squad of 10 soldiers to lay an ambush at Christofani. Because of the impassable ter-



Although Alex Singer sometimes found Israel a frustrating place to live, it was home nonetheless. I want to make this place better – not leave it.

rain they were to be airlifted at night near to the ambush site.

Because of the high altitude, Air Force procedure dictated that one Anafa helicopter would fly the fighters to the drop site, four at a time.

"The first four soldiers, myself included, were flown in and dropped off," recalls Korakin, one of the unit's two machine gunners. "Our job was to defend the landing site until the whole unit had arrived. Then we were going to hike to the designated spot and set up an ambush.

"Ronen and another soldier took up position on the more vulnerable lower left flank. I positioned my machine gun on an elevated, relatively protected, position on the right flank."

The helicopter returned to base, picked up another four soldiers and successfully dropped them near the ambush site. This unit of four also divided and took positions on the right and left flank. The Anafa took off and left to pick up the final group of soldiers, who were led by Alex.

"We were waiting for the last group when suddenly," Korakin recounts, "out of nowhere, we were strafed by assault rifles, machine guns and missiles. Some of the guys with me were wounded. There were 15 terrorists well hidden in the rocky terrain on a high crescent-shaped hill surrounding our position. We couldn't charge them like we were trained, because there was a steep valley between us. Besides, we couldn't see them."

Meanwhile, the Anafa returned with Alex and his men. From the darting tracers and brilliant explosions it was clear that a battle was being fought. Although in danger of being shot down, both Alex and the pilot bravely decided to attempt the landing. The Anafa sped in as quickly as it could, hovered above a boulder-covered slope and the four soldiers jumped. The pilot, who later received the IDF's highest award, safely extricated the chopper.

"After that, it was too dangerous to airlift reinforcements," says Korakin, matter-of-factly. "We knew we were on our own."

Alex made his way to Korakin, who was firing his machine gun blindly in the direction of the unseen terrorists. "The first thing I said to Alex over the clatter of my machine gun was that Ronen is not responding to our call. I'm sure he was wounded in the first few ferocious minutes of the battle. Alex asked me where Ronen was last seen. I pointed. Alex grabbed a medic and ran in that direction."

The topology, the black of night and the deadly fire hampered their advance. Alex pushed on and found Ronen dead, leaning against a boulder. Just as Alex was leaning over him, a burst of bullets rang out. Alex was killed instantly. He fell next to Weissman, where they both sat, shoulder to shoulder. The medic was also hit and fell to the ground wounded.

The battle continued for four hours, leaving three dead and four wounded Israeli soldiers. All but one of the terrorists escaped, leaving behind a variety of weapons.

"I have no doubt the captured terrorist was the one who killed Ronen, Alex and Oren [the other machine-gunner]," says Korakin angrily. "We captured him stuck inside a very narrow rock crenellation which allowed his machine gun to fire in only one direction - [the] exact spot where all three were killed. We talked about killing him, but in the end we didn't."

The terrorist, of Lebanese origin, admitted he was part of a Syrian-trained PLO group that was on its way to attack an Israeli settlement.

Losing three soldiers in one battle, each lone killed trying to help the other, galvanized the country. The press focused on Alex's personal profile. Many olim felt a special connection to him. One was Glen Cohen, a young American immigrant soldier who had met Alex for the first and only time two weeks before his death.

By eerie coincidence, Cohen was in the helicopter squadron control room when the battle in which Alex fell was first reported over the radio. Cohen wasn't aware until

the next day, though, that one of the three fallen soldiers was Alex.

At the funeral, he looked on as he saw an American family burying their son. "They could have been my brothers burying me," says Cohen. "I think every immigrant *hayal boded* at that time was thinking, 'That could have been me.'"

After reading *Yoni's Letters*, the best-selling collection of letters written by Yonatan Netanyahu and published after his death in the raid on Entebbe, Alex had written that the book gave him "a shot in the arm." Ironically, some now refer to Singer as "the American Yoni." This analogy was not lost on Yoni's brother, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who spoke at the memorial service held for Alex, 30 days after his death, at the Israeli Embassy in Washington.

Alex's story moved many people who knew him and even those who only heard about him. David Bernstein, the former director of Jerusalem's Midreshet Lindenbaum yeshiva, would bring his students to Alex's grave site every memorial day. "I thought it was important for the students to be able to relate to a fallen soldier who was not a mythical sabra, but a young American like themselves," says Bernstein.

Allusions to death, including his own, are sprinkled throughout Alex's writings. "Life is many things. It is fragile, beautiful, full of opportunity to create and improve our world. But it is also short."

A young person on the kibbutz was wasting away from cancer, prompting Alex to write: "Death in war is more glorious and less painful - and in general easier - than death from disease. But I'm not planning on dying soon."

Although he would share his thoughts with his parents, he was concerned he might worry them. "Remember this letter was written two weeks before you read it so by now the problems discussed are in the past and all is well. Don't worry. I have the strength to get through all this - I only wish I didn't have to use it all. Be well."

Alex carried a sketchbook and water paints in his army bag. Symbolic of what painting meant to him, during respites from desert training exercises, he used the water from his canteen to paint as well as to drink. In much of Alex's art a part of his body is depicted - his drawing hand, his dangling foot, his jutting shadow. Including a part of himself in the picture, captured the moment - Alex's moment.

His sketches of Europe surprisingly lack the stiffness of most representative architectural sketching and retain a freshness, as if they had been drawn just a few minutes ago.

Alex sketched anything that moved - or didn't move, as his drawing of the public toilets of Babadilla, Spain, can attest. His father recalls with a smile, "He needed to write and sketch the way other people need to rest."

After Alex's death, then mayor Teddy Kollek initiated an exhibition of his drawings in Mishkenot Sha'ananim's Fisher Hall Gallery in Jerusalem's Yemin Moshe neighborhood. Since then, they have been exhibited around the world, and a permanent home is being arranged for them at the new Jerusalem-based center of Melitz, an informal Jewish education program.

Alex believed he would be judged ultimately for his actions and not his thoughts. His degrees, awards and wings didn't impress him. "Self-esteem comes from concrete (not paper) accomplishments," he wrote in one letter. And accomplishments he had. Korakin recalls the moment he screamed to Alex over the roar of combat that Weissman was probably wounded: "Alex ran through a hail of bullets to find and help Ronen."

Korakin pauses as he whispers somberly, "It was an act of humanity."

Although Alex died in the blaze of battle, he didn't believe significant accomplishments had to be dramatic or dangerous.

What drove him to push forward in all areas of his life was, as he wrote, a "fear of mediocrity which has made being less than



Suzanne Singer at Alex's grave on Mount Herzl. 'There are times when I feel his loss acutely, the raw way it was in those first months.'

the best so hard for me."

Belief in ideas and commitment to ideals alone didn't satisfy him. He wanted to share them. He yearned to engage others with his thoughts, to win them over - or to be won over. But Alex was aware of the dangers of arguing a position. "I am really bothered by being unable to convince people of the truth. I need to learn technique... I think I've learned some but what I've learned bothers me for it's slimy duplicity."

In keeping with Alex's philosophy of life, his parents formed The Alex Singer Project.

"We specifically chose not to call it a 'foundation' because that sounds too passive and we intend it to be a dynamic organization," Max Singer says.

The Alex Singer Project published *Alex: Building a Life*. Another of its efforts is "The 50 Year Discussion," in which a diverse group of volunteers committed to improving this country will participate in a long-term discussion about how to bring about a practical synthesis here of the values of pluralism, democracy and Judaism. The ultimate goal is for the group members to implement their suggestions over the next half-century.

For Alex's family, all this positive activity cannot erase the pain of losing him. His

father recalls how "Alex used to be the mortar of the family. Always sharing his feelings about family relationships."

And his mother says, "During moments of happiness I realize... he is missing... and what he's missing. There is a hole, an absence of his joy. There are times when I feel his loss acutely, the raw way it was in those first months."

Yet the family finds succor in remembering Alex. At the memorial service in Washington, his oldest brother Saul read from a posthumous letter he wrote to Alex. "If I flag, I will remember your strength."

The Alex Singer Project invites the public to join Alex's parents on a memorial hike. On September 23 at 11 a.m., a designated bus at the Jerusalem International Conference Center will take participants, free of charge, to the Crusader Castle near Ein Tzuba. The group will hike to Ein Sataf and down Nahal Sorek. From there the bus will bring them to Alex's grave on Mount Herzl at 4:30 p.m. where kaddish will be recited. At various points during the hike there will be readings from Alex's letters and journals, and people will have an opportunity to speak. Participants should bring their own water and food.