

ADVERTISEMENT

NEWS

Brother of Evanston teen held hostage by Hamas speaks on hope for a safe return: 'We are a peaceful family'

By Ilana Arougheti
Chicago Tribune • Published: Oct 18, 2023 at 6:35 pm



Expand

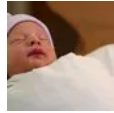
ADVERTISEMENT



Jumble Daily & Crossword
Play Now



Chicago-area hospitals welcome first babies of 2024: 'It's a real blessing'



New laws for 2024: Minimum wage hike, indoor vape ban and don't worry about that...



Morgue assistant's meatballs at southern Illinois cook-off not made of male body...



Ben Raanan, of Denver, Colorado, are awaiting word about the location of his mother Judith Raanan, and his sister Natalie, who were taken hostage during a visit to Israel by the terrorist group Hamas on Oct. 7, 2023. (Hyoung Chang/The Denver Post)

Listen to this article



On Oct. 24, Natalie Raanan's 18th birthday, her brother Ben planned to take her to get her first tattoo, with matching ink of his own. The two never got as far as choosing a design.

Natalie, 17, and her mother Judith Raanan, 59, of Evanston, were taken hostage during a visit to Israel by the terrorist group Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip, during a coordinated attack on Oct. 7.

Now, as the search for Natalie and Judith continues, Ben Raanan, 34, instead sat Wednesday for a tribute tattoo — a tree of life with Natalie's and their brother's names in the branches.

[[Update: Natalie and Judith Raanan, Evanston residents who have been hostages of terrorist group Hamas since Oct. 7, have been released, Israeli state-sanctioned news channel KAN 11 reported on Friday.](#)]



TRIBUNE PUBLISHING

ADVERTISEMENT

Advertise

1-2-3

It's that easy!

- 1  Schedule
- 2  Layout



LATEST

COLLEGE SPORTS

DePaul falls to No.



Privacy - Terms



Judith Raanan and her daughter, Natalie Raanan, at Natalie's high school graduation. They were visiting relatives in southern Israel when Hamas attacked Oct. 7. (Family photo)

Judith and Natalie were visiting relatives at Nahal Oz when Hamas operatives attacked the kibbutz near the Israel-Gaza border. The family in the U.S. last heard from Natalie about 6 a.m. via text, saying that she and Judith were locking themselves in a guesthouse because they heard gunfire and explosions.

TODAY'S TOP VIDEOS



4 UConn 85-56 — the Blue Demons' 17th consecutive loss to the Huskies

5m

COLLEGE SPORTS

Marcus Domask scores 32 points in No. 9 Illinois' 96-66 rout of Northwestern: 'This was a butt-kicking'

22m



CHICAGO BULLS

4 takeaways from the Chicago Bulls' blowout loss to the Philadelphia 76ers, including Patrick Williams' early exit

1h



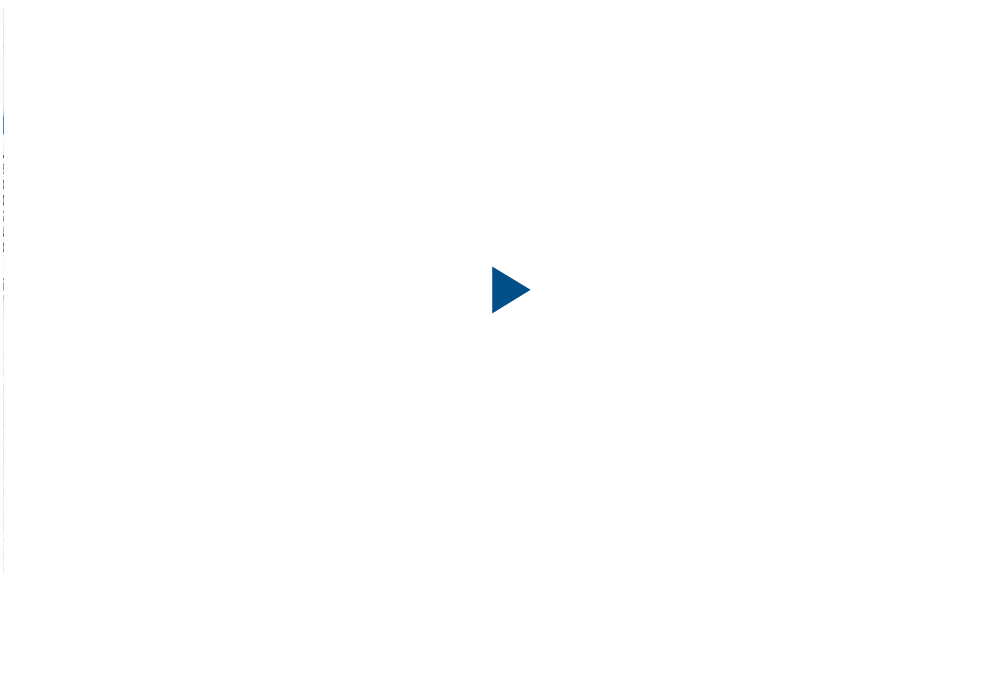
ADVERTISEMENT

You May Like Sponsored Links

Secure Tomorrow's Legacy Today:

When Israeli Defense Forces soldiers searched the guesthouse several hours later, they found broken glass on the floor, Ben said. A neighbor later confirmed they had seen members of Hamas leading them from the guesthouse at gunpoint in the early hours of Oct. 7.

Ben believes his sister and stepmother are alive.



“We’ve received information from both Israeli intelligence and American intelligence, and the belief is that they are still alive and somewhere in Gaza,” he said.

Natalie was born in the Chicago area, but lived with her mother in Israel for nearly a decade before the pair returned to live in Evanston. She graduated from Deerfield High School in the spring.

“When she first moved to America, she barely spoke any English, and I barely spoke any Hebrew,” Ben said. “We went to see Cirque du Soleil, and it was just this really fun memory of, ‘Oh, we’re going to get along fine, even though we can barely speak the same language.’”

Now living in Denver, Ben said he and Natalie kept in touch by phone throughout her high school years. Natalie last spoke to Ben about a week and a half before she was taken hostage. She had asked him about the

Get the 2023 Silver Eagle.

Nausil

Upgrade Your Storage Game With Thuma's Versatile And Innovative...

Thuma

Thyroid malfunction and its effects on the eyes

FAQtoids.com

by Taboola

ADVERTISEMENT

mobile game Pokémon Go, a recent discovery for her.

“It’s weird because our family is separated — I’m in Denver, she’s in Chicago — but we’ve always been really united by our culture,” Ben said. “We’re a family that’s very based around us living completely separate lives but loving each other so immensely.”



Sigal and Avi Zamir attend a vigil for their relatives, Judith Raanan, and her daughter, Natalie Raanan, at a family friend’s home on Oct. 12, 2023, in Evanston. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune)

Ben described his sister as a “typical 17-year-old” with a big heart, enamored with her phone and her closet, but even more so with her dog, Panda.

Natalie left for Italy first before traveling with her mother to Israel, Ben said. Before she left, he said the “big discussion” in her house was whether she should study fashion design, interior decorating or tattooing, Ben said.

“She’s not a politician or a soldier,” Ben said of his sister. “She is an artist.”

His stepmom Judith, who was born in Israel, was married to Uri Raanan, Ben and Natalie’s father, for several years around the time Ben was 14.

Natalie and Judith grew extremely close to Ben's other brother, Natalie's half brother, who is autistic. Judith visited him biweekly for nearly six years, and the pair enjoyed doing art projects together, Ben said.

"Judith is a very kind of spiritual person who loves people," he said.

Judith has worked as a life coach, Ben said. Her website also lists her as a certified medical aesthetician, working in the beauty and wellness industry. Judith and Natalie belong to Chabad of Evanston, where Judith has been active for about a decade.

The Raanan family last received an intelligence update several days ago, but remains in daily contact with representatives of both governments, Ben said.

Mia Schem, 21, a French and Israeli woman also held hostage, was featured in a video recently released by Hamas. The Raanan family is calling for Hamas to release a similar video featuring Judith and Natalie as the family holds out hope for their safe return, Ben said.

"We are respectfully asking Hamas," Ben said. "That would be really, really helpful, and we would really, really appreciate it."

At least 31 American citizens have been killed as a direct result of Hamas actions since Oct. 7, President Joe Biden said Wednesday, speaking from Tel Aviv.

Thirteen Americans are still unaccounted for as of Tuesday and believed to be hostages of Hamas, according to an Oct. 17 [interview](#) between White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre and National Security Council spokesman John Kirby.

"There's no rationalizing it, no excusing it, period," Biden said Wednesday, referring to the Oct. 7 attack in which Natalie and Judith were taken hostage. "The brutality we saw would have cut deep anywhere in the world."

The Israeli military says that Hamas is holding 199 hostages in Gaza,

Reuters [reported](#) Monday. Hamas says it has 200 to 250 hostages.

Ben and Natalie's aunt and uncle attended a Zoom meeting with Biden on Oct. 13, as he addressed the families of American hostages.

"When President Biden met with us ... he spoke very kindly," Ben said. "It was clear this wasn't some political thing to him. This meant a lot to him."

The Raanan family is cooperating with the Biden administration as they wait for news on Judith and Natalie, Ben said. The family has been in touch with Illinois Democrat Rep. Jan Schakowsky, U.S. secretary of state's office, the consul general of Israel to the Midwest and the FBI, the Tribune [previously reported](#).

The Raanan family is also praying for civilians in Gaza, who Ben emphasizes "are also victims in this matter."

"We are a peaceful family," Ben said. "We believe that all life is important and are really, really, really focused on the humanity of all this."

Ben Raanan holds his phone showing an old photo of himself and his sister Natalie. (Hyoung Chang/The Denver Post)

As they remain in constant contact, family members are working in teams to advocate for the safe return of Natalie and Judith. They are dividing efforts, with some working with reporters, others working with the U.S. and Israeli embassies, and some engaging with the FBI.

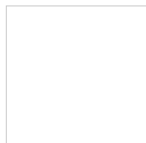
"We're in constant communication with each other," Ben said. "The only thing we have right now is hope. We believe Natalie and Judith are alive. We are hoping they are being treated well, and hoping that everything is OK and they're not doing too horribly."

Biden spoke from Tel Aviv, saying there's "no higher priority" for the American government right now than negotiating the safe return of hostages.

Hamas warned last week that it would kill a hostage every time Israeli

military forces bombed a civilian target in Gaza without warning, The Associated Press reported.

Uri Raanan, who is Natalie’s father and Judith’s ex-husband, has raised more than \$8,000 as of Wednesday toward Judith and Natalie’s medical and psychological recovery.



Afternoon Briefing

Weekdays

Chicago Tribune editors' top story picks, delivered to your inbox each afternoon.

By submitting your email to receive this newsletter, you agree to our [Subscriber Terms & Conditions](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).

>

The [fundraiser](#), created Sunday, also supports travel to meet with public officials, and future public awareness events held by the Raanan family.

Ben said the family wishes they could tell Judith and Natalie that a whole team of loved ones are standing by to help.

“We love you very dearly,” Ben said. “We are hoping you are being treated with respect, and we can’t wait to go on this journey and be there as a support for you.”

Ben said when he thinks of his sister and stepmother’s return, he imagines taking them out to a fancy dinner — with a Natalie twist.

“I’d love to say I’d take them to the most beautiful meal ever,” Ben Raanan said. “But Natalie would probably prefer McDonald’s fries. So we’ll get some fries.”

The Associated Press contributed.

iarougheti@chicagotribune.com