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A man who seeks light from his darkest hour

August 15 2002

Arnold Roth's daughter died in a suicide bombing at a Jerusalem pizza restaurant. Now, he uses his grief to help other Israeli parents whose children have been murdered. Julie Szego reports.



Arnold Roth, whose daughter Malki, 15, died a year ago in a suicide bombing at a Jerusalem pizza restaurant, in Melbourne yesterday.

Picture: Sandy Scheltema

A charitable foundation in Israel recently held a weekend retreat for families mourning loved ones killed in the suicide bombings of the past two years. Among them was Australian-born Arnold Roth, whose 15-year-old daughter, Malki, died a year ago in an attack on a Jerusalem pizza house.

About 800 people from 250 families converged on the five-star Dead Sea resort, where, as Roth put it, "everything was laid on". As the visitors lapped up the luxury, they also shared with each other their bottomless grief.

Much of what transpired that weekend lingers in Roth's mind: like the miserable sight of hundreds of fathers, most of them secular, reciting Kaddish - the Jewish prayer for the dead - in honour of their murdered children. But what stood out most were the long, often tedious, discussion groups that raised every topic under the sun save these: vengeance, war, hatred.

"It occurred to me that the concept of anger or revenge or Arabs wasn't in the discussion at any stage, because we were all so focused, so desperately focused, on getting our lives back into shape," Roth says. "Most of us had other children to worry about and lives to get on with."

In getting on with his life, Roth has become an unofficial ambassador for the families of Israeli victims of violence. Media from Bulgaria, Japan, the US and Australia have approached him for interviews. Yesterday he left Melbourne, his former home town, after an 11-day visit that included appearances on radio chat shows and at public forums.

Roth's mission was born of his darkest hour. Malki was killed alongside her best friend after the two went to the Sbarro pizza house for lunch and a young man entered with a nail-packed bomb concealed in his guitar case.

After learning Malki was among the 15 victims, Roth vowed his gentle and generous daughter would not pass into history as a mere statistic.

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Sadly, the statistics have mounted relentlessly over the past year. Despite Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's promises to deliver security, Israeli civilians have continued to be killed and wounded - in upmarket cafes, pool halls, hotel function rooms, at service stations and university campuses, on buses and trains. The death count on both sides since the second intifada erupted in September, 2000, is estimated at more than 1900. The figure also includes many Palestinian children killed during Israeli retaliation against militants.

Against this background, Roth has been an advocate for grieving Israeli families who feel trivialised by what he sees as the glib media coverage focused on the "cycle of violence" - a term he says carries an assumption of equal moral culpability on both sides.

The gulf in understanding between the families of victims and Israelis who are less personally affected by the violence is wide even in Israel, where Roth relocated his family 14 years ago when Malki was two.

There are many lonely victims in an edgy country that depends on a degree of denial just to keep going.

Roth's wife Frimet recently wrote an embittered article in the Israeli press about the reopening of Sbarro in Jerusalem. She criticised the self-congratulatory, rise-from-the-ashes tone of the event and the absence of any plaque bearing the victims' names.

The proprietors of Jerusalem's reopened Moment cafe, where at least 11 people died in a suicide bombing last March, were also accused of insensitivity.

Roth says many longstanding friends have deserted he and his wife since the tragedy because they can't deal with the couple's grief. This breakdown of these friendships has caused the Roths a great deal of pain.

"Maybe it's also denial, I don't know. Whatever the reasons I'm not in a forgiving mood right now. My wife needs the support and they just can't hack it."

These days their friendship group is made up of other families of victims. While some family members are in individual counselling, the couple belongs to an experimental support group of about 15 parents; all of them mourning murdered children. There is a Russian couple who have lived in Israel for 25 years, a Moroccan couple who also lost a child in the Sbarro bombing, some secular Israelis, and a woman from an ultra-Orthodox Jewish sect.

"There's people I'd never normally talk to," Roth says.

"I don't know how we are going to heal one another. But we had all experienced things we weren't ready for, like losing friends. Almost everyone said: 'I didn't expect that, I don't know how to cope with that.'"

The sorrow of parents also comes with an irrational but powerful sense of guilt. Roth talks of feeling as if he has broken the "contractual obligation" to protect his daughter. What did he do wrong?

"When your child is murdered, when your child was the target, it intimately violates the image you have of yourself as a parent. It absolutely shakes you to your fundamentals," Roth says.

Other families worry about subconsciously putting pressure on living children to fulfil the dreams of dead siblings.

Roth, meanwhile, has drawn meaning from Malki's close relationship with her younger sister Haya, who is blind and severely intellectually handicapped.

A charitable foundation established in Malki's memory has raised


substantial sums to fund home-care programs for disabled children - something lacking in Israel, where the emphasis is on institutionalisation. The family has also built a website to honour Malki and messages of support have been posted from around the world. Roth's philosophy is to answer a callous act with a good one.

But while there may be little room for revenge, some family members have subtly revised their politics. Roth gives his young adult sons, both observant Jews, as examples. The two had always held a "liberal, left view" of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict - one was actually disciplined during his army service for smiling at Arabs while stationed at a road block.

Roth was proud of his sons' actions then and remains so now, but he says dreams of peaceful coexistence have been abandoned. His sons, along with many Israelis, perceive there is no longer a negotiating partner. And the despair is deepened by opinion polls showing the support of most Palestinians for suicide attacks against Israel.

"There is a wall-to-wall consensus that we have to do everything possible to protect ourselves. The view is: let's defend ourselves in every possible way and look for peace when things are calmer."

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