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[Go](#) [ADVERTISE WITH US](#) 5 Av 5763, Sun., Aug. 3, 2003

Welcome arnoldr

[Front Page](#) > [Editorial](#) > No memorial, not even a plaque... By Frimet Roth

Sites

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[JPost Travel](#)
[Personals](#)
[International JP](#)
[JRep.com](#)

Main

[Front Page](#)
[Archives](#)

Interactive

[Readers' Letters](#)

Sections

[News](#)
[Latest News](#)
[Business](#)
[Features](#)
[Editorial Page](#)
[Columns](#)
[Israeli Life](#)
[JPost Français](#)
[Sports](#)
[Literary Supplement](#)
[Travel & Tourism](#)
[Real Estate](#)
[Hi-Tech](#)
[Health](#)
[Judaism Online](#)
[Jewish World](#)
[Maps of Israel](#)
[This Day](#)
[Looking Back](#)
[Magazine](#)
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Jul. 30, 2003

No memorial, not even a plaque... By Frimet Roth

Why has Jerusalem failed to erect a memorial to my 15-year-old daughter, Malki, and others murdered in the city?

Shortly after the 9/11 terror attack on the World Trade Center, debate over the size and character of the memorial to the victims became heated. Still unresolved, it has engaged parties ranging from politicians to local businessmen to the families of the victims.

A few weeks ago The Wall Street Journal published an article complaining about one of the proposals, which would list the names of all the victims without distinguishing between those who were firefighters or rescue workers and "ordinary" victims. The writer of the opinion piece - whose brother, a fireman, died in the Twin Towers attack - challenged the argument that making a distinction of this kind will have the effect of "ranking" the rescuers and victims in some kind of hierarchy.

It is simply a sign of respect that is their due, he maintains.

Here in Jerusalem our adroit municipality has entirely avoided conflicts of this kind. It simply excludes bereaved families from all aspects of the decision-making process affecting memorials. And sometimes it dispenses with memorializing them at all.

My 15 year-old daughter, Malki, was murdered in the terror massacre at Jerusalem's Sbarro restaurant almost two years ago. So far, at least, city officials have seen fit to do nothing in the nature of a memorial or plaque with the names of the 15 people killed in the Sbarro suicide bombing.

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Editorial Page

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[Editorial: The fire and the](#)

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The practice of erecting plaques to honor terror victims at the site of their murder is a well-established one in Jerusalem, having been in effect since long before the state was established. One year into the second intifada the municipality dispatched this time-honored policy to the scrap-heap.

When I asked why, I was told by city officials that Jerusalem was faced with the need to erect more than 30 memorial plaques. Doing this, they said, would "interfere with the city's character and appeal" and chase away the tourists.

Several bereaved parents, myself among them, voiced anger over this decision through an attorney's letter. The officials beat a hasty retreat and in a meeting in November 2002 announced the restoration of the city's original policy. Plans were also under way to erect a central memorial at the Mahaneh Allenby site on Derech Hevron, they said, on the south side of the city.

Most importantly, they assured us that representatives of the families of terror victims would henceforth be active partners in all relevant decisions by the municipality.

WE WAITED for results. Since that meeting at Safra Square nine months ago there have been none. When I visited the Mahaneh Allenby site last week the litter had proliferated and the weeds had grown taller, but no other changes were evident. There wasn't even a sign announcing the designated use of the site anywhere in its vicinity.

The site of this intended central memorial stands today pretty much the same way it has stood since it was originally landscaped and terraced about four years ago. It was actually allocated then, long before the outbreak of this war, for use as a municipal park but proved inappropriate for that purpose.

When the terror victim tally started rising exponentially city bureaucrats recognized the hidden potential of the place as a bone to throw at the families of terror victims.

Now, whenever it is questioned about plans for a central memorial to Jerusalem's victims, the city responds by trotting out this site. It is clear that any hope of a memorial ever arising there is futile. A manager in the City Engineer's office recently conceded to us that the project is headed nowhere because it lacks a ba'al habayit - an internal champion - who will promote it, raise the necessary funding and ensure it goes somewhere.

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[Out of step, big time, By Mark Steyn](#)

[No memorial, not even a plaque... By Frimet Roth](#)

[Letters to the Editor - Reeve and Resilience](#)

Columns
[How about a real debate? By Bret Stephens](#)

[Five missing words, By Saul Singer](#)

[COLUMN ONE: Accepting our limitations, By Caroline Glick](#)

Today's Paper
[Arafat orders 17 Mukata fugitives to Jericho, Gaza](#)

[Ministers to discuss releasing more Palestinian prisoners](#)

[Mofaz orders removal of 6 settlement outposts](#)

Features
[Whose script? By Khaled Abu-Toameh](#)

Still, like many other families in this war-ravaged city, we want to see the memory of our child respected in an appropriate way by the authorities. At the very least we feel she deserves to have her name engraved on a plaque like those that have been erected at most other terror attack sites.

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Moreover, these plaques document and publicize the history of this city to all who live or visit here. We cannot rewrite our painful past by dispensing with them.

For over a year now we have been reduced to the humiliation of begging for a gesture that should by right have been automatically given us - some mention of our daughter's name and age.

Toward that end we have made scores of phone calls. We have received innumerable empty promises. We have been fed lame excuses - for example, that the owner of the building refuses permission to erect a plaque on his property. Surely his consent is not necessary to erect one on the adjacent sidewalk. We have even endured criticism of our impatience and annoyance.

Despite this neglect of our own victims, the Jerusalem municipality has treated those of the New York World Trade Center attack very differently. A privately funded memorial park will soon be erected at the entrance to Jerusalem in memory of the victims of the New York terror attacks of 9/11. Shortly after those attacks an anonymous American donor enlisted mayor Rudolph Guiliani's help in negotiating with Jerusalem's mayor Ehud Olmert for a site. Guiliani rejected several of Olmert's offers, insisting on the prestigious site at the city's entrance, to which Olmert finally acquiesced. Completion of the park is expected in time for the second anniversary of those attacks.

Guiliani was looking out for the interests of his constituents, and that is understandable. He has also been an outspoken critic of the present plan for the reconstruction of the World Trade Center site because, as he said in a recent Time interview, "the memorial has been the secondary thought, and the replacement of the office space has been the primary thought."

And he has warned New York memorial designers: "I'm very, very afraid that future generations are going to be very angry that we did not appropriately, on a grand enough scale, remind people of what happened."

Jerusalem protocol and memorial planners would be wise to heed his words.

The writer is a New York-born freelancer.

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