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Partners in 'Project Amnesia'

By Frimet Roth

Tags: Memorial Day

With Memorial Day over, the Jerusalem Municipality must have breathed a sigh of relief. We, the victims of terror attacks on the home front - attacks our leaders failed to thwart - have Memorial Day throughout the year. But City Hall, it seems, would prefer for the memories of our loved ones to fade.

Reminders of the hundreds who have been murdered by terrorists in this city poison the ambience. Negative ambience equals unhappy tourists, and unhappy tourists deplete the city's coffers - so goes the logic. This, at least, was the off-the-record explanation given to me last month by the unnamed staffer who answers the phone in the office of Jerusalem's spokesman, Gidi Schmerling. She was responding to my inquiry as to why, seven years after the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, there is still no central memorial to this city's terror victims.

The municipality was actually the first to raise the idea. In 2002 it made a promise to victims' families that a memorial park would be erected in Jerusalem. The city's official policy for years has been to place a plaque wherever a terrorist murder happened. The reality is that only a few such memorial plaques have gone up. There is one on the outside wall of the building that was formerly the Sbarro restaurant. The plaque, 50 cm x 80 cm, lists the names of the 15 men, women and children massacred there. One is my daughter, Malki.

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The plaque is up only because of many months of unrelenting pressure by my husband and me. My questions to Jerusalem's official representatives this year about what happened to the plan for a central memorial have been met with a resounding silence. Despite several months of calls and e-mails to the spokesman's office and other officials, some of them elected, no formal response has ever been forthcoming. My approaches were ignored or referred elsewhere, or I was given empty assurances that they would be dealt with in the near future. They never were.

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Nobody deserves such disgraceful treatment from a municipality, least of all those of us who have paid the supreme price for this city to keep flourishing. The municipality has a partner in its de facto "Project Amnesia": The government of Israel has seemed no less keen to banish reminders of our terror victims. Shortly after the election of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), our prime minister at the time, Ariel Sharon, laying the groundwork for the disengagement, told Israelis that "we must forget our pain."

Evidently our current prime minister shares that view. In his public addresses,



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Ehud Olmert routinely avoids mentioning the more than 1,100 Israeli civilians murdered in the Al-Aqsa Intifada - and with good reason. Dredging up those casualties would hamper his efforts to pass Fatah off as a moderate "partner for peace." Concessions to Abbas - prisoner releases, new weapons, closing roadblocks - would go down much less smoothly with the Israeli public if the enormity of our recent losses were highlighted.

There is a third partner eager to distract the public from the wounds inflicted by terrorism: our own news media. In a recent television discussion, two veteran Israeli newscasters, Ben Caspit and Yigal Ravid, bemoaned the inordinate amount of time and ink that Israel's media have devoted to covering terror attacks during the last intifada.

According to this view, now that the tsunami of tragedy has passed, memorials are unwelcome. But apparently that rule carries a proviso: If the victims are non-Israelis and if the attacks took place outside Israel, then commemorating them is fine.

How else can one explain the decision of the Interior Ministry's Urban Planning and Construction Committee in February to approve the construction of a monument to the memory of the victims of the 9/11 terror attacks? That memorial will be erected by none other than the Jerusalem Municipality - in a city park in the Arazim Valley, on Jerusalem's northern side. The choice of site will ensure its exposure to the traveling public; a bridge for the new light-rail train is slated to pass right alongside it. Somehow, concerns about depressing our tourists with such a monument were not an issue here.

This will not be the first 9/11 memorial in Israel. Nine have already been erected. As a bereaved mother, I feel a bond with victims everywhere, including non-Israelis, over the loss of loved ones murdered by terrorists. And as someone who grew up in New York, that bond is particularly strong toward my compatriots. Nevertheless, it is unconscionable for Israel to accord foreign victims, even those of our most loyal ally, the United States, preferential treatment over our own victims.

Six years ago, in a private meeting requested by my husband and me, Oved Yehezkel, the personal assistant to then-mayor Ehud Olmert, confirmed for us that Jerusalem had allocated an existing but rarely-frequented park as the location of a memorial to Jerusalem's victims of terror. That site, at the Allenby Compound, is a safe 15-minute drive from the city's center. It was thus unlikely to feature on many tourists' routes. The idea of such a park was initiated by the municipality, not by the victims; we were simply urging its planners to respect our sentiments in its execution. Yehezkel, now cabinet secretary, assured my husband and me that we would be consulted frequently during the process of its erection.

The bone that was tossed to us (a park that is not close to the city center, in a place rarely visited) remains an unfulfilled promise. Not even the tiniest steps have been taken at the site and we've received no requests for our input. Municipal officials know they need not lose sleep worrying about a backlash from the victims' families. We are a sector that can be counted on to swallow its anger and suffer humiliation in silence. Grief tends to have that effect on us.

But it is not only the offense toward the hundreds of victims that is disturbing. As Israel conducts serious cease-fire negotiations with Hamas, recalling that group's commitment to bloodshed is crucial. It would inject the caution and wariness that often seem absent from our leaders' mindset. And as for the city's precious ambience and the feared drop in tourism? Somehow we can find a way to survive the diversion of a few prospective tourists to Greece or Turkey. But we cannot survive the consequences of forgetting our terror victims.

Frimet Roth is a freelance writer in Jerusalem. She and her husband founded the Malki Foundation (www.kerenmalki.org) in their daughter's memory, which provides support for Israeli families of all faiths who care at home for a special-needs child.

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