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‘I’m not going to respond to terrorism by becoming a terrorist’

by Rachel Shabi

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If you’d lost a loved one, would you want revenge? As the world edges closer to war, Rachel Shabi talks to relatives who believe retaliation is wrong.

Rita Lasar, 71
New York, USA

Marion Waithera, 26
Kilifi District, Mombasa, Kenya

David Potorti, 46
North Carolina, USA

Subhi abu Zahra, 55
Jenin, West Bank

Dr Rihab Essawi, 53
East Jerusalem, West Bank

Amiram Goldin, 49
Galilee, Israel

Yitzhak Frankental, 51
West Jerusalem, Israel

Revenge is in the air. In the wake of September 11, President Bush declared a war on terror. In his state of the union speech in January 2002, he made plain what he meant, summoning all nations to ‘eliminate the terrorist parasites who threaten their countries and our own’. In this country, Tony Blair has heeded the call to arms. In Israel, Ariel Sharon has allied the American cause to his own.

But do they speak for the people most closely affected by acts of terror around the world? Rachel Shabi talked to Americans, Palestinians, Israelis and a Kenyan. All of them have lost a loved one in the most violent circumstances. None is looking for retaliation. For them, more killing is not the answer . . .

**Rita Lasar, 71
New York, USA**

My brother Abe [Zelmanowitz, 55] worked in the north tower of the World Trade Centre, on the 27th floor. He could have got out, but his colleague, Ed, a quadriplegic, was trapped with him. My other brother and sister-in-law called him, begging him to leave, but he said he would wait for help to get Ed out. But help came too late.

Then Bush made his speech at the National Cathedral [September 14 2001]. He mentioned my brother’s heroic act, and it became immediately apparent to me that my country was going to use my brother’s death to justify attacks in Afghanistan. That was as horrendous a

blow to me as the actual attacks on September 11. I hoped and prayed that this country would not unleash forces in my brother's name. When it [the bombing of Afghanistan] happened, I was horrified and devastated. I felt so impotent.

Then I got a call from Global Exchange [a human rights organisation], asking me if I'd like to go to Afghanistan. What I saw there changed my life for ever. I had been a very privileged, blessed American who had only ever seen war on TV. And then I went to Afghanistan and saw the devastation and horror of what happens to innocent people when bombs fall -- anyone's bombs, anywhere in the world. That my brother's name had been used to justify attacks on the people I met, became family with, cried and grieved with, brought it to a point where it was emotional and real. I found nothing but understanding, warmth, hugs -- they knew all about 9/11 and they grieved for us and apologised to us. Every American should go there -- because, if they did, they would stop the plans for war on Iraq immediately.

I did not pay any attention to who was to blame for 9/11 -- there was no place left in my mind and heart other than the grief about my brother and the people who were going to be killed in his name. I didn't feel anger. I didn't want any other sister or mother to feel this way. It was only later that I began to think about how to bring the perpetrators to justice. I knew that bombing was not the answer. We are no safer now than when we started bombing. We are going to war with a country that had no connection to 9/11, our privacy and our freedom in this country are being slowly whittled away, and Muslims are afraid to go out in the street -- in a city that used to welcome everybody.

Revenge for 9/11 is the excuse they are using to bomb Iraq. There are people in Iraq who are alive today and who will be dead next month if we have a war -- and my country will say that they have done that to avenge my brother's death. I will not let my brother, my dear brother's death, be hypocritically used in this war -- the fact that his death is being used cynically hurts me so much, I can't tell you. Imagine someone who you loved, who died violently, being used insincerely and untruthfully in a political campaign. It is an exploitation.

So I have no intention of touching the subject of revenge. If people ask me why I don't want retribution, I say that it is the natural human reaction to not seek retribution -- or it should be. It cannot accomplish anything. My brother is dead. I privately mourn for him every moment. But I am not looking to atone for his death. I'm looking to prevent the death of others. I don't want to see other people die to amend a ghastly, unbelievable death. The world is larger than just me. Things don't have to be done to make up for things that have happened to me. Things have to be done to make things better in the world. I draw from my love of human beings that everyone is the same as I am. That it is possible -- not in a dream, but someday -- for this to be a peaceful planet. I'll fight to the day I die against this war on terror. I don't want my granddaughter to be sitting here at my age, facing the same world that I'm facing now: a world of starvation, war and inequity. Surely we can do better than this.

David Potorti, 46
North Carolina, USA

His name was Jim Potorti -- he was my eldest brother, 53. Jim worked on the 95th floor of the north tower, almost directly where the plane hit.

I was surprised at my reaction at the time, which was that I didn't have a lot of anger in the way that others did. I felt sadness more than anger, because I recognised that these terrible acts were desperate acts reflecting a desperate feeling.

All the radio and TV stations were saying we should kill the people responsible for 9/11, just go and bomb people -- and it made me sick in the heart to hear that. I had just lost someone and they were saying we should do the same to others. I never remember being angry at the people who did it, because it was such a political act. It wasn't like a drunk driver hitting my brother, where I would have been really angry.

I remember being angry that the bombing of Afghanistan was being carried out in my name. Yes, anger is the only word, because I think of what a nice person my brother was, how much he loved his family. I felt we were really dishonouring his memory by throwing our constitution out of the window, that if we really wanted to honour him we should hold on to our principles instead of throwing them all away. I don't think my brother died for my country, but I hope that my country doesn't die for him, by rejecting its values and principles.

The goal is always justice, but how you achieve justice is the question. We have all wanted to bring the people responsible for 9/11 to justice. And so another source of anger is that we are not doing that, we are not locating Osama bin Laden or the al-Qaida network -- in fact, we are making it harder to find them. It's the exact opposite of what we should be doing. Justice for me would be a more equitable world, where people did not live in such misery that they had to hate each other. A world in which the US contributes to a sense of equality, rather than making it worse.

So the rage I felt after 9/11 was rage at the whole system, that people could be so desperate that they would do something like this. The people who flew the planes into the building are dead: what more can you do to them? But this kind of terrorism is like a cancer. The only way you stop it is to stop the cycle, by saying, "I'm not going to respond to terrorism by becoming a terrorist." If you do respond with violence, you are just promoting more and more terrorism.

I don't make any connection between Iraq and 9/11, because I've never seen any. I would only justify an attack on Iraq if the Iraqi army attacked the continental US. Not a terrorist attack, but the official Iraqi army. I got a vicious email today in which someone claimed that Saddam killed my brother. How do you respond to someone who's so out of touch with reality? My brother's death was a nightmare, and I feel like it just gets worse every time it's used to justify more terror and more pain. I just want this to be over. I just want people to stop being so angry. I want people to stop dying.

No one has ever asked me how I feel about anything. That's where the feeling of violation

comes in -- speaking for me, instead of asking me how I feel. We had a baby about a month ago, and I'm realising that she will never know my brother. How could I possibly wish that kind of loss on anyone else's brother, or daughter, or parents?

The thing to atone my brother's death would be for there to be more honesty in the world, for America to start being more honest about the repercussions of its world policy. Over the past year, I have really educated myself about foreign policy -- I wanted to know why this happened. What I wish now is that people in the US would do the same. I want people to just shut their mouths and read -- stop talking until they know something. We all have to do that, including me.

Marion Waithera, 26
Kilifi District, Mombasa, Kenya

My husband, Wewa Mutisya Kingole [35], died after being fatally injured in a suicide bomb explosion outside the Mombasa Paradise hotel, on November 28 2002.

The day we got the report about the bomb, we found my husband in hospital. They did their best, but he didn't make it -- he died on December 16. He was lying sick in hospital, on a machine, for 19 days. He couldn't speak, he was in pain. It was so hard. We loved him. It is very bad, very bad. I try to be patient with myself. I am five months' pregnant, so I have to take courage with myself.

The story I heard is that it was the Palestinians, who are not good friends with Israel. I knew Israel had problems -- I see it every day on *CNN*. I can't tell very well about the history of the area; all I know is that it is something about land. I don't support either side. The two countries should be good countries and understand each other -- they should be considering peace, not conflict. They shouldn't be attacking innocent people in Mombasa.

I'd like justice to be taken, for people who commit these terrible acts to be found. They should be sentenced. But revenge is not a good act, also. If I give revenge back, then somebody else will be attacked. If I attack somebody, then they will feel hate and want to attack somebody else. We all pay for revenge -- it just keeps repeating itself. When I get angry about what happened to my husband, I try to be courageous and pray to God. I try to cool myself, keep myself in peace, by not thinking of this so much. I try to think instead about the good things inside of me, my health, my child, my future -- and I try to imagine a peaceful, quiet environment with no conflict.

I was angry, of course. I felt angry to lose my husband and be left behind alone. I felt very mad with the people who did this -- it was a terrible act, not human; they shouldn't do that, whatever the reasons. They should talk in peace, sit down and think about it very carefully.

But Israel shouldn't attack back -- they shouldn't go and attack the Palestinians. If they go and attack, they just kill more and more innocent people. There is no need for fighting or attack. Revenge is not good -- the Bible says you shouldn't take it. I know I have a right to feel I want revenge because of what happened to my husband, but then other people will be affected. Of course I don't want other people to be affected like this. I know how bad it feels.

Subhi abu Zahra, 55
Jenin, West Bank

My eldest son, Imad, he was a journalist, he was killed trying to take a photo of Israeli tanks. There was no curfew that day -- it was July 12 last year. When the soldiers inside the tank saw him, they fired at him. He was holding a camera, nothing more. He was bleeding badly but no one came to help him, and then they prevented the ambulance from coming near him. So he died. He was 35. The soldiers denied everything, they said he was shot by Palestinian fire -- even though a lot of journalists reported that he was killed by Israeli fire. We told Israeli lawyers and are trying to raise a case against the soldiers -- we are seeking justice. But, until now, nothing. The lawyers, anyway, told us that this case was to seek compensation, nothing more.

So you tell me, which type of justice is this? This is tyranny, cruelty -- how else can I say it? And this is everywhere -- destruction is everywhere. Everywhere, every day, you hear of people being killed. And right now I worry that, under the cover of an American attack on Iraq, the Israelis will do something terrible to the Palestinians -- maybe they will try to transfer us. Of course, there are kind Israelis, but the Israeli leadership is not kind.

I think if we didn't have the occupation, the Palestinians could be kind neighbours to the Israelis -- this is what I hope and wish and believe. Palestinian people are not killing for the sake of killing, they are doing so because they are trying to get rid of the Israeli occupation -- if we didn't have that, we would be good neighbours.

My son died for his country, this was his fate. His message was peace. As a journalist, his weapon was his camera, his pen. He was trying to show the outside world what is going on here -- that was his duty, and he was killed as a result.

My feeling after this is not to seek revenge for him. This is the spirit of mine, and I think the spirit of any parents who have lost their son in this way. I feel angry, of course, and I am missing him and nobody will fill his place -- all the youth of the world couldn't fill his place for me. But, believe me, I don't feel any hatred towards the Israeli soldiers who did this. I think they are cowards. They feel afraid whenever they come near the Palestinians, so they fire in fear.

I don't feel hatred towards them, but forgiveness is something different. The matter is not how to forgive a person who has killed your dearest person. Because nothing can forgive this action, nothing. If you have children, you know how dear a son is. If you read the words I wrote on his gravestone, you would understand that I cannot forgive these people who killed my son.

My son was a friend to a lot of Israelis, and a member of the peace movement in Israel. He never believed in violence as a way to solve the problem. I raised my children in this spirit -- not to have any feeling of hatred towards others, to be kind to others, to behave well. I believe that this is our basic nature -- we are timbered so, and nothing can affect this construction of our personalities in a negative way. So I haven't changed my nature since my son was killed.

As far as I can remember, my son was dreaming to see the Israeli and Palestinian people living in a friendly way and peacefully, the same view that I also have. I grew up in Haifa [Israel], we had Jewish neighbours and we would play together in front of our houses, go in and out of each other's houses; we were friends. I always told my children about this memory -- and I feel happy when I talk about it. This is what I would like to see happen again now: that Israelis and Palestinians can live side by side, without any negative feelings, with nothing to worry about. As friends.

Dr Rihab Essawi, 53
East Jerusalem, West Bank

In 1982, my brother Osama was killed, bombed by an aeroplane attack in Lebanon. He was 24. We still don't know what happened to his body. We tried to find him, but we couldn't -- no one knew then exactly what was going on. Then, in 1991, my mother was suffocated by a tear-gas bomb that the Israeli soldiers threw into our yard. She inhaled the gas, and by the time we took her to hospital she died. She had lung failure. We were in our house watching TV, and 15 minutes later she died.

In 1995, my nephew Sadi was killed by military police, who came to our house and shot him with an exploding bullet that went into his neck. He was 17.

There is no justice in any of this. When my brother died, I had the feeling that I wanted to kill the ones who had killed my brother. That stayed in my mind for a few months, thinking how I would do it and what would I gain and lose. Then I got involved in learning about the situation politically, because now there was an interest for me -- and then I realised I would gain nothing. So when my mum got killed, by then I had changed my attitude, my mind, everything.

Now I believe there is no way but to learn how to live together. There is no way that we can push Israelis out, or that they can push Palestinians out. We are both here to stay -- the leaders should understand that.

We have had enough killing and enough bloodshed. It has to stop. If I take revenge, what will it do? Just make another reason for another revenge. The ones who got killed are dead already -- why kill more? If we can spare others the agony of what we went through, why not? Let what happened to us be a lesson, to save others the agony and the suffering we have experienced.

I don't care what nationality you are -- I look at you as a human being who understands my problems as another human being. I don't care if you are Israeli, American, British, whatever. We have something common to talk about. When bullets kill an Israeli, the same ones killed my mother and brother. We cannot differentiate.

If these people who use my loss to justify more bloodshed, if they felt what I went through, they would never justify it the way they do. I still can't get over my mother's loss: she was special, not just to me but to the whole area. I can't come to my house and not see her there. The hardest thing you can do in your life is to talk about your loss, each time remembering

exactly what happened and how you feel, but I have to.

My son is five years' old and he can see that some people, Jewish people, treat him nice, and an Israeli soldier at the checkpoint treats him bad and yet he knows they are both Jewish. So he understands that there are good and bad people on both sides. He wants to know how to say words in Hebrew now -- and I like that! I don't want him to have the same brain that every stupid person wanting revenge has.

I went to the US on a talking tour, to tell other people our problems and our campaigns for peace. A lot of the time I heard people say that the Palestinian women are proud to have their children martyred. So I asked them, what mother would want her children to die? How would you choose which of your kids you want to see die first? Do you think that your God gave you a better heart or a bigger heart? I appeal to them to speak as a mother, not as a politician or an Israeli. That's nature. A mother is a mother -- if you put a mother in Jerusalem or in Honolulu, they are going to feel the same way.

Yitzhak Frankental, 51
West Jerusalem, Israel

On July 7 1994, three members of Hamas murdered my son, Arik. He was a soldier and hitched a lift with them. They looked like three Israelis and were playing Israeli music in the car. They started to fight with him, and Arik got shot in the head. He was 19.

Altogether, there were five Hamas members. Three of them have been killed by Israeli security during other acts that they committed, one is still outside and the other is in prison for life.

If I could see them, I would kill them. They are my son's murderers. It doesn't bring my son back, but I would want them to be killed. But if they said tomorrow that they are going to make peace and that one of the conditions is that they release the man who murdered my son from prison, I would say yes -- because the peace process is more important. If we want to live in peace and security, there is no other way. There is no question of forgiveness -- if Arik's killers want me to forgive them, they should bring my son back. But I want to make reconciliation with them even though I don't forgive them and never will. What other choice do I have? To seek revenge? It will not bring my son back. Thousands and thousands have been killed in this war -- and for what? The only way is to try and achieve peace. Striving for peace gives me the thought in my soul that I did my best, so that my other children will continue to live. But it will not help me to continue to live with my sorrow. Nothing will. To lose a child is to lose the future. You cannot continue to live as you did before -- everything, all the proportions of life, have been changed.

I'm not looking for justice, because in our life I don't believe in justice, I believe in wise ways to live. Even in peace, there is no just peace -- what is justice for the Israelis is not justice for the Palestinians. Justice is very subjective. An example is the question of Palestinian refugees: the Palestinians want all the refugees from 1948 to have the right to return to this land; for Israelis, justice means that the refugees do not come back. For the Palestinians who killed my son, that act was justice, because people living under occupation

need to fight against the occupier. From my point of view, it is unjust to kill our children. If you are looking for justice, you will not find a solution.

The Palestinians are despairing people; they have nothing to lose. We, the Israelis, need to understand that we have to give the Palestinians hope. If we are not ready to understand, if we continue with the occupation, only bloodshed and sorrow will continue.

When I hear what is going on with the war against world terror, I cannot understand the global leaders. They are creating motivation for others to be terrorists. If you have before, say, 1,000 terrorists -- during the years that you fight against terror, fighting and punishing all the society will create 10,000 new terrorists. The way to fight terror is to undo the motivation that makes people want to make terror. Bush, Sharon and these people, they create a generator to produce new terrorists.

As much as I would like to do so, I cannot say that the Palestinians are to blame for my son's death. That would be the easy way out. Arik's killers were born into an appalling occupation, into a political and ethical chaos. Had I myself been born into the chaos that is the Palestinians' daily reality, I would certainly have tried to hurt the occupier. I would have undoubtedly become a freedom fighter and would have killed as many on the other side as I possibly could. I do not absolve the Palestinians or justify attacks against Israeli civilians. No attack against civilians can be condoned. But as an occupation force, it is we who trample over human dignity, it is we who push an entire nation to crazy acts of despair.

I am a patriotic Israeli. I love my country and this is the place where I want to live. I am carrying a feeling that, as a father, I failed, because I brought my son into this world and didn't do what I could do to stop the hate, to stop the bloodshed. I've got another four wonderful kids and I want them to stay alive. So I am doing my best to achieve peace and reconciliation between these two nations.

Amiram Goldin, 49
Galilee, Israel

I lost my youngest son, Omri, in the suicide bomb at the Miron junction [Galilee] on August 4 2002. He was 20, a soldier, and was going back to the army compound after the weekend. He left home -- that is Mizpe Aviv, in Galilee -- with his girlfriend and caught the bus to Sfat. They sat together on the bus and, after a few minutes, went to sleep holding hands. After 15 minutes, the bus exploded -- a suicide bomber dressed as a tourist got on the bus a few stops after Omri. He was killed immediately. The little comfort I have is that Omri was killed in his sleep and didn't suffer. His girlfriend was badly injured, but saved.

The easiest way to keep going on with your life is to want revenge. But all our life we have been involved with the peace camp in Israel. All our life we have gone everywhere we can to encourage and keep up the peace process -- and Omri was always with us. So we didn't change our ideas. We think that peace is the only solution; we won't get anywhere with hate. All that has happened in the past year is revenge and counter-revenge -- this is for killing that man, and this is for killing those people.

We think that the criminals that are involved have to pay by the law for what they did. They should be charged and tried in court -- that's the justice system. A murderer is a murderer is a murderer -- what the justice system is giving to other murderers, that's what my son's murderers should get. Revenge won't bring Omri back home -- it will bring only more bereaved families from both sides.

We have two more children and a granddaughter now, and we are very worried about their safety. Life is cruel. It's not all the time that you are satisfied with your feelings. Even if these are hard feelings, I won't be against the peace process -- or an amnesty on Palestinian prisoners -- if it will save my children and other children from getting hurt. We have to think about the future.

Of course, suicide bombing is terrible and not acceptable by any means. It's confusing because this is involved in emotional feelings -- so it is very difficult to think clearly.

The Palestinian society is a desperate society -- they don't have any hope in their future, and a society without hope acts like animals. They do these terrible things out of no hope, and I don't accept it and I'm against it with all my mind and heart. But I see the situation and I try to understand where it comes from and to think about ways to eliminate the reason for this behaviour -- and not just fighting with the result.

I don't accept Sharon taking revenge in my name. I feel very frustrated. I can't agree with what they are doing and I can do nothing, because I have no power over them. I can cry and shout with all my might, but he has the stage, the press conferences. I just look at the TV, see what happens, and can do nothing -- I can't even speak about the alternatives.

Omri was a peace soldier. He was a singer in a rock band and the songs they wrote were against the war and what is going on in Israel. He understood that the only solution to live here for a long time is to live together in peace, to have equal opportunities and equal rights, to understand and know each other, help each other -- just like normal neighbours.

So we thought that it was our duty -- like a will from him -- to continue to be very active about peace and compensation and equal rights to all the citizens of Israel. I am even more convinced now than before. I was very active in this region before, but after Omri was killed I decided that it was not enough, that I must be even more active in making the peace happen. If it won't happen, our future here is not safe

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