

Confronting the Grotesque Culture of Terror in Israel

In Israel, especially relating to the capture and imprisonment of terrorists who have murdered others, there's a debate that is especially pronounced at this season. Israel has released many terrorists, some "with blood on their hands." Despite claiming they will renounce terror as a condition of their release, many have gone on to murder again. Israelis debate whether we should ever release terrorists, and whether there should be a death penalty for terrorists. Some live with added anxiety that the murderers of their loved ones have gone free or will go free, opening old wounds. Perversely, others, whose loved ones have been murdered by terrorists who have not been apprehended, derive "comfort" knowing that they won't ever have the added grief of having their loved ones' murderer being released.

Kathleen offers, "I am grateful the murderers were caught, providing a measure of closure and relief, as well as their life sentence. I have never been fixated on the murderers. My struggle and anguish and anger was at my God who did not intervene and protect my sister. After much wrestling I accepted what happened and while I will never understand why God did not intervene, I know He is good. I choose to draw near to Him knowing He promises to draw near to me in return [see James 4:8].

"There's comfort knowing they can no longer hurt anyone else. It's disturbing that they can be released as Israel does as goodwill gestures to the Palestinians; crazy, insulting and hurtful to the families! That is tacit agreement and condoning of terrorist behavior. I understood this has happened in the past, which is shocking and frightening—[but] how [could] any rationale ever justify the release of anyone who has murdered anyone and committed a terrorist act? There was a time we

understood the release of these men was a possibility. Our family felt helpless and powerless to protest or prevent this. They should never be released.

“There is no real comfort except what God can provide. These men robbed my sister of her inalienable right to life. God is comfort and He is the Balm of Gilead to my heart that is healing.”

Kathleen and I discussed how Palestinian Arabs celebrate, and even fund, terrorists who are imprisoned. “It is atrocious and abhorrent that the Palestinian Authority provides financial support to the families of those who perpetrate such evil and call them ‘national heroes.’ It’s a practice that keeps Palestinians in a cycle of hate, an imprisonment of their own making. They will not be able to rise above this evil mentality. It will just continue to blind each generation. If Islam influences and encourages this evil against Jews, Palestinians are sadly duped. It is a lie. It is more than sad that (terrorism is) accepted blindly as an acceptable way of life.”

Experiencing PTSD

Early on, in discussing Kathleen’s story, I wrote to her using a common euphemism, that I would “give it a stab.” I never thought about my words, or how they might be insensitive or like fingernails on a blackboard of someone’s soul, given how Kristine was murdered. As sensitive as I am, this was a total blind spot. In Israel, there’s comfort in a support network, emotionally and financially, along with many social services and a community of other victims being able to relate to one another’s trauma. At one point Kathleen said, “I hesitate to tell you this, because I didn’t suffer the attack myself. In the early days, I had a sort of PTSD.”

I asked why she hesitated to say that. Don’t you have PTSD, in fact?

"I was so deeply traumatized by what had happened to my sister. The word *murder* was not in my vocabulary. The plotting of the attack, the violence itself, the pure evil was incomprehensible and left me in shock. I was dazed and unable to process the enormity of what happened. The shock and manner of her murder was terrorizing to my soul and that was what I described as PTSD. I was scared, as irrational as it was, especially at night."

Perhaps because they were twins, Kathleen's PTSD was particularly unique.

"I feared they would come after me. Hiking became fearful. My sister and I loved to hike. She was attacked on a hike in the outdoors. My fear was irrational, though understandable. I had to keep training my mind to think as Jesus said in Colossians 3:2, 'set your mind on things above.'"

Without a community and resources to support her, Kathleen grieved and suffered her trauma alone.

"I had to learn to remember her, and not what happened to her. It will only imprison me and if I had done so I would be sick in my mind, body, soul and spirit. It would have enveloped and consumed me. It was a healthy practice, to protect myself from details that would prevent me from carrying on with life. Because she suffered so greatly in her death, I struggled with intense reactions at objects associated with her murder. It has taken years to overcome to the degree [of PTSD] I have.

"I know God has been faithful to hold my heart and that He understands the trauma my soul has endured—'For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to understand and sympathize with our weaknesses' (Heb. 4:15). I am sensitive to phrases we all use regularly, like 'take a stab at it.' Perhaps I will always cringe and avoid certain objects and certainly will not use that phrase ever again."

On Faith, Forgiveness and Moving Forward

What about forgiveness? Is it possible to forgive the terrorists though they are unrepentant and have not sought forgiveness? Before Kristine's murder, "being asked to forgive anyone for murder was unfathomable. God commands us to forgive; I had to choose to forgive the men for robbing my sister of her life. I spoke the words of forgiveness and asked God to help me forgive."

But they are unrepentant, and even celebrate what they did and would probably do it again, I probed.

"It is unsettling to know that these men are unrepentant, that they found pleasure in the attack and have no remorse. Until they open their hearts to God they will not be capable of feeling remorse and repentance."

Kathleen had already chosen to forgive the terrorists when her parents and brother went to Israel for the trial and sentencing. Kathleen didn't go.

"I didn't go to Israel to see the men face to face where perhaps my choice to forgive would have been shaken to the core. Maybe God knew that to be in their presence would do more damage to my soul. I can't imagine seeing the men who brutally murdered my sister with my own eyes. Would I have been able to say, 'What you did was horrific, but with God's power and love I forgive you'? I pray yes. I choose to forgive just as Stephen did when he was being stoned for his faith in Jesus Christ.

"Stephen said in Acts 7:60, 'And falling to his knees, he cried loudly, Lord, fix not this sin upon them. And when he said this he fell asleep [in death].' What an example. How much more as Jesus, while He was being crucified on the cross, said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' (Luke 23:34). There is no greater example of love and forgiveness than this. I must follow Jesus' example. If I do not I will be in the prison of unforgiveness and poisoned with

anger and unforgiveness. The forgiveness does not depend on these men asking for my forgiveness or not. I must forgive by His power so I can be free.”

Despite not going to the court proceedings, Kathleen wonders “what the terrorists’ reactions would have been if I walked in the room. Would seeing my face shock them into the reality of what they had done, and bring them to their knees as they looked at the face of her identical twin sister? Would it wake them up from their coma and drunken stupor of their anger and hatred? I think I hoped if they had seen me they would do just that.”

Kathleen’s faith is steadfast. “I pray for their salvation. I have thought of visiting them in prison to extend my forgiveness. I pray God would be glorified. Maybe someday.”

What can wake up such ones to life, love and compassion? Jesus alone. He waits with open arms to forgive them if they would turn to Him. He waits to fill them with the love they crave and squelch the raging fire of anger, hatred, offense and retaliation that has bound, poisoned and imprisoned them. God is a God of justice, but only He can mete out perfect justice, as He alone is perfect and just. His ways are not our ways.

Psalms 56:8 has deeply consoled me as I was so often inconsolable: “You number my wanderings; put my tears into Your bottle—are they not in Your book?”

In my grief just weeks after her passing on my way to work, the car in front of me had a license plate that referred to 1 Thessalonians 4:13. I looked up the Scripture and I was both comforted and corrected. God was reminding me once again that He sees me. The Scripture says, “Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind who have no hope.” It was as if He lifted my chin to look in His eyes and spoke to my heart. He reminded me where my hope lies, in God

alone.