

Israeli Bomb Shelters: 8-Year-Olds and Architecture

One of the fascinating things about parenting is that as much as parents are supposed to teach their kids, often I find myself learning from mine. Kids are always interesting, and it's always fascinating to look at things from a kid's perspective, often seeing things through a prism that's simpler and less encumbered by the bias we grow to incorporate in how we see things as adults.

Being the parent of six kids ages 8 to 20, I often consider that I have nearly 100 years of collective parenting experience and have certainly done my share of learning. Maybe one day I'll actually perfect it, just in time to be a grandfather.

Early Saturday mornings are one of my favorite times of the week. Most of my kids are sleeping so the house is quiet, and there's hardly any noise outside except for birds waking up. Living in what is largely an Orthodox Jewish community, no cars are heard, no lawnmowers and no TV. Just quiet. It's one of the most restful points in the week, a time to read, think, pray, get ready for my weekly Shabbat observance, including synagogue worship, and family time and fellowship with friends.

Often on Saturday mornings I wake up first and have the house to myself. It's a time of serenity I relish. Usually I am joined by my 8-year-old son, though sometimes he wakes up first. He plays or reads quietly, and I read and have coffee quietly.

Every now and then, we find ourselves in conversation on any number of things—Torah and religion, soccer, current events. He certainly may not know as much as I do, but sometimes he

teaches me things all the same.

A recent Shabbat morning, out of nowhere, he asked me why all the rooms in our house have windows. I have no idea what made him think of this, but it's almost as if he was leading up to the next question.

"Why do we have a window in the *milkat* [bomb shelter]? It's not safe if a terrorist were to get out there and try to hurt us."

First of all, yes, we have a bomb shelter in the house. Actually, we have two. It's part of standard construction in Israel since the Gulf War in the early 1990s, when Iraq fired dozens of missiles at Israel because they were fighting a war in the Gulf. Go figure.

Then there are public communal bomb shelters that are standard in most communities, but because of the threat of WMD (another story as to where they went), Israelis were issued gas masks and outfitted "sealed rooms" to prevent deadly gas from doing what a direct hit from a scud missile would have done.

Today, homes and buildings built before the early 1990s are having bomb shelters attached to their homes, especially those on or near the front line, in range of rocket fire from any of our Arab neighbors who are prone to send them flying. Sadly, there are far too many such experiences, and the need has not diminished. And sadly, we are all in range.

Now, back to my son. I told him that although our bomb shelter has a window, there's also an outer steel window that we can close in a case of emergency, making us safe inside, if needed. Of course, he never noticed this, so he had to check. In pajamas, he went outside to see for himself. Satisfied, that was the end of the conversation.

But I kept thinking about it. I was glad that he knew what the bomb shelter was for. I am glad that he is aware that there

are threats we face that others don't, in order to be ready, just in case. I'm also glad, I think, that he's not aware that the need behind our bomb shelters is not a terrorist in the backyard but bombs. Or, more accurately, rockets in the front yard.

Living across a valley from Bethlehem, controlled by the Palestinian Authority, which has been less than warm toward the idea of making peace and living side by side with Israel as a Jewish state, we don't think about the risk every day, but the risk is out there, literally, in our front yard.

None of my kids know what Israelis went through during the Gulf War, when air raid sirens were commonplace. For weeks, families lived in close proximity to their sealed rooms, gas masks ready to be put on at a moment's notice. And when out of the house, gas masks were in tow with them, wherever they went.

Decades later, Israelis still suffer post-traumatic stress from the sound of air raid sirens, even when we know that it's just a test. In sharing this video, produced to expose some of the risks we face living here, with friends who went through the Gulf War, it brought back fears and memories that they'd rather have not remembered.

Oh, and yes, we have gas masks in our bomb shelter too, small, medium and large. Just like Goldilocks and the Three Bears, sort of.

Hopefully my kids will grow up and be aware of the global threats against us—all of us. To be naïve is to be ill-prepared. While our neighborhood may be safe for now, other kids their age know the sound of air raid sirens and the anxiety this produces regularly. All their lives, this is all they've known.

But hopefully we will live to see a day that these threats are no longer, that our bomb shelters are just extra rooms with

thicker doors and strange windows, a place for a computer, extra bed and storage, and that the only thing unusual about our bomb shelters will be that they have different windows.

Maybe one day a grandchild will ask me why that is without knowing the threats we faced in the past and still today.

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