

Protecting My Holy Land from Terrorists

By Barry Emanuel Zeve

The screen at the Castro Theater is my Wailing Wall. How many times have I sat before it and cried? That theater is my temple; it's the center of my spiritual life, where I meet my friends and pray in my own special way for understanding and acceptance in a world so hateful of gays. San Francisco is my Jerusalem, my "city of peace" as is the Hebrew meaning of the name. And the Bay Area is just a tiny piece of land, yet here I feel safe; I have a homeland, a refuge from the world in which many want to destroy me and my way of life. "Israel" means "to struggle with God." Here is my Israel. Here is my struggle. I won't leave it or give it up to the terrorists within or outside my community.

When I was growing up in L.A. in the sixties, I hated America, politics, hippies, loud rock music -- everything! I was intimidated by denim! To me "cool" described weather we rarely experienced in L.A., not my state of mind. I thought it was unnatural to experiment with sex with men in the same city my mother lived in. I felt guilty even for breathing!

So I ran away from America as soon as I graduated from high school. I was going to show the world how to take steps toward peace through movement. I became a ballet dancer. My language was not in words. I was queer as in "odd," and I thought I could escape my oddity if I packaged it somewhere else in a different wrapper. So I moved to Israel to dance and learn about love.

There I had to learn another language to engage with the Israeli

people in their mysterious and distinctive culture. I came out of the closet in Tel Aviv and had my first sex at Independence Park where I met young gay soldiers at the picnic tables late at night. Someone would bring a thermos of coffee and we'd all drink from it. Then we'd go off in the bushes to find comfort in each other's arms. On many occasion the police raided the park, to catch us and write "Homo" on our identity booklets, which would devastate our reputations. While running from the police I thought of my parents, both Holocaust survivors, and asked myself how it was possible that I was running from Jewish policemen. Had the world gone mad?

I'd run away from America because I wanted to stop running, but I ran into the arms of cigarettes, drugs and alcohol, and the embraces of immature young men like myself instead. I hated other people's hatred, but I was too young then to see that I also hated me.

I came back to America five years later after having lived in Israel and Holland, head bowed, feeling indebted to this country, and yet more wounded than before. Two suicide attempts in my twenties only confirmed that the homophobe inside me wanted to kill the queer, and that there was a Nazi within with a Final Solution to the problem of the Jew. Thanks to A.A. in L.A. and the community of gays and lesbians I found there, I was lovingly held in gay arms as I began to heal.

When I came to San Francisco in

1990 to be with the man I loved, the intolerance I experienced here of gays towards gays shocked and chagrined me. But when that relationship of fourteen years ended two years ago, I experienced a disappointment with gay life that went far deeper than anything that saddened me about the Castro, or the world. Yet where else could I go with my pain if not to this community? I needed the broad, gay shoulders of San Francisco to cry on, this one special place where I felt free.

Over my lifetime I became more "queer" and less odd. Today my closet is filled with denim. I may be more outspoken than most, but I consider myself "cool." I take three ballet classes a week, love America, but still hate loud music.

Today, Israeli gays (and that includes Israel's Moslem citizens) enjoy more gay rights than we do. Palestinian gays on the West Bank have an organization in Israel to run to, to escape discrimination from their families and the homophobia in their own society. It pains me that most Moslems worldwide (and probably in America too) would like to see all Jews and gays eradicated. I cry for Israel, and for gay people everywhere, who are forced to fight to be free. Anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism and homophobia are the world's wounds, but the world will have to heal, or suffer the consequences, for justice will come.

Today, I see young people in America "meandering" out of the closet compared to the way I shot out like a seed trying to germinate overnight. I see queers walking

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nonchalantly through the Castro as if freedom were free, not realizing what's been attained here or the high price paid for it with drug addiction and infection from AIDS. Those who choose death over life are trying to learn about love without the benefits of wisdom.

There are terrorists today in my Holy Land, the Castro, blowing themselves up with unprotected sex and dangerous drugs, and they don't give a damn how it affects the rest of us. I tried fighting them with smiles and encouragement, as I did the terrorists in my own heart. But I'd had to retaliate against my own muddle of autonomy and freedom with reason and restrictions – and so will they. I only hope our community will come to realize that we need to take a harsher stand against the suicidal tendencies we see around us.

The terrorists are everywhere. But every moment of every day there are opportunities to act with courage and conviction by refusing to give up our hard-earned freedom to them. The terrorists are the narrow-minded or homicidal straights; the deluded or suicidal gays – and, yes, even the voices within that threaten the healthy individualism we've worked so hard to attain. I'll be damned if I'll watch us retreat even one step back into the closet for any of them!

Like Israel, we have the right to protect ourselves from anyone who would deny us our right to exist and flourish. And we need to be especially vigilant to stop

those who would hurt the rest of us as they destroy themselves.



Barry Emanuel Zeve has lived in San Francisco since 1990. He moved to the Castro when he became single again in 2004. He joined SFGMCI's Wilde Chats, a gay men's discussion group, because for him being gay and single in the Castro required developing courage through conversation. He can be reached at strawberry@comcast.net.