

On Nightmares and Dreams

by SARA K. EISEN



that there's really anything to worry about since so many of our friends and neighbors take buses in Jerusalem all the time... How do I get out of this one?)

But this breezy explanation isn't enough for him. He smells my fear like an animal and he needs to scratch to the very bottom of it. Why, he wants to know, can the police not "deactivate" the bombs before they explode? What is the big security problem here, my solution-happy first-born male wants to know, if we can solve everything like Bruce Willis does?

The question indicates to me that he is not aware, after all this time and for all his smarts, that there are human beings wearing said bombs. I am amazed at how adept his defensive filters are; he picks up everything — knows who I am talking to on the phone by the way I laugh with each person, he says — but not this basic fact that lurks around each corner.

On one hand, I'd like to leave it alone. But I can't. I shouldn't.

This asking means that he is ready now. So we discuss the streamlined, ever-improving suicide belt. I find myself answering nightmarish questions. It occurs to me that I might want to leave things out or to soften the facts. But he solves that for me quickly: Each time I hedge, he asks exactly the right thing to excavate the whole truth. Readiness with him is extreme.

Somehow, very quickly, he gets back to 1948. He does not understand the issue under contention. In his mind it is clear: We won this country fair and square. Why won't the Arabs admit it, he wants to know. I had no intention of going here, of course, but there is no stopping the digging once he's got his claws in. So we discuss history for a while. I teach him the concepts of underdog,

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*I am so glad my son doesn't ask me how
God lets daughters explode in front of their fathers,
or mothers vanish in a crack of smoke and
glass in plain sight of their sons.*

My nine-year-old son has been sleeping through the night since he was two months old. Unlike his little brother, this is not a child who ends up in our bed before dawn. He is independent to a fault and sometimes too mature.

Last week he came to us at 3 a.m. with a nightmare for the first time in maybe five years. In his dream, he was on a school trip and the driver was really a terrorist. He blew up the kids on the bus before they could discover his identity.

I let him sleep next to me for the rest of the night, assuring him that terrorists don't disguise themselves as bus drivers. But the dream was my fault, poor kid.

With the best of intentions, earlier that day, I had given my son nightmares.

Avi has been chosen to represent his class on a trip commemorating the yahrzeit of Rabbi Uziel, the former Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel after whom his school is named. He and 20 other students will be traveling to Jerusalem, visiting the Western Wall, the Chief Rabbinate and several other sites in the center of town. His excitement is contagious, and I am warmed over with pleasure and pride. I say nothing of the other thing I feel as he hands me the note.

But I write on the permission slip: Please confirm that you will be traveling by private bus, as I do not allow Avi to ride public transportation in Jerusalem.

He reads, as always, over my shoulder as I write. He wants to know why it's so important to me that there's a private bus.

It's supposed to be a simple answer: C'mon, Avi, you know what's going on here, don't you? I'm just being careful, is all. (Not

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to Edmond Moser, a businessman, born June 20, 1871 in Helmstedt. They were sent to France following the ship's return. He came to New York on September 17, 1947, but she did not accompany him.

A French researcher doing work at USHMM offered to write to an archivist in the French town where the Mosers lived. She located documents that place the couple at a number of residences in France between 1939 and 1942 (they were probably on the run). In 1942, Rosalie was admitted to a hospital in Clairvivre for intestinal surgery and a second operation was scheduled. "From that time the archives lost the trace of the couple Moser," she writes. Did Rosalie die in France? Is that why her husband came to the U.S. alone? This story still needs to be followed.

Of the fate of the eight passengers I found, three survived the war, three did not make it out of the concentration camps and

the fate of the final two is not determined.

My two-year experience has been so inspiring and gratifying that I am embarking on another people search for the museum. This time I'm the recipient of a grant, working two days a week — so much for retirement!

In reassessing the project, I must say that all the family inquiries that I made, all the Survivor's Registry* mass mailings and other large mailings, all the time spent at the Library of Congress (surreptitiously in the stacks) and looking at old international phone books came close but did not produce anybody. The people I unearthed were found because dedicated archivists and their staffs — unheralded public officials — in Germany, Belgium, France, Holland and the U.S. were willing to go through old records, ledgers and death records to come up with a name and some data.

The entire project has made a valuable thumb print on history. My involvement was more of a nail scraping; nevertheless, it has been an honor and privilege to restore a measure of dignity to lives that

were shattered but for a final visa form that might have allowed them entry into the United States. It has been rewarding to help complete the story, to fill in a face, to be part of a project that has added yet another dimension to the ever-widening field of Holocaust research.

Discussing the St. Louis project with Scott Miller, he said: "This project is important because it shows that large sweeping historical actions or decisions have individual consequences. In the case of the St. Louis, the restrictive immigration policies of the U.S. government had 937 consequences. Only by discovering the fate of each passenger, therefore, could these consequences be brought to the public's attention and with the hope that such an event will not happen again." ■

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*The Benjamin Meed Survivor's Registry is the largest database of Holocaust survivors in the world (www.ushmm.org/remembrance/registry).

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world opinion and two sides to every story. I tell him about the romantic notion of struggle, about good guys making bad mistakes, about legitimate complaints and about the twisted ways people sometimes use these claims. We talk about the whole world sometimes being wrong, to paraphrase Kofi Annan, and this disturbs Avi deeply, although he does not seem that surprised.

I tell him that this land is special, that it is both our history and our future, and that it is legitimate and right for us to be here. I tell him that we are, for the most part, more merciful to the indigenous population than most nations who have dreamed a country and built it, despite what he may hear, but that there is much work to be done in our society on all fronts. I tell him that there is nothing worth having that is easy to get and to keep.

I have to make some quick decisions on spin, realizing that his ability to see grays, at nine, will be limited. This business is tougher than answering the "why" questions of a four year old; it means defining myself, as well.

At one point, the boy gets stuck on God. "I'll bet their leaders are lying to them, that God never really told them to kill people... That can't be what God wants them to do," he posits roundly. He is sure.

I am so glad he doesn't ask me how God lets daughters explode in front of their fathers, or mothers vanish in a crack of smoke and glass in plain sight of their sons. That was his kind of question at five, but he seems, like Abraham and Moses and Job before him, to have given up the point.

We finally wrap up (Whew!) at Arafat, who, Avi is convinced, must have a fake house to pretend he's poor, because if peo-

ple knew he was rich and not sharing, they'd never forgive him. I try not to laugh, mostly because he has a decent point.

But now, a surprise. He tells me he doesn't want to go on the trip. He's scared, he says. I think to myself: Oy. Look what I've done now. Did I make a mistake, being too honest? Were my assumptions about his readiness wrong? Or does Avi, like the rest of us, simply need some reassurance that he, too, can navigate the crazy space between existential uncertainty and abject terror — a space that is at the center of spiritual and psychological awareness?

So I tell him that he has to keep on living — that we can be careful and well informed, but that we cannot stop doing the things we need to do. I remind him that our neighbor Jacob takes the bus in Jerusalem every day to work because he has to go to work, and that's that. I tell him you can minimize chances sometimes, like I was trying to do with the note to his teacher (was that a mistake, I wonder now, writing that note?) but that you have to go about your business. You have to live your best life and try not to think about the rest.

At least not too much.

Avi's response is that he wants to get up early the day of the trip. He'll go, he says, but he wants to pray first, say extra Psalms.

I smile and hug him, and then I tell him to go outside and ride his bike.

I remind this small, kind philosopher to be a child.

That night, when he crawled in bed next to me for a 3 a.m. hug to chase his bad dreams away, he remembered how. ■

Sara K. Eisen is a writer and editor living in Bet Shemesh. She wrote "Laughter and Tears" in our Summer 2003 issue.