

Finding extra purpose on a visit to Israel

by Judy Klein

On a recent trip to Israel to visit our daughter, my husband our 15 year-old son, 18-year-old daughter and I were privileged to meet two young women who survived recent acts of terror. We connected with these two courageous women through Potomac's Aviva Tessler and Operation Embrace. Before our trip, Aviva gave me some information about each girl; their names were Miryam and Tigist.

Miryam was a survivor of the August 2001 Sbarro restaurant bombing in Jerusalem Tigist was an Ethiopian immigrant who was serving in the Israeli army when a bomb went off on a bus she was taking on a busy Jerusalem street.

Miryam,, a beautiful 18-year-old, was incredibly articulate and open about the trauma she has been through. She immediately put us at ease with her warm smile and friendly personality.

At the time of the attack Miryam was 15. She and her 10-year-old sister were waiting at the Sbarro counter for their food. She recalled her impatience that day because the food was taking so long to come. She told us that she now realizes that there were signs of what was to come, but, of course, she didn't understand them at the time.

She asked the Arab waiter why it was taking so long for them to heat some pizzas and he replied something to the effect of, "Don't worry pretty soon it will be very hot in here."

A few seconds later he disappeared. As she leaned over the counter to see where he was, she felt an enormous tremor and blacked out. Her younger sister, Yocheved, died instantly.

Miryam told us about her many injuries and hospital stays To this day, she still must undergo painful operations and therapy. But her face lit up when she described the lap-top computer and other support Operation Embrace has given her.

When we hugged good-bye, we felt confident that our visit was a bright spot in Miryam's life. Our interaction with her helped personalize the atrocities we hear about in America. We have heard from Miryam via e-mail and are hoping she continues to heal.

Tigist met us for lunch the same day. She is a lovely 20-year-old who has suffered greatly, but still manages to smile and see good in people. Her trip to meet us was the first outing she had taken since the incident; she had been too traumatized to return to a busy street with buses and constant traffic.

The afternoon proved to be very difficult for her. We could see the pain in her sad, brown eyes as she recounted the terror of that fateful day.

She was on the bus when a powerful jolt and loud noise erupted. She recalled seeing the top portion of her friend fly by and then she remembers no more until she was in a hospital. She was told that she was presumed dead at the scene and was put into a body bag. When other dead bodies were piled onto her, the movement jostled her and she called out, "I am cold."

Fortunately, someone heard her and discovered that she was, indeed, alive.

Tigist shared with us a photo album of herself before the bombing and of her therapy in the hospital. She told us how difficult her life was as an Ethiopian immigrant, her parents are unemployed and there is a very large family to feed. Several times during our lunch, Tigist would pause and look to the side as tears welled up in her eyes.

She is receiving vocational training that Operation Embrace has funded. She is so grateful for this help and hopes it will enable her to provide for her family. Tigist was incredibly brave to share her story with us. It was obvious how painful the memories are for her and our hearts broke as she opened herself

to us and relived the trauma she has been through.

Tigist's face brightened when we handed her some gifts and she was so gracious as she posed for pictures. Two days later, she phoned us to thank us again, and to make arrangements to get together with our daughter.

It was so inspiring to meet these two incredible people and to hear their stories firsthand. It is obvious that the work of Operation Embrace is making a huge difference for victims of terror and we feel honored to have become a part of the lives of these two special young women.

A resident of Silver Spring's Kemp Mill, Judy Klein has four children, one of whom is studying in Israel

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