

The Alchemist

Is it possible to wrest good from an act of terrorism?
Potomac's **Aviva Tessler** set out to try

By Debra Rubin

A bronze-coated vase of rough, twisted metal is among Aviva Tessler's favorite possessions.

An Israeli carpenter fashioned it from the remnant of a Qassam rocket launched into southern Israel from the Gaza Strip. The carpenter, whose home was destroyed by the rocket fire in 2007, gave the vase to the Potomac resident after she admired it, telling her that "in life, we must turn bad into good. We have to turn that which was destroyed into a vessel for life."

Tessler has been turning bad into good since 2001, when she co-founded Operation Embrace, a nonprofit organization that assists Israelis—Jewish, Arab and Druze—who have been injured in terrorist attacks.

That assistance comes in many forms, from visiting hospitalized victims to giving them laptop computers. She also has created art therapy programs and provided financial aid for medical care, physical therapy, transportation or education in Israel. She stays in touch years after the victims' traumas.

Tessler and her husband, Joel, the senior rabbi at Beth Sholom Congregation in Potomac, were on a four-month sabbatical in Israel in 2000 when she got the idea. Terrorism was rampant. "Every day in the newspaper it seemed like there was another suicide bombing," she says.

A friend asked if she would help deliver gift baskets to hospitalized victims for the Purim holiday. That's where she met a 23-year-old named Michal who had been waiting for a bus when a car bomb exploded, instantly killing her friend. Mi-



Potomac's Aviva Tessler holds a vase fashioned from a Qassam rocket—a symbol of how her nonprofit, Operation Embrace, helps Israelis reshape their lives after being injured in terrorist attacks.

FRANCIS TATEM

chal “tried to stand up and realized she had no legs to stand on,” Tessler says.

The woman told her: “One day we’re news headlines, the next day we’re forgotten. Don’t be a ‘hi, bye’ friend.”

“I walked out of there sobbing,” Tessler says. She got some money together with help from friends and bought Michal a laptop. The two remain in touch, and Michal was invited to the wedding of Tessler’s daughter in Israel last August, though she didn’t feel well enough to attend.

When Tessler returned to Potomac after her trip, she and three friends started Operation Embrace. She says the organization has raised more than \$2 million and assisted upwards of 6,000 people.

She still visits Israel two or three times a year, and wears a dual-faced watch set to Israeli and local times. Roni Gagin, who directs the social

work program at Israel’s Rambam Hospital in Haifa, calls Tessler “the best defense attorney for the injured.”

Helping others is nothing new for Tessler, who grew up in Dayton, Ohio, and Weirton, W.Va., the daughter of an Orthodox rabbi. She attended a Jewish private school in Pittsburgh, boarding with a family and coming home for weekends and holidays. “It forced me to take care of myself, become independent at a young age,” she says.

After high school, she spent a year studying in Israel, then went to Stern College in New York, marrying Joel at 19. The couple moved to the D.C. area in 1983. Inspired by the way her husband counseled congregants, Tessler went to grad school to become a marriage and family therapist. She maintains a small, private practice, and says it’s a privilege to help “facilitate better communication

and better families.”

She has taught Judaic studies, was a guidance counselor at the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Rockville, and for several years had a WMET radio program with her husband, “Torah Talk with the Tesslers.” Last summer the couple led a group of teens to Europe, as they’ve done twice before, and then to Israel for community service projects.

But Tessler’s focus remains Operation Embrace.

“So many of these people become my personal heroes,” she says. “I might be having a hard day, but it’s nothing compared with what these people are going through.” ■

Debra Rubin previously was the editor of Washington Jewish Week. She lives in Silver Spring. To comment on this story, email comments@bethesdamagazine.com.

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