

Title of Presentation as announced in Program Book: *“Life after Terror: Israeli Experiences,”* by Zieva Konvisser.

Zieva Konvisser was the first woman to rise through the ranks to executive positions within Chrysler Corporation’s Mopar Parts Division. After retiring from Chrysler in 2001, she pursued her own search for meaning by earning a Ph.D. in human development from the Fielding Graduate University (Santa Barbara, California), where she continues as a postdoctoral researcher. She served on the National Commission on American Jewish Women and on the boards of other philanthropic organizations.

Description:

In this talk, I will present the powerful stories of positive changes and growth of Israeli civilian survivors of suicide bombings and shooting incidents during the Second Intifada. The people I interviewed shared not only their distress and despair, but also their expressions of hope and optimism. They spoke of their remarkable life journeys—from terror to hope and from grief to meaning—not just moving on with life as usual, but moving forward in their lives, contributing to society, and turning tragedy into action or activism. How they were able to make sense of their experiences, find positive meanings and new purpose in their lives, and make choices that involved significant life changes is the subject of *Life after Terror*.

Life after Terror: Israeli Experiences

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“Smoke, darkness, blood, burning flesh, fire, heat . . . it’s a picture I don’t forget for all my life.”

Who can forget these words and the pictures they paint in the aftermath of a suicide bomb attack on a crowded bus? Sadly, such monstrous acts have become all too common in a world where terrorists will stop at nothing to win at psychological warfare. What happens to the survivors of such indiscriminate attacks? Can they say *yes* to life, transcend the traumatic experience, and lead healthy and fulfilling lives?

“In the beginning it has to destroy you in order to survive. . . . There is life after the terror act I became better in my head, in my soul, in my heart. . . . I can see much more clearly what is important and what is not important. . . . I can do everything in life . . . I have the power. . . . I can do it. . . . I will do it. . . . I am a survivor, not a victim, of terror.”

Interviewing civilian survivors of suicide bombings and shooting incidents in Israel during the Second Intifada, I was touched by the essence of their humanness. I heard not

only their distress and despair, but also their expressions of hope and optimism. They shared powerful stories of positive changes and growth, even as they struggled with their horrific experiences. How they were able to make sense of their experiences, find positive meanings and new purpose in their lives, and make choices that involved significant life changes is the subject of *Life after Terror: Israeli Experiences*.

The people I interviewed spoke of their remarkable life journeys—from terror to hope and from grief to meaning—not just moving on with life as usual, but moving forward in their lives, contributing to society, and turning tragedy into action or activism.

While we may never experience an event as horrific as a terror attack, life crises are inevitable for most of us. In our struggle with new circumstances, we can learn from the inspiring stories of these terror survivors how to integrate these challenges into our lives, make choices and changes that will help us overcome those experiences, and live healthy, purposeful, and fulfilling lives.

Stories—especially for survivors of traumatic experiences—provide order, structure, and meaning and make things not seem meaningless. As librarians—especially Jewish librarians—there is a special message about the importance of collecting, documenting, and disseminating these powerful and rich survivor stories for the purpose of recognition, education, and research. As we have learned from the testimony and memory literature of Holocaust and genocide survivors, so too shall the stories of survivors of terror remind the world of Never Again!

The focus of my work is different from most discussions about terrorism. In the media, we hear and read a lot about *posttraumatic stress disorder* (PTSD) which may occur in persons who have faced traumatic events and which emphasizes succumbing, negative outcomes, and illness. I come from a perspective of *posttraumatic growth* that focuses on positive outcomes, wellness, growth, and thriving. Although the term is new, the idea that great good can come from great suffering is ancient. *Posttraumatic growth* is the positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances and it describes the experience of individuals whose development, at least in some areas, has surpassed what was present before the event occurred.

Dan, a survivor of a suicide bombing at the Hebrew University, explains the power of the struggle: *“Usually the most seriously injured people don’t have any choice. In the beginning it has to destroy you in order to survive. And so the fight is the crucial one and afterwards it’s okay.”*

And as an Israeli social worker told me, *“There is so much destruction and devastation and yet if one begins to look, there are people out there who somehow find the strength to move onwards despite the ongoing deep pain in their hearts. These people do rebuild their lives in new ways that they had never known before.”*

Sara is one of over 50 Israeli survivors of terror acts and bereaved family members whose stories I collected between 2004 and 2007. Here are a few vignettes taken from Sara’s inspiring story, using her own voice:

. . . I was eating an orange in the car. . . . Something attracted my attention to the window next to me and I looked sideways and I saw a hole in the window. And then I heard glass breaking from the window behind me. . . . I think I understood immediately there was something wrong with my legs. . . . And then I just felt something very peaceful and quiet falling on me. . . . After I gave the phone numbers, I just relaxed. I felt no pain. There was no blood. . . . I didn’t scream or shout out. . . . I’m not the type that screams. . . .

Sara and seven other people were on their way home from work when the van in which they were riding was shot at by five terrorists. Sara’s spine was cut completely by a bullet; she is paralyzed and wheelchair-bound. Later she learned the facts of the attack:

. . . It was unbelievable. There were five of them. One of them wanted a loan of \$500 . . . and he went up to a guy . . . and he told him okay, come tomorrow. And he came the next day and he was introduced to four other terrorists. And he told them . . . for the money you have to kill. . . . Four of them were with machine guns in a deserted house on a hill, just overlooking the road that we pass every day. . . . The guy who was on the lookout videotaped the whole thing. . . . They sent it to their leader. . . . The guy complained that he never got his \$500, because he didn’t kill. I was only injured. . . . And he is in prison. For \$500 . . . which is . . . inhuman.

Sara's life has been changed forever by the senseless and horrific terrorist attack. Even though such a tragedy resists the possibility of meaning, she was able to find meaning and growth, not in the tragic event, but in her life, in her deeds, in her choices, and from her past experiences.

Sara is married, a mother and grandmother. She is an observant Orthodox Jew and continues to work from home in her job as a manager for a chemical company. Her parents were both Holocaust survivors. One of her children was born with Down Syndrome.

Maybe once or twice I asked myself why did it happen to me?. . . And you should see that boy. He made my life. He made our house better. Wherever he is, he changes the place for the better. And I can only say that I'm proud that G-d chose me to have such a child and that through him, we are able to make a better world. . . . I think what I went through before made me a stronger person. And it helped me in a way when this happened to me. I said to myself okay, I already went through a hardship before and I survived. I will survive now, as well. And that is how I look at life.

Sara's story is about finding meaning, positive attitudes, and strong belief systems. She describes how she is helped to move forward by the strength from her past experiences, her deeper connection to G-d through prayer, her future vision, and goals and especially by her love for her family. She sees her family in a new way. *"I look deeply into their soul. . . . I look into them, not that I look at them from the outside. . . . I learned to love my children much more. . . . I learned to thank my family, to appreciate them with all their hardships. I enjoy giving them more than I can."* She appreciates and lives life to the fullest and understands herself, as well as what is important in life and what is not. She makes choices and takes responsibility for her choices. She exudes determination, optimism and hope. *"I haven't given up anything. Even walking I haven't given up. I still hope maybe the people of Christopher Reeves will find some cure."*

Sara experienced inhumanity but does not hate. She learned this from her parents and her children also do not know what hatred is. She has made sense of her life in the aftermath of the terror attack and moved forward with her life. In the process, she changed her perception of self. During a visit to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, she thought of her parents and realized that *"In Israel, they call them survivors of the Holocaust—Nitzole Shoah. So why am I a victim? And it was there at that instant that I decided to regard myself as a survivor of terror, not as a victim."*

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Book and website forthcoming—please visit www.zievakonvisser.com