



Shula Ben-Zev on the balcony from which she watched the events unfold. (Eitan Arom)

Har Nof in flames

Mourning – and tales of miracles – after the synagogue massacre

• By EITAN AROM

News on the bus from Jerusalem's city center to Har Nof Tuesday spread the old-fashioned way, by word of mouth: Such-and-such has a cousin who was hurt, so-and-so is in critical condition.

The brutal murders of four rabbis during their morning prayer sent shock waves of tragic stories and expressions of concern and grief reverberating through Har Nof's religious community, which occupies a hilly outcrop on the western fringe of the capital.

A woman on the bus said someone she "knows well" was just that moment going into surgery. She described the residents of the religious community of Har Nof as "amazing people, righteous people."

Instead of taking a right onto the long, curving streets of Har Nof, the bus on Tuesday afternoon veered abruptly off its normal path, continuing instead along a main thoroughfare. The commuters revolted, but the driver insisted the standard route was blocked off (it wasn't, just choked with news vans).

On the walk up to the synagogue where the attack had taken place on Harav Shimon Agassi Street, children stood on balconies and in yards, watching passersby. School had been canceled – the combination of the killings and a strike by Arab bus drivers had made the logistics of getting there too difficult.

The adults paced in front of their congregations, sharing news over the phone. One told his partner on the other end of the line that one of those hurt had been "someone named Goldberg."

A couple of hours later, a car drove onto Agassi Street, a speaker fastened to its roof mournfully chanting the names of victims. Among them was Rabbi Avraham Goldberg.

The massacre, which also claimed the life of a Druse police officer who arrived on the scene, generated a

spate of graphic images that set fire to media locally and abroad. But here, the tales were of personal danger avoided, and of those who were not so lucky.

A teenager standing in the growing crowd in front of the Bnei Torah Synagogue described sitting in a lounge in the back of the synagogue during the attacks when he heard someone coming down the stairs towards it. He said they stopped and turned

around. He speculated it might have been one of the terrorists.

One oft-repeated fact was the double tragedy for the family of one victim. Three years ago, the daughter of Rabbi Aryeh Kopinsky, slain Tuesday, died suddenly.

Neighborhood residents poured into Agassi Street over the course of the clear and sunny afternoon,



Zaka rescue and recovery organization volunteers survey the scene of the attack. (Marc Israel Sellem)

greeting each other with embraces and whatever news they had.

Accompanying the grief over the deaths was frustration with the political and security situation that led to them. Dror Shamir, a sports therapist from Givatayim who traveled to Har Nof that morning to “be a part of it” and provide whatever comfort possible, said the violence in Jerusalem has ceased to be passing unrest and has instead become a pattern. He condemned the government for not involving the military and instead leaving it up to the police, when “this is not their job.”

“You have people getting killed in the middle of the capital,” said a man from New York with a long, graying beard and watering eyes. “It’s insanity.”

Several blocks from the synagogue, a group of girls clad in Orthodox garb on the side of the street held a large Hebrew banner reading “We are at war.”

Some were still less conciliatory. As I walked through the park overlooking Agassi Street, a man arriving for the funeral noticed I was a journalist and asked, “What are you writing?” He told me, “Write that soon in Jebel Mukaber there will be a big attack.”

AS PEOPLE gathered for the funeral, police and synagogue officials needed to move a car parked in front of the main entrance that had belonged to one of the victims. A crowd of Orthodox men rapidly gathered around the beige mid-sized vehicle, now



A crowd gathers outside the Bnei Torah Synagogue a few hours after the terror attack. (Marc Israel Sellem)

pockmarked with bullet holes.

Dozens of hands pressed down on the hood and roof, bouncing the car up and down to make it easier to maneuver, as one man held the wheel and others pushed from the back. A young boy with some of the baby teeth missing in his grin took it upon himself to direct the effort, chanting, “More! More! More!”

Weaving through the crowd in front of the police line with a metal pot of hot water and a bowl of Turkish coffee, 18-year-old Avishai Illuz and 16-year-

old Neriah Cohen offered coffee to police officers and ambulance technicians, most of whom turned them down graciously.

Journalists watched the happenings from a second-floor balcony belonging to Shula Ben-Zev. She had seen that morning’s episode standing just outside her kitchen, from which she was now offering hot coffee to reporters.

She said her husband, Shlomo Ben-Zev, regularly attends the prayer service that was attacked. On Tuesday morning, he awoke with a bad pain in his knee and a slight fever. Shula told him to stay home and pray there.

“Never in my life have I told him not to go pray, never,” she said.

Just as her husband began to pray at home, Shula heard gunshots and went to the balcony to see what was happening.

Outside the synagogue, across the street, a partially decapitated man was sitting on the street. Within minutes, the police arrived and fired on the terrorists. She watched the whole scene play out from the balcony.

She said that if her husband had been there, his bad knee would have prevented him from running. She attributes his survival to nothing less than divine providence.

“I’m telling you, it’s a miracle,” she said. “It’s just before Hanukka, and my miracle came.” •

A city consuming itself

Jebel Mukaber residents join others in east Jerusalem in expressing anger, shock and rage over the latest attacks

• Text and photo: SETH J. FRANTZMAN

“You can go further, but I can’t guarantee your safety.” The man in the gray track suit who spoke broken English was trying to be helpful. “The house of the family of the cousins who were killed is up the road, but I don’t know if you should go.”

Born in Jebel Mukaber, he had gathered with his two friends this morning when they heard that two men from the southeast Jerusalem neighborhood had been killed after carrying out a bloody terrorist attack in Har Nof in which four were killed and many injured. (A fifth man later died of his wounds.)

“We were shocked, but you have to expect it,” said the man who refused to give his name. “Tensions are high, look at those kids over there, they are waiting for *Mista’arivim* [YAMAS, the Border Police’s undercover unit] with stones.”

When we entered the neighborhood, we had to navigate several improvised roadblocks of stones set up by these kids. A burning trash can with tires in it gave off a noxious smell around the bend of the steep hill. “Bibi [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu] doesn’t want peace. He is doing nothing towards this two-state thing. Look at al-Aksa Mosque and what Israel is doing there.”

These men were expressing what we would hear again and again in the next

hours: Israel is the cause of the recent violence, and Israel’s government is fanning the flames.

Jebel Mukaber, like many Arab neighborhoods, has been on edge since this summer’s Gaza war. This tension goes back years. The terrorist who killed eight at Merkaz Harav in 2008, Alaa Abu Dhein, was also from the neighborhood.

In February, a man’s home was demolished after the city proved it had been built without a permit. Some residents, such as Muhammad Ali Zerth, have had their homes demolished or been threatened with demolition several times due to building without permits. Although the city recently installed street signs, many of the streets are steep and in disrepair, and the neighborhood has a feeling of neglect.

Yet residents and family members assured the media that Uday and Rasan Abu Jamal were not affiliated with any “organization” or political group, meaning Fatah or Hamas. A man who said he was a cousin of the two perpetrators and gave his name as Alaldin Abu Jamal said the family was in shock over what had happened. “My cousins were quiet and worked in construction and interior design; one had three children.”

After the attack, which occurred at 7 a.m. at a Har Nof synagogue, police and security personnel entered Jebel

Mukaber and detained nine male members of the family. By noon the family had selected a small plot of land near their house to host a mourners’ tent. When we arrived, only men were in attendance. Many of those in the neighborhood had not gone to work.

“This didn’t happen in a vacuum. Yesterday an [Egged] bus driver was murdered, and there is the issue of al-Aksa,” said one of the men.

Bus driver Yusuf Hassan al-Ramouni had been found hanged on Monday morning. Protesters in Abu Dis and other parts of east Jerusalem assumed it was a murder, similar to that of Palestinian teenager Muhammad Abu Khdeir this summer, and they rioted. Pictures of the autopsy released by the family, who had been invited to see the body, were passed around on social media as “proof” he was murdered, even as Israeli authorities concluded it was a suicide based on an autopsy at the L. Greenberg Institute of Forensic Medicine at Abu Kabir.

According to those gathered, this likely was one of the sparks that set off the two cousins. “It makes us very angry,” explained the 32-year-old Abu Jamal, a black-and-white keffiyeh dangling from his neck.

Other men explained that the



Abu Jamal is interviewed by the media.

media are ignoring what is done to east Jerusalem residents. “Look how the police treat us,” they said. A white tethered blimp was hovering just north of the area as if to cement this feeling, and police had cordoned off entrances to the village from East Talpiot.

Salah-a-Din, a mild-mannered engineer who comes from the area, agreed. “The situation has no future.”

Did he blame Jews or the government? “Maybe the Jews are worse sometimes than the government, they hate us.”

A young woman from Isawiya felt that Israel “doesn’t want this cycle of violence to stop.” She is a student at Hebrew University. “Arabs are fed up, we want justice.” •