

# The strength from within – Sderot's Special Report, part 2

By Ari Bussel, Israel

In last week's issue I reported about my first trip to Sderot, a city in the Negev, about half a mile away from Gaza, in the fire range of the Palestinian terrorists. Since my initial trip, Sderot has become the focus of daily attention of the country, if for no other reason than a local billionaire's proposal to spend his money to provide protection to the buildings in Sderot. Having tens of Kassam rockets fired at Sderot (rather than the average of two a day) has also contributed to the massive media attention. It is not expected to last long.

Sderot has been bombarded constantly over the past seven years. It has withstood these constant attacks and the irregularity of its timing or location with courage and amazing will power. Sderot continues to serve as the front line for Israel, and it seems that Israelis still do not comprehend the enormity of the sacrifice.



From right to left: Ari Bussel, Benny Cohen, General (R.) Danny Yatom, Mayor of Sderot Eli Moyal, former Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai, Ilana Kadosh.

for the Kassam rockets from Gaza. Any person who claims Israel is an Apartheid

**Former Defense Minister Itzik Mordechai who spends much of his time with Mayor Moyal said: "It is time to act. Have the community in Los Angeles raise funds for specific projects. Designate a local representative (a volunteer) to ensure that the funds are best utilized from the very first dollar. But do so now. There is no time to waste." Let us send a very strong message of support to the residents of Sderot. Let us make sure to tell them that we care. And let us do so in a smart way, making sure to maximize the utility and benefit from our actions.**

I have seen children smiling and playing outside, while their parents worry that a missile might be launched and they will need to gather the kids and find a shelter within 15 seconds or less, knowing there are only very few protected places in Sderot. I have seen the true meaning of assimilation, a true melting pot, between Ethiopian Jews and Israelis – no difference between "blacks" and "whites" other than the color of their skin. I have seen Ethiopian kids who finished military service and came back to be "big brothers" to eighth and ninth graders, and other soldiers who sit and act as counselors and as tutors in a local shelter.

I have seen a congregation of orthodox Jews celebrating the 20th birthday of a sister who died from a Kassam rocket. She used her body as a human shield against the incoming Kassam rocket, thus saving her younger brother. The celebration took place by naming a synagogue after her, bringing a Torah Scroll inside. I have seen religious and non-religious Jews, side by side, all differences not in existence, and I have seen a Catholic volunteer from Holland who has been spending the last six months as a volunteer at the local Fire Station.

I have seen in one visit all that is good in life. Heaven on Earth, had it not been

state should only visit Sderot to know how wrong he is. Any person who ever tried to understand what our civil rights organizations such as the Anti Defamation League are fighting to preserve, needs to visit Sderot in Israel to see in her own eyes what Utopia is all about.

Dr. Adriana Katz who heads the local mental health clinic has expressed her professional astonishment that, relatively speaking, only a small fraction of the residents suffer from PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). In fact, PTSD would be expected as the norm (and in very high numbers) since the exposure to the Kassam rockets bombardment is chronic – it has been going on for seven years. While an academic study will undoubtedly be conducted, there are the circles of support – from family to neighbors to the synagogue that keep the people strong: A belief that if they will leave, then they essentially give up the first and front line of defense for Israel.

Equally as important is a local activist, a 25 year old Noam Beidin, the son of an American-Israeli activist. Eight months ago Noam moved to Sderot, and is now serving as the residents' spokesperson to the outside world, leading tours for foreign groups and for the foreign press, providing footage, pictures, data. Noam, red headed with a pony tail is the mate-

rial from which legends are born. One should only walk with him throughout the City and witness the reaction of the residents (smiling, calling "Hi, Noam," awaiting his reply, update, comforting and reassuring smile), to realize that Noam has a charm, an ability he does not even realize he possesses, to connect to people. Noam is indeed the additional circle of support, an angel sent from Heaven.

And thus my disappointment is even greater that so few Israelis actually take the time from their busy schedules to go down to Sderot. I would have expected congregations, school classes, workplaces and individuals to come down. I

sent all their interns, all their research assistants down to Sderot to study, to lend a helping hand, to help. But Sderot stands alone, across from the Gaza Strip, the remains of what once was a flourishing area of Jewish settlements, where agricultural exports were in the tens of millions of Dollars a year, where religion intermingled with the love of country.

It all changed mid-week last week, when the bombardment intensified, but has anything really changed? We went down again to talk with the Mayor and with others in the City of Sderot. This time we found a deserted city. Most residents left on a weekend retreat. All the beauty I had witnessed just days earlier had dissipated into thin air. Even the firefighters said they cannot do their job while worrying about their families. They were not worried about not having a protected station – they were worried about their wives and kids.

Noam was still there, leading a group of foreign journalists to see pallets of Kassam rockets piled neatly at the back of the local police station. Each rocket is marked with the date and the location. Each is a silent testament to a horrible event. There is no street in the City that has not been scarred by the Kassam rockets. Someone needs to show the human side of this firing range, to send the message this is not a game.

But the enemy across the border has studied the Second War of Lebanon and knows it has in its arsenal sufficient advanced weaponry to hit Sderot and the Western Negev (and likely much further



Sderot's Fire Station. Working full time job 24/7.

would have expected mental health professionals, educators, social workers, comedians, and so many others to show their support. Departments in different universities and hospitals should have

north than the Negev) with hundreds of missiles every day for a period of a whole year. The enemy across the border has seen the mighty IDF fail in Lebanon and has laughed at the Israeli Government and its lack of leadership. Until this enemy from across will pay the price, for each scar it leaves on each three or four or five year old in Sderot, there will be no peace, there will be no quite time for the residents of Sderot.



Volunteer Noam Bedein helps Sderot's residents.

**May you continue being strong, residents of Sderot. You are our first line of defense.**