

Haaretz.com, 26 July 2010

Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish, do you still have hope after the IDF killed your daughters and niece in Gaza?

On January 16, 2009 three of his daughters, Bessan (20 ), Mayar (15 ) and Aya (13 ), and his niece, Noor (17 ) were killed by an Israel Defense Forces shell fired directly into their bedroom.

TORONTO - Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish speaks frankly to Israelis and Palestinians, in synagogues, mosques and cultural centers, in this city, where he now resides. On January 16, 2009 three of his daughters, Bessan (20 ), Mayar (15 ) and Aya (13 ), and his niece, Noor (17 ) were killed by an Israel Defense Forces shell fired directly into their bedroom. When Operation Cast Lead in Gaza started, he stopped traveling to his job at Sheba Medical Center at Tel Hashomer, where he worked in in vitro fertilization. A widower, he did not want to leave his children alone at home and in any case it was impossible to get through the checkpoints and enter Israel. Abuelaish became a popular commentator on events in Gaza in the Israeli press.

When the shell struck his home, he knew he had to get his injured family to a hospital in Israel as fast as possible. He bypassed the bureaucracy at the checkpoints when he phoned his friend, Channel 10 correspondent Shlomi Eldar, and during an emotional live broadcast, pleaded for assistance. Six months later, he moved to Toronto with his five remaining children, and now works at the University of Toronto's faculty of medicine - the Dalla Lana School of Public Health. This was his original plan, even before tragedy struck. In Canada, Abuelaish has chosen to bury the urge for revenge, and focus on cooperation and fraternity, and has written about his suffering and his hope in a new book entitled "I Shall Not Hate" (RandomHouse ).

How is it that you are still optimistic?

"People think that I will wallow in hatred and revenge. As a believing Muslim and a physician, my answer to the hatred and revenge is the success in overcoming them. I am compelled to believe that out of our suffering something good has to emerge; the other alternative is too dark for me. My three dear daughters and my niece are dead. The revenge that is characteristic of the Middle East will not bring them back to me. It is important to feel the anger in such a situation - but you can choose not to turn this anger into hatred. Revenge will only scare away wisdom and lead to more anguish."

Do you believe there is hope?

"If I don't have hope inside me, I'm not alive. Each one of us can and should make a change. The change is small, overcoming the emotional barriers and the hatred, and [involves] thinking about the other.

"There are on both sides people who want to live a tranquil life of enjoyment and dignity. I can't ask that the Palestinian people have their own rights without supporting the Israeli people - they too should have rights. The two peoples are

intertwined with each other, like Siamese twins; if you stab one, the other also experiences pain and the suffering is shared by all of us."

What reactions do you hear when you travel around and speak about your basic beliefs?

"When I hear Israelis or Palestinians [speak], they don't look at themselves - right away, they start talking about the other side. We have to move forward. Time is creating more extremists on both sides and the ball is in Israel's court."

Do you feel that we, both peoples, are too busy with our past and with "what belongs to whom" to the point where we are burying the future?

"History has to be the basis for diagnosing the patient and his status, and according to that we should build a better future - not by blaming the patient and denouncing because of his condition."

In your book, you criticize the Palestinian leadership and write that simple and inexpensive Qassams are actually the most expensive weapons in the world if we take into account the harsh ramifications they have for both sides. So what do you say to those who argue that there is no one to talk to?

"The two peoples need an immune system against hatred. The Palestinians also feel they have no one to talk to. The Palestinian Authority and [PA President] Abu Mazen are the ones that have to be approached - and they are willing to move forward. I do not make a distinction when it comes to Hamas, just as in Israel I don't speak of parties. I don't refer to Sderot as a separate state, but rather as part of the State of Israel. We have to leave behind the arguments over who is making whom more miserable, and start talking to each other with respect and as equals."

Gilad Shalit's parents walked from their home to Jerusalem, helpless, and are still waiting for their son's release.

"For me human life and individual freedom are important. I want Gilad Shalit to be freed and I understand the pain and suffering of his parents. I lost my daughters and to this day no one from the Israeli government has apologized to me - on the contrary, they are even proud of it."

Are you directing your remarks to Hamas as well?

"I am not talking about Hamas, but about human beings [in general]. And what do you say about the Israeli government, which is not releasing the prisoners? This does not help facilitate the primary objective: They should all be freed and a new life should begin. There are two sides to the coin. We have to leave behind the ego and personal interests. The Israeli child is equal to the Palestinian child. One and a half million people in Gaza suffer every day and this is an embarrassment to the Israeli people, each one of them is the same as Ehud Barak and every other Israeli. If you want to move forward, you must treat everyone as equal human beings."

The cover of the book features a photo taken in December 2008, a month before the girls were killed. In the photo, the three sit on the beach and their names are drawn in the sand. Does that day have any special significance for you?

"It is rare for someone to see his name etched anywhere, such as in stone or metal. It is typical of generals and officeholders. For most of us, the only place our name is etched is on our gravestone. I promised that the names of my daughters would be etched in stone and metal and in Jerusalem stone and everywhere. I want through them to provide Palestinian women and girls an opportunity to get an education, and to that end I set up a foundation in memory of my daughters: Daughters for Life (<http://daughtersforlife.com>).

Will you return to Gaza or have you decided to remain in Canada?

"First of all, I have a five-year contract in Toronto. But I am constantly returning to Gaza and I see things differently. For me, the entire world is my home. When I can contribute and help from any given place - that is where my home is. You have to work for the sake of humanity and not on behalf of a territory."