

Battle of the bloggers

‘We definitely make a difference,’ insists pro-Israel blogger Elder of Zion

By Tibor Krausz

IN THE early afternoon of August 9, 2001, Palestinian terrorism became terribly personal for Arnold and Frimet Roth. The Jerusalem couple’s precocious 15-year-old daughter, Malki, was meeting a friend at the Sbarro Pizzeria in the center of the city when a Hamas suicide bomber detonated his nails-packed explosive belt inside the crowded eatery, killing 15 diners, including Malki, her friend, and five other youngsters.

Malki had played the flute, written happy songs about life, volunteered as a youth leader for nine-year-olds, and helped care lovingly for a blind and severely brain-damaged younger sister at home. On the mouthpiece of her cellphone, which was later retrieved from the pizza parlor’s rubble, Malki had written a note to herself: “Never speak badly of anyone.”

The massacre was global news for a few

days, and then faded from the headlines and collective memory. Malki and the other murdered Israelis soon became mere statistics in the ever-mounting death toll of the second intifada.

But not to the Roths. The couple, from Australia and the US, who immigrated to Israel with their children in 1989, decided to honor their daughter’s memory in two distinct ways. They set up Keren Malki, a foundation





that provides specialized equipment and assistance with home-based therapies to thousands of parents, many of them poor and marginalized, a third of them Arab, who look after a severely disabled child.

And they also started blogging.

“Malki was an extraordinary child and she was taken from us,” Arnold Roth, a well-spoken Orthodox Jewish lawyer, originally from Melbourne, who works as an adviser to

Israeli start-ups, tells The Jerusalem Report. “The massive terror attack galvanized us through our own experience of it. We were in a state of trauma, but we weren’t willing to lose this war to the terrorists.”

Blogging was the Roths preferred way of fighting back. Their weapons of choice: hard truths and un-minced words. On their “This Ongoing War” site (motto: “This ongoing war is killing us”), they set out to provide a

Blogger Arnold Roth shows a photo of his daughter Malki, killed in a terrorist attack in Jerusalem, August 2001

corrective, through regular commentaries on current events, to the common narrative that portrays Palestinian terrorism as an inevitable product of desperation brought on by

Israel's own heavy-handed policies, thereby implicitly blaming the victims of terror for the attacks against them.

A decade later they're still at it. In succinct blog posts, the Roths skewer recurrent attempts by foreign politicians and journalists alike to explain away, downplay or whitewash the homicidal views, deeds and stated aims of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah. "The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is very poorly understood abroad," Arnold Roth insists. "There's a general sense that if we just act nicely to terrorists and reach out to them and uncover the 'root causes' of their grievances, they'll be nice to us back and all will be well."

Roth, who has spoken at the UN, met Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, and given hundreds of interviews to the news media on behalf of Israeli victims of terror, has seen the fallacies of such wishful thinking exposed from up close. In February 2004, the lawyer joined a small Israeli delegation at an international conference on the human costs of terrorism in Madrid, Spain. Treated as unwelcome guests by the organizers, while representatives of Lebanon, Syria and the Palestinian Authority were being feted openly, Roth recalls, he and the other Israelis confronted their hosts. A leading Spanish politician decided to set the Israelis straight.

HE LECTURED us that terrorism against us was our own fault and so we were not really suffering from terror at all but from a political situation [of our own making]," Roth recalls. Within a month, on March 11, 2004, several bombs exploded in a coordinated terror attack by Moroccan Islamists on packed commuter trains in Madrid, killing 191 passengers and wounding scores of others. "The Spaniards learned to their great sorrow that the curse of Islamic terrorism has other countries on its agenda as well beyond little Israel," he notes stoically.

Much of political blogging is the online equivalent of pamphleteering, an unabashed form of partisanship masquerading as informed commentary. The blogosphere is home to a ceaseless cacophony of invective and hyperbole; and a myriad of virulently anti-Israel bloggers — white supremacists, conspiracy nuts, self-styled "friends of Palestine" — find common cause in demonizing the "racist," "Nazi," "apartheid" state of "Israhell."

On mainstream media sites, meanwhile, the comments sections under even the most innocuous news items about the Jewish state invariably become hotbeds of vicious rants

ElderToons



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against the country, drowning out the rare dispassionate voices.

Pro-Israel bloggers clearly have their work cut out for them, but that doesn't faze perhaps the most influential one of them. "We definitely make a difference," insists the New York-based IT professional who goes by the cyberspace nom de guerre of Elder of Ziyon and enjoys regular attention from mainstream media outlets for his investigative scoops.

Elder, who chose his pseudonym to poke fun at cockamamie conspiracy theories about Jewish power, began frequenting Yahoo message boards a decade ago to challenge the views and logic of Israel's garrulous detractors. "Arguing one on one with people emotionally invested in hating Israel was a big waste of time," the blogger, who prefers to remain anonymous and describes himself as a "fairly ordinary middle-aged Jewish guy,"

tells The Report. "I looked for alternatives where I could write more freely and expansively for a larger audience."

So in August 2004, he started his own blog. After a first few tentative steps of simply reposting items from the mainstream media, he soon came into his own as a seemingly indefatigable one-man operation, armed only with a computer, chutzpa and stamina. In several new posts daily, except on Shabbat, the blogger — who reaches some 10,000 readers a day and has many fans far and wide, Israel included — links to the latest articles of interest on the Middle East, parses media reports for inaccuracies and overt biases, provides satirical rebuttals to Israel's fiercest critics, and highlights the Jewish state's little-publicized achievements. "It takes up a few hours a day; but then again, that's less time than most people spend watching TV," he says.

He spends some of that time digging up archival records about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and perusing damning reports by NGOs and the UN on Israeli policy to verify the credibility of their sources and double-check their conclusions. Recently, after delving into a UN document and poring over photographs of damaged buildings in Gaza, he discovered that two Palestinian children whose deaths had been blamed on Israel during its week-long Operation Pillar



Elder of Ziyon cartoon of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas; (far left) Elder of Ziyon cartoon of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah

to the Palestinian news agency, Ma'an. In March, the blogger revealed that the Arabic version of the website of MIFTAH, an EU-funded "moderate" NGO headed by prominent Palestinian legislator Hanan Ashrawi, ran an article promoting the old libel that Jews used the blood of Christians and Muslims for their matza at Passover. Cue an international hue and cry. MIFTAH lashed out at the "obscure pro-Israeli" blogger over his "smear campaign" before issuing an apology, in English, a few days later.

"Many pro-Israel bloggers are doing cutting-edge work," stresses Benjamin Weinthal, a veteran American journalist who is The Jerusalem Post's correspondent in Berlin. "They're breaking stories either on their blogs or on social media sites like Twitter." Weinthal first took notice of Elder's work in September 2009, when the blogger revealed that Marc Garlasco, an American official for Human Rights Watch and a fierce critic of Israel, turned out, under closer inspection, to be an avid collector of Nazi memorabilia.

"I've written several articles based on [revelations by] pro-Israel blogs," Weinthal says. One of those articles revolved around findings that Vittorio Arrigoni, an Italian activist for the pro-Palestinian International Solidarity Movement who was murdered by Islamists in Gaza in 2011, called Jews "rats" and posted anti-Semitic cartoons on his Facebook page." He adds, "Bloggers have carved out new territory for themselves by zooming in on stories that remain in the cracks or on the edges of mainstream news coverage. They bring these stories front and center into the mainstream."

Elder himself downplays his influence. "I've been fortunate that some of my posts do bubble up to [the mainstream media] but too much of the stuff we bloggers do stays stuck in our little world," he remarks.

But there's plenty of eye-opening stuff, almost daily, in that "little world" of pro-Israel bloggers. Some Palestinians, including children, for instance, aren't above hamming it up for the news cameras to incriminate Israel, as another anonymous blogger, Aussie Dave, has discovered. The 38-year-old Australian immigrant, who lives in Jerusalem and runs the lighthearted website Israellycool recently

of Defense offensive against Hamas militants last November, including the much-publicized death of a local BBC correspondent's young son, had in fact been killed by Hamas rockets. His findings made the headlines.

"PRO-ISRAEL bloggers have served as a sort of "information Iron Dome," says Dovid Efuno, a British Jew who edits the New York-based weekly The Algemeiner Journal, whose website hosts some 500 Jewish bloggers. "During Israel's Pillar of Defense, they were at the forefront of exposing and intercepting routine bits of misinformation by Hamas before they could land. Hamas and other anti-Israel actors were routinely releasing pictures

of bloodied, maimed or dead children with the aim of whipping up anti-Israel sentiments. In many cases, the pictures [some of which were picked up by the mainstream media] were false, taken from different conflicts or scenarios. Larger news organizations [rarely bother combing through] Twitter feeds or translating Arabic Facebook pages."

But Elder of Ziyon does. Running regular Google News searches on keywords in Arabic, then turning to his trusted aide, the Google Translate tool, the blogger scours the Arab-language news media for reports and op-eds about Israel, mocking, exploring and deconstructing the foibles of anti-Israel firebrands from Iran's Press TV to Al Jazeera

scored a scoop by documenting instances of Palestinian “nonviolent protesters,” in the words of The New York Times, trying to goad armed Israel Defense Forces soldiers into manhandling them, before the cameras, in the West Bank village of Nabi Saleh, the site of regular protests against Israeli troops and a local Jewish settlement.

Examining a series of news photographs and YouTube videos from the village, the blogger discovered 11-year-old Ahed Tamimi, a pretty, blonde Palestinian girl, featured in many of them. There she was, again and again, taunting alternately bemused and phlegmatic IDF soldiers and shaking her fists angrily in their faces. When a soldier seizes her wrists lightly in a widely published news agency photograph, she cries out with affected pain.

LAST MARCH, Tamimi was featured on the cover of The New York Times Magazine, whose lead article lionized the villagers for their “peaceful resistance,” and she’s won an award for her “bravery” from Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. Aussie Dave in turn bestowed on the burgeoning young thespian a catchy moniker: “Shirley Temper.” His blog posts on the girl promptly went viral. “I discovered she’d appeared at numerous Nabi Saleh protests, urged on by her parents [schoolteacher activist Bassem Tamimi and his wife, Neriman] with cameras in hand,” the blogger recalls. “[News] photos of her were all part of a concerted Pallywood effort to concoct a situation to paint IDF soldiers in a bad light.”

Nabi Saleh, the Roths pointed out on their own blog, is the village from where the girl’s kinswoman, Ahlam Tamimi, then a

21-year-old woman working as a newsreader for the Palestinian Authority’s TV channel, set out on that fateful August 9 in 2001, with a suicide bomber at her side for Jerusalem’s Sbarro Pizzeria. She had chosen the target, and, disguising herself as a Jewish tourist, drove the bomber to the eatery. Tamimi then proudly reported the slaughter on her TV channel.

THESE BLOGGERS CAN SERVE AS OUR EYES AND EARS ON THE GROUND THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

She was released from prison, where she’d been serving 15 life sentences, in 2011 as part of the Israeli government’s deal with Hamas to free more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for Gilad Shalit, an IDF soldier held for ransom by Islamist militants. Upon her release, the woman told a Jordanian TV channel, “I do not regret what happened. Absolutely not... I would do it again today and in the same manner.”

The Roths had been using their blog, and other public channels, to campaign against Tamimi’s release. “Nobody from the government even did us the courtesy of talking to us [about the pending deal],” Roth notes bitterly.

Richard Landes isn’t surprised by any of this. Another well-known pro-Israeli blogger and media critic, Landes coined the term “Pallywood,” now widely used in pro-Israeli circles to designate choreographed events deliberately staged by Palestinians for the benefit of gullible or complicit foreign journalists. Much of mainstream media coverage “stinks,” in his view, and on his blog “The Augean Stables,” so named after an unwholesome Herculean cleanup task, Landes

seeks to dissect “the reasons for the systemic failures and dysfunctions of journalism.”

He has also produced several online documentaries about “Pallywood”; and in 2005 he launched a web-based media-oversight project, “The Second Draft,” with the aim of countering the mainstream media’s usual narratives in their “first draft of history.” On both websites he routinely excoriates the practice of what he calls “lethal journalism”—selective, one-sided coverage that legitimizes terrorism by unquestioningly reporting Palestinian claims about Israeli oppression and brutality.

“Lethal journalists have doubly betrayed us,” fumes Landes, a professor of history at Boston University. “On the one hand, they’ve buckled to the demands of the Palestinians to hide their flaws, such as systematic incitement and a genocidal hatred of Jews. On the other, they run all their lethal narratives about Israelis, feeding their audiences with this cognitive poison and sewage of war propaganda disguised as news.”

BLOGGERS LIKE Elder, Landes, the Roths, and Aussie Dave, argues Algemeiner editor Efuné, help challenge “what you could call ‘dictatorial journalism.’” He elucidates, “Most major news outlets today are run as ‘editorial dictatorships,’ where a small group of editors hold all the control and decide what’s important for people to know and what isn’t and what the correct angle for a story is. It’s this climate that makes it easy for reporting to be controlled by agendas and biases.”

But challenge the status quo, and you may wind up being derided or, worse, ostracized. His views, Landes says, have made him a pariah on his home turf in liberal academia, where Israel is often decried as a latter-day colonialist aggressor and where special treatment is reflexively reserved for any alleged victim of historical Western racism and imperialism — the so-called “Other,” a sweeping category that, thanks to the influence of the late Palestinian-American academic Edward Said’s work “Orientalism,” has come to encompass Muslims en masse, including militant jihadists. “Most of my colleagues won’t talk to me, and certainly not about this stuff,” Landes tell The Report. “If I go to a talk [on campus] about the Middle East and I challenge the speaker, I’m told not to be impolite.”

Regardless of their views on any other subject, from economics to gay marriage, spirited defenders of Israel are often



COURTESY

The logo of pro-Israel blogger Aussie Dave

automatically labeled “neoconservative” or “right-wing,” the implication being that their views place them beyond the pale in polite society. Aussie Dave, who uses a cartoon koala with a kippa as his online trademark and professes to be pro-peace (with reservations), was duly branded “a right-wing blogger” by The New York Times for his posts on Ahd “Shirley Temper” Tamimi.

Then again, that’s a relatively harmless putdown. “I’ve received everything from death threats, anti-Semitic slurs and threats to sue,” Aussie Dave notes apropos the less salubrious comments he receives.

Likewise, pro-Israeli bloggers often get dismissed out of hand as agents – “*hasbara* trolls” in the nomenclature of anti-Zionists – of a shadowy, well-oiled propaganda machine, so-called *hasbara*, overseen by the Jewish state. In an op-ed for The Guardian newspaper, Richard Silverstein, a prominent blogosphere critic of Israel based in Seattle, labeled it “a cynical attempt to flood the web and news media with favorable flackery in a vain attempt to tilt public opinion toward Israel.”

This “*hasbara* troll brigade,” in the words of another critic, launches well-coordinated campaigns to try to drown out critical voices, reedit Wikipedia entries in Israel’s favor, and engage in underhanded smear tactics of opponents. The irony of their purported conspiratorial powers in the face of somber realities – chaps in their bedrooms with laptops – is not lost on the bloggers.

“My standard reaction [to being labeled a paid propagandist] is, ‘When do I get my check?’” Elder of Ziyon quips. “The idea that we’re ‘well-coordinated’ is itself hilarious. Some [anti-Israel blogger] can, with a single tweet, mobilize thousands of people to create a trending topic on Twitter or to vote in some online poll,” he says. “Our side can’t even figure out how to put together a single site that looks as professional as +972 Magazine [an online publication by the Israeli left].” He himself uses a plain and free Blogspot template for his site.

“We each have our own ideas on how to relate to Islam, on whether to embrace the two-state solution, on what issues are important,” Elder goes on. “I’m in touch with other bloggers, of course, but there’s no *Hasbara* Central. We have lots of generals and very few troops.”

“We’re not a *hasbara* site making Israel’s case,” concurs Roth, who regularly posts blog entries critical of Israeli government policy. “Our blog doesn’t move the needle on public opinion,” he adds, “but it’s a platform for us to get our message out.” That message involves having none of the usual mealy-mouthed moral equivalence between perpetrator and terror victim. The lawyer doesn’t shy away from labeling terrorists “barbarians.” “That’s not a politically correct message,” he acknowledges. “Some people accuse us of hating Arabs. That’s nonsense. We’re angry but not filled with hatred.”

Such forthrightness can be a double-edged sword. By refusing to mince words in the politically correct fashion, even judiciously levelheaded bloggers risk simply being lumped together with the raving kooks – some of them self-declared Zionists and pro-Israel Christian End-of-Days enthusiasts – who populate cyberspace.

In early August, a British Jew who lives in Tel Aviv and guest-blogs on Israellycool as “Brian of London” lost his cool and lashed out at The New York Times’s Jerusalem correspondent Jodi Rudoren on her Facebook page regarding an article she wrote about Palestinian youths in the West Bank village of Beit Ummar, who regularly pelt passing Israeli cars with fist-sized stones. Angered by the article and the IDF’s handling of “these damn savages” with kid gloves, as the blogger saw it, he insisted that a 17-year-old stone thrower profiled in the piece “should have been shot and killed already.” “We should crush them and kill them and break their spirit with overwhelming

force,” he fumed. “We stand accused of occupation anyway!”

Rudoren warned the blogger to refrain from “post[ing] violent, threatening messages,” which then prompted him to demand a public apology for “defamation,” insisting he had “not violently threatened anyone.” Their exchange went public and the blogger’s outburst became grist to the mill of anti-Israel websites like The Electronic Intifada.

“Of course, there are many crazies out there,” Efuno allows. “But just as in a democracy, the majority of bloggers can be assumed to be reasonable.”

As with journalists, so with bloggers, credibility is an important issue. Operating without any editorial control in the Internet’s raucous free-for-all, freelance bloggers can blow hot and cold as they please. “Any way you slice it, a regular person will instinctively trust Reuters as being less biased than someone called ‘Elder of Ziyon,’” the eponymous blogger says. “I try to substitute transparency for my anonymity, so I back up my arguments with references to original sources.”

In the end, whether they are toiling away in relative obscurity or breaking out into the mainstream, pro-Israeli bloggers will keep chugging along, doing what they do best – standing up for the Jewish state in a largely hostile world. “These bloggers can serve as our eyes and ears on the ground throughout the world,” Efuno says. “We need more of them to break the mainstream media’s monopoly on reporting.” ■

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