

AIPAC spoke recently with Aharon Polat, a resident of Kibbutz Karmiya, near Sderot and the Gaza Strip. He describes his family's trauma under the constant threat of Qassam rocket fire from Hamas militants.

How long have you lived in the Sderot area?

I'm a citizen of Karmiya, a Kibbutz near the border, near Sderot in the Western Negev. I have worked as a social worker in Sderot for the last 11 years.

You remember a time before the Palestinian rocket attacks began occurring, correct?

I lived in Elei Sinai [a Gaza settlement] before. It was quiet until the second Intifada [Palestinian campaign of violence] began, and then our whole life was terrible. Sderot was still quiet, but after a few months there was a danger from Qassams.

So you moved from Gaza to escape the rockets, and arrived in Sderot where you are still facing Palestinian rockets?

True, it's sad. I remember when we had to leave Elei Sinai, it was very sudden, very quick. My child asked, 'why are we leaving?' And I told him we are leaving our house, maybe it will bring peace. A few months later in Kibbutz Karmiya, about two miles north of Elei Sinai, we started getting the bombing of the Qassams and a small boy was injured. I remember my young son telling me "Daddy, why did you lie? You said that there would be peace!" And now there are Qassams almost every day.

What sort of things have you seen happen in Sderot, where you live?

I remember the day a rocket fell about 100 meters from my house. I ran there. My wife and I left our children with a neighbor and we started running. When we arrived we were dealing with the people that were hurt. There was a baby that wasn't moving, a one-year-old baby. His father and mother were covered in blood. The ambulance driver was the grandfather of the baby. It was terrible, and I remember the hysterical people all around.

You come to a place where children died, a few hours or a few seconds before. You see the people cry, the unbelieving eyes. You see crippled old people that don't know how to get shelter and don't know how to be safer. It's a hard situation.

What is life like for people who are living under the constant threat of rocket attacks? What sort of things were you able to do before the rocket attacks started that you're not able to do now?

Until you experience it you cannot understand it, and I mean that it's a different reality. I can't ask you how many times a day you think about death, people that you appreciate. It happens to us all the time.

My child speaks about death. Children of Sderot are suffering, speaking about death, afraid all the time to die, afraid that their parents will die. They cannot separate from their parents and go to school. Sometimes there are children who don't go out of the house, who eat under the table, who won't leave the bathroom.

How old are your children? They experience these symptoms that you describe?

I have a 10 year old and a six year old. They are very afraid.

My child, when we went to Turkey last summer, asked me if there are Qassam's in Turkey. Everywhere we go he asks. Wherever we went, he asked, "Are there Qassams?"

In Yam Ha'melach, the Dead Sea, he asks, "Are there Qassams?" In Tel Aviv, "Are there Qassams." It's a kind of reality for us. Our child must learn to trust the world, to grow, and in this situation he doesn't know who to trust. Even his parents who are protecting him.

I must tell you that every time my child goes out, I think, "if something would happen, how would I feel?" I can't even leave the car for two minutes, or two seconds, because I think if I go home something will happen and I won't be able to live with it for the rest of my life. So it's really a hard situation when there's so much anxiety and they're so afraid. I don't want to die or the children to get hurt.

How much of a warning do you get when a Qassam is fired? How much time do you have to seek shelter?

We have about 15 seconds.

Is it possible in that amount of time to find adequate shelter?

When you are home, it's ok. We have a shelter room in our house. And we are lucky, because there are people who don't have it. We didn't have it until one year ago. When there was a warning I sometimes had to decide on which child to protect with my body.

A lot of people thought it wasn't adequate shelter. When you don't have time, you don't know what to do. Some people are crippled or blind, what will they do? Sometimes children freeze with fear, and we know that when we are frozen, we start to have post traumatic stress disorder. Lots of people in Sderot suffer.

What would you like people in America to know about your situation and what's going on in Sderot and the surrounding areas?

I want people to know that in Sderot there is bombing without discrimination between soldiers and citizens and there are a lot of children who can't fight. They didn't do anything. All this is happening after Israel withdrew from the Gaza strip. People lost their houses in the communities and got nothing, and I want people to understand that it's really not an easy life in the Middle East for Israelis. It's not an easy life. You give everything and you get nothing.

What do you mean, you give everything and you get nothing?

I lost my house, and I got nothing, I got bombs. I had a house in Elei Sinai it was in the north of the Gaza strip [before the disengagement]. About 8000-10000 people lost everything, almost—and still, we get bombs. We have tried, really tried, to get peace.