

Australian man 'saddened' by Tel Aviv shooting

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A MELBOURNE man who was a frequent visitor to the Tel Aviv gay and lesbian community centre targeted in a shooting spree has expressed his sadness at the tragedy.

A masked gunman entered the centre in downtown Tel Aviv on Saturday night and began firing. The dead were identified as a 26-year-old man, who was a counsellor at the centre, and a 17-year-old girl. Eleven people were wounded, four of them seriously. So far, no arrests have been made.

Apart from the risk of terrorism, Israel "is a very safe place. If it's Jew after Jew, it's always a very sad thing in Israel, because it's not what you expect," Daniel de Vries told *The AJN* this week.

De Vries, who made aliyah in the 1990s, was in his 20s and unsure of his sexual orientation when he found out about the centre.

He has since returned to live in Melbourne, but recalled his time in Tel Aviv from 1994 to 1998 as a period of change in his life, where he made some close friends.

De Vries, who discovered the centre "when I was on the verge of com-



Daniel de Vries met a number of his closest friends at the Tel Aviv gay and lesbian community centre.

Photo: Ben Weinstein

ing out", described it as "a place to meet people in a friendly environment where you can talk to people about your issues, coming to terms with your sexuality and learning a bit about the world out there".

"Literally when I first went there, I hadn't come out yet to anyone," de Vries said.

De Vries remembered "weekly or fortnightly group meetings, guest speakers, making friends in a comfortable social environment".

De Vries said he was shocked and saddened about the attack and hoped it was "personal" rather than "just someone going after the gay community".

"It's hard to know if it's someone going after a family member who they didn't want to be there ... but no matter what the reason is, it's a pretty sad

thing to bust in on a group of people who are just looking for moral support."

Israeli-born educator Shai Feniger, the aliyah and Habonim Dror shaliach in Sydney, also reflected on the shootings. "For me, as a gay Israeli, this terrible hate crime is obviously devastating and hurtful. This could affect the lives of thousands of gay teenagers in Israel who are going through one of the most difficult challenges of their lives," Feniger said.

"This crime is a heinous attempt to take Israel back to darker times, and I truly hope that the tolerance, love and pluralism that exist in Israel will prevail. My heart lies with the victims' families," he added.

Roy Freeman of Sydney-based Jewish gay and lesbian organisation Dayenu said that "until our society is willing to work on getting to know those who are different to themselves, the world will not be a safe place for gays and lesbians – and all minority groups, Jews included". He said people at the Tel Aviv centre "have been prematurely outed to their families as a result of this attack, adding another disturbing dimension to this crime".