



City in shock

Justin Rudzki reports from Tel Aviv in the wake of an attack on a gay community centre that left two dead.

MAIN An injured man is treated as he is brought into Ichilov Hospital.
RIGHT A sister of Nir Katz mourns with his family. Photos: Getty Images



Ask any local lad in the know and he'll tell you that Saturday night here is all about Cheech Beach, an open air bar on the shores of the Mediterranean where the boys gather from about 11pm to see out the close of the weekend together. Situated smack in the middle of the city's main waterside promenade, its location characterizes a country where everything must coexist: there is little choice in Israel, a nation almost half the size of Victoria. In some areas this creates a tension that is palpable; in others, less so. On most days the average Tel Avivian will tell you that their metropolis is the place that does it best: one of those harmonious, multicultural melting pots that works.

Saturday night was a very different tale.

The facts are already well known: as is par for the course in the modern age, within hours a local tragedy became front page news around the globe. At around 11pm on Saturday evening – the end of the weekend in a country that works Sunday through Thursday – a lone gunman entered one of the two community centres that service the gay community in Israel's largest city and opened fire on gays and lesbians attending a weekly support group for teenagers.

Two died – Nir Katz, 24 and Liz Trobishi, 17. A further 15 were injured. For many, the incident was a forced coming out to the family members who were later notified of their condition.

Some four days on, the impact still looms large. The victims are struggling to come to terms with the enormity of what has happened to them; the perpetrator is yet to be found. The city is in shock. Even in this part of the world, where violence and terror are regular guests on the evening news, an event like this can shake people to their core.

Within hours, citizens who have uncomfortably familiar networks for

spreading bad news swung into action. Modern technology became the bearer of bad news: text messages, internet, social networking sites. By midnight a group of local gays spearheaded an initiative to have as many as possible change their Facebook profile pictures in support of the victims. Vanity gave way to a whole host of pride flag images adorned with black ribbons and memorial candles. By 8am the following morning, less than 12 hours after the city was ripped from its summer slumber, the work had turned to gathering support for a hastily convened rally.

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At 4.30pm people began assembling on Rothschild, a leafy, tree-lined boulevard dominated in the middle by a pedestrian thoroughfare – a kind of year-round gathering place where locals sit on benches in deep conversation, ride bicycles, drink coffee and play Bocce. The Aguda building, scene of the prior evening's sinister events, is tucked into a side street less than 50 metres away.

Shortly before the anointed start time the crowd had the appearance of a low level sit in. A core of passionate activists

gathered chanting choruses of "In pride, without fear" and other emotionally charged catchphrases. By the time the official program of speakers got underway the gathering had shifted dramatically in form, its scale well and truly symbolizing a community and city mobilized. Traffic was forcibly stopped as the crowd spilled out, covering the boulevard from pavement to pavement.

A number of high profile politicians came to speak, including a former Education Minister and Israel's only out gay Member of Parliament. And then there was Tzipi Livni. The charismatic National Opposition Leader addressed the crowd with a passionate conviction. In one of the most poignant commentaries of the afternoon she urged the community to see "this crime as a turning point" and expressed the hope that it might "give the strength to everyone in the gay community to live their lives give strength to a child to go to his parents and say: 'I am gay' or 'I am lesbian'."

They spoke about the many things to be learnt from a tragedy like this. Strong voices that talked of how this event will mobilize the community; how we need to fight for more rights, more acceptance and a tolerance that runs deeper and ultimately permeates well beyond a few square inner city miles. Although borne of the desire to see something good ultimately come out of something so heinous, there is no denying the necessity of these calls to action.

In addition to the demands for a better

tomorrow, there is much talk on the street here about the things to remember and contemplate: like the young man and woman who lost their lives as the result of a brutal crime, the random and inexplicable nature of evil that sometimes rears its head in even the most civilized of societies, and some of the deeper prejudices those actions may or may not represent.

But when the shock wears off, one of the most important things will be for this city to not self-flagellate – to ensure it remembers the value of what it has managed to construct; that in the moments before and after the tranquility of that summer evening were shattered by a violent crime there were many symbols of a place that, on most days, provides a secure, accepting and free environment for gays and non-gays alike to live. There's the open celebration of life in a beachside bar, a forum of support for the newest members of the community; the sort of people that would mobilize in an instant in support of their own, and a National Opposition leader who is willing to come out at a moment's notice in support of a group whose mere existence often polarizes the electorate.

That in middle of one of the most troublesome regions in the world there exists a place like this is a reason for Tel Aviv to retain a sense of pride amidst all the work still to be done.

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