

Shootings are despicable

A BRUTAL attack on a Tel Aviv community centre for gay and lesbian teenagers and young adults shocked Israel and the Jewish world this week.

The shootings, which claimed the lives of two and injured four others, have been condemned across much of Israeli society.

Israel's President Shimon Peres slammed the crimes as "despicable murder" that "a cultured and enlightened people cannot accept".

In Australia, Jewish gay and lesbian individuals and the Dayenu and Aleph organisations have added their voices to the condemnation.

The tragedy is even greater because the Tel Aviv centre provides a secure environment for gays and lesbians, and those who have not yet come out, to find a safe space to map out their short-term and longer-term lives – away from tawdry bars and other threatening backdrops.

An Australian man has spoken to *The AJN* about the emotional support he received from the centre at a critical phase of his life.

It is not yet known who committed the crimes, and police have not made any arrests, so it would be wrong to rush to judgement. But at the same time, opponents of homosexuality in Israel should take these murders as a signal for them to differentiate between criticism and incitement in their narrative.

In the recent past, members of ultra-Orthodox political parties have made inflammatory comments about gays and lesbians.

Last year, a Shas MK actually suggested in the Knesset that earthquakes were a divine punishment for homosexuality.

The line between hateful language and violence is easily crossed. In 2005, an ultra-Orthodox protester stabbed three marchers at a Jerusalem gay parade. Israelis know that combustible words can lead to tragedy, as was graphically demonstrated by the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin.

Opponents of homosexuality need to curb their unconstructive language and refrain from making statements that de-legitimise the gay and lesbian community and the right of Israeli gay and lesbians to live as safely and securely as anyone in Israel's broad and diverse society.

If it turns out the shootings were a hate crime, it would be a harsh reminder that hatred between Jew and Jew is an insidious dimension of life in Israel that threatens to undermine Israeli society, as if the problems Israelis find immediately beyond their borders were not enough.