

Day after Jerusalem synagogue attack, site is symbol of faith and determination

by [Christa Case Bryant](#)

November 20, 2014

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Dov Sorotzkin was awakened Tuesday by gunfire between Palestinian assailants and Israeli police at his synagogue.

On Wednesday, he and his wife returned to their place of worship to celebrate their newborn son's brit mila, or circumcision.

He describes the ceremony as a symbol of the willingness to give oneself to God—just as the four rabbis were doing when they were killed Tuesday morning here in Har Nof, an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood of West Jerusalem.

"We decided to do it today to show we're not running away," Sorotzkin said, posing for happy photos with his wife and son, with bullet holes and policemen in the background. "We give ourselves to God."

The attack—the deadliest in months of Israeli-Palestinian violence in the contested holy city—has inspired self-examination among ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) members of this community that see such tragedies as a sign from God. The imperative response for these devout Jews, is to improve themselves and grow stronger in their faith—something the Jewish people have been doing for thousands of years, they said.

In honor of that, Sorotzkin named his son Eliyahu Meir after his great-grandfather Eliyahu Meir Bloch, who fled Lithuania after his yeshiva was destroyed in the Holocaust and rebuilt a new yeshiva center in Cleveland, Ohio.

"The Jewish people have suffered persecution throughout the ages, but they just draw strength from that," said Yosef Sorotzkin, Dov's father. "This whole thing of rebirth is a constant in the Jewish history. . . . It's in our belief, culture, religion, that we push forward."

Attack produced shocking images

Indeed, the study hall that saw such ugly scenes the day before was buzzing Wednesday, with men of all ages poring over rabbinic teachings in the Talmud and other religious works, some serious others engaged in lively debate, and some even smiling.

The attack by two Palestinian cousins from East Jerusalem armed with handguns, knives, and axes, in which an Israeli policeman and the attackers were also killed, follows a wave of violence touched off this summer with the kidnap and murder of three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank. The murder of a Palestinian teenager in revenge heightened tensions in Jerusalem and launched the city into the worst period of violence in nearly a decade.

Despite the increasing tempo of attacks over the past few weeks, the brutal attack on men at morning prayer was particularly shocking, with many saying the images of blood-stained prayer shawls evoked memories of the Holocaust or pogroms in Europe.

The attack was also unusual in that it pushed ultra-Orthodox Jews to the front of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For purely religious reasons, their rabbis do not allow them to ascend the Temple Mount, and many do not support the building of Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Israel's settlement policy, and official visits to the Temple Mount, revered by Muslims as Haram al-Sharif, are deeply resented by Palestinians.

In the unfamiliar spotlight, they are not taking the opportunity to condemn Palestinians or denounce their culture or politics, in contrast with others. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, for one, referred to the perpetrators of the synagogue attack as "human animals," and vowed to restore calm in the city.

Still, Netanyahu and Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat urged Israeli citizens not to take the law into their hands and launch revenge attacks against Palestinians. Overnight, however, Palestinian media reported that a 16-year-old boy was badly injured by an Israeli settler's bullet amid protests outside Ramallah, and that a Palestinian in northern Jerusalem was attacked by three Jews.

But on the quiet street in Har Nof that witnessed such tragedy, the focus Wednesday was on introspection, not accusation. Those interviewed by the Monitor described the attack as a sign from God, ascribing it variously as a way to awaken or even shock Jews into following God more closely and being better people.

"Sometimes a mother gives her kid a slap on his face or hand—because she loves him," says Avi, a math teacher at a neighborhood school, who was standing on the synagogue steps.

Zev Warneck, who was in the neighborhood visiting family mourning one of the victims and is not himself Haredi, said that in his view, righteous people sometimes lose their lives in order to protect others.

He cites the three Israeli teenagers killed this summer, which led to the Gaza war and the discovery of many cross-border tunnels that Hamas reportedly was planning to use to launch a massive attack on the Jewish New Year this fall.

A trust in God's justice

Meanwhile, the wider Haredi community—literally, those who tremble before God—is trusting God to mete out justice.

"Revenge is in the hands of God, to [give] what each one deserves or doesn't deserve," Yosef Sorotzkin said.

"He will take care of it," agrees his daughter, Chaya Gotthelf. A mother of four, she spent most of the day yesterday listening to a religious radio station that had invited children from the ultra-Orthodox community to call in and tell how they were responding to the tragedy with good deeds.

But she is still wary of Palestinians, especially those who work in Jewish neighborhoods, as at least one of the attackers reportedly did.

"I'm not saying welcome all the Arabs into our community," she said.

Her son, Ari Gotthelf, added, "This shouldn't happen again."