

Todd David Epp

Another Night in a Sealed Room

I recently read Ido Dissentshik's essay, "Night in a Sealed Room" [op-ed, Jan. 26]. The night he and his family spent in their sealed room during the Scud attack on Tel Aviv must have been terrifying. As a family man like him, I can't imagine my 1-year-old and wife having to endure the dangers of missiles and poison gas. I admire his pluck to carry on and not let Saddam cower him, his family or his nation.

I also mourn for his family members who were killed in Latvia at the hands of Nazis and their supporters. My ancestors, the Mennonites, also sometimes paid with their lives for their faith and beliefs at the hands of the intolerant. Fortunately, the Dissentshiks and the Epps have persevered.

But we have even more in common.

Like Ido Dissentshik, I too have spent a "night in a sealed room." The date was July 24, 1988, and the place was somewhere in a home in the Jabalyia Refugee Camp in the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip. I too was not only in fear of being gassed. I actually was gassed. A couple of times, in fact. Fortunately, and I use that word loosely,

it was "only" American-made tear gas that choked my throat and made my eyes burn. To see the tears and choking of the children was even worse, however.

I cowered in a corner of a dank room as Israeli soldiers and border guards fired live

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ammunition and rubber bullets from their M-16s and Uzis just outside the door of the house. Rocks and rubber bullets rained against the tin roof and cement walls. I was in fear of the "knock on the door" that might take me or my hosts away in the middle of the night.

You see, Jabalyia was under curfew during one of the active periods of the intifada. I'm not sure why the camp was under curfew, but I suspect it was because of a rally I had earlier witnessed staged by young Palestinian men and

boys honoring the dead of the Palestinian uprising during the Feast of Abraham. Anyway, my host family (who, incidentally, had only invited me in for coffee and small talk) couldn't go out of the house—for days. The Israeli Defense Forces patrolling Jabalyia told us so over loudspeakers. Thus we were stuck, more or less, in a "sealed room" of curfew.

So for two days, we were virtual prisoners. We played backgammon. We ate. We dived for cover. We slept. We splashed cologne on handkerchiefs and put them over our mouths during tear gassings. We talked politics. We talked of a day when there might be peace and justice for Palestinians and Jews alike.

But mostly we were scared. Actually, "scared" doesn't begin to cover how I felt. I think Ido Dissentshik knows the feeling all too well.

I read in news accounts from the start of Operation Desert Storm that almost all Palestinians were under virtual house arrest—living, if you will, in sealed rooms. Thus, both Jews and

Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories have shared the distinction of living in sealed rooms during this conflict. Different causes, but still sealed rooms.

I'm a very lucky man. I don't have to live in a sealed room. I live in small town in the Midwest of the United States. It is a very safe place—we don't even really have to lock our doors and windows at night. The only time we remotely feel the fear Mr. Dissentshik and his Palestinian neighbors feel is when we have to duck to the basement during the occasional severe summer thunderstorm. I can't tell you how good it is to know that my family and I are so safe.

And that's my simple hope for the Dissentshik family and the Palestinian family I stayed with in Gaza: that someday, ideally sooner than later, both can live as I live in Brookings, South Dakota—without fear, without hate, without the need for a sealed room.

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