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From the Desk of Rabbi David E. Fass *B'nai B'rith International Under Siege*

Having heard so much about terrorism and hostage situations and the like, I wanted to share with you a first person account of being taken hostage by Islamist extremists. It appears in the Winter, 2001 issue of the B' nai B'rith Magazine. This was written by a woman, Rae Ehrlich, working in the B'nai B'rith International offices in Washington, D.C. At the time of the attack she was 54 years old. Although it took place in 1977, her words speak directly to us and the world we are living in. Note the fanatical outlook that twists facts beyond all reason. This situation developed because Islamist militants blamed American Jews (!) for murders committed four years earlier by Black Muslims!

[On Wednesday March 9, 1977, B' nai B'rith International headquarters (and two other Washington, D. C., buildings) were invaded by armed Hanafi Muslims. Their leader, Hamaas Abdul Khaalis, said they were seeking revenge for the brutal murders of Khaalis' family members by Black Muslims in 1973. At BBI they held hostage more than 100 people for 39 hours before giving up peacefully. Rae Ehrlich, then 54, was a secretary at Hillel, working on the fourth floor. An edited excerpt of her oral history given to Cincinnati's Hebrew Union College in 1977 follows:]

At about 11:00 a.m. a coworker ran into our office screaming that there were men with guns. I went into Dr. Norman Frimer's [international director of B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundations] office. He told everyone to go into their offices and lock the doors. I could see police outside, and I opened the window and motioned for them to come up. They saw me but apparently could not enter the building.

A man shouted, "Unlock this door and come out or I'll shoot." He smashed the pane of

glass on the top half of the door with his rifle and herded us out, telling us to move quickly. He made us walk to the second floor. There, people were lying on the floor and other people piled on top of them. I thought they were dead.

There was no room for us, so Khaalis, the leader of the group, had us stoop on the floor and face the elevators. Khaalis and his terrorists threatened to kill us by cutting off our heads or shooting us. A terrorist hit one of the Hillel rabbis in the eye with his pistol. His eye bled profusely, but we were not allowed to comfort him.

Khaalis ordered Betty Neal [who worked in the personnel department] to call United Artists in New York to tell them to stop showing [the recently released] movie on the life of Muslim Prophet Mohammed.

Then we were made to walk up to the eighth [top] floor. We were told to lie face down in rows. I was trembling from fright and nerves. Khaalis told us to hold on to the ankles of the person in front of us, We counted off out loud. Khaalis said that Allah, his Lord, gave him more than 100 people and he was satisfied. While Khaalis' men watched over us with their guns, Khaalis told the story of the killings that were done to his family, which included babies and women. He blamed the Jews and the government.

Khaalis selected four or five older men and said they would be the first to die. I thought he was going to shoot them then and there.

One woman wet herself. Khaalis told her to go to the bathroom and gave her a pair of overalls that the painters had left. (Our building was in the midst of extensive remodeling.) He gave others permission to go one by one. He said that we must wash our hands afterwards and make sure the toilet seat was clean after we used it as he and his men would be using the bathroom. He told the men they would have to sit on the toilet seat and not stand, as he did not want the toilet seats splattered with urine. One man had an accident, and Khaalis made another man scrub the floor three times. We all felt for one another because so much of it was humiliating, but we wanted to survive; we listened and did as we were told.

Khaalis kept telling us that the world knew about us. I was worried about my husband [who had already survived a heart attack]. It didn't register that if the whole world knew, certainly my husband did. I learned later that my husband was outside the building with my children, sister-in-law, niece and nephew, and that he had offered himself in exchange for me.

I kept thinking, will I ever lie next to my husband again? Will I live to see my children married? Will I get to finish the afghan that I started for my daughter? I was expecting friends over on the 12th of March, and I asked myself if I would be with them, talking, and laughing.

Wednesday night was very cold. Khaalis [gave the women the men's jackets]. I had on the jacket of a man who was caught in this ordeal only because he was visiting the building. The jacket label read "Jos. H. Bank." My husband worked for them, and I took it as a good omen.

Khaalis gave orders to tie the men with their hands behind their backs with telephone wire and electrical cord. If a man had a tie, they used the tie to bind his hands. The men were in agony; their circulation was being cut off. One of the painters said that if it was his time to die, he would die, and he couldn't do anything about it. Khaalis took him to the center of the room and hit him in the back of the head with a pistol. The painter's head gushed blood. Khaalis made him lie face down on the concrete floor, with his hands tied behind his back and his feet tied together.

My thoughts wavered between optimism and pessimism. I fantasized that Khaalis would eventually take all the women and release them. When I whispered this to a coworker,

she said, "He'll take the women who aren't Jewish, but he'll kill the Jews." Khaalis said that he would hang a woman or a man out the window, and for every man of his killed, he would take ten of us.

I was too frightened to cry. I reasoned that if Khaalis really wanted to kill us he would have done it already. We heard the sirens and helicopters and knew that people were trying to help. The terrorists threw furniture down the staircases, and Khaalis had the young men who were hostages paint the windows.

The terrorists emptied the women's purses. When cigarettes fell out they took them. They did not want our money or jewelry. When my purse was emptied, the belt of my dress fell out, and the terrorist used it to tie a man's hands. I hoped that since the belt was soft material it would not dig into his wrists. When the purses were emptied, they returned them so we could use them as pillows. On Thursday they collected the purses again and used them to hold ammunition.

About 10:00 a.m. Thursday, coffee and doughnuts were sent up by the Red Cross.

Later, the terrorists bound the men's hands and feet. A terrorist pointed his gun at one man and said, "If the Lord gives me permission, I'll kill you." Khaalis released two hostages who had heart problems and were not feeling well. He said he didn't want anyone dying on him; he'd just as soon shoot them than have them die a natural death.

It was warmer on the floor than it had been Wednesday night. Khaalis told us that his Lord was good to us; he gave us warm weather. When evening arrived I was sure that we would be there another day or overnight. At 6:00 p.m. sandwiches were sent by the Gramercy Inn, next door. The women were told to serve and then, suddenly, they were told to stop. As Khaalis had demanded, three ambassadors [from Pakistan, Iran, and Egypt] had arrived to meet with him.

It must have been about 1:00 a.m. Friday when we heard loud voices saying, "Keep your heads down. Don't raise them. We're the police." I thought it might be a trap. I peeked and saw. It really was the police. They searched for traps before they would bring us down.

Rabbi Frimer recited the Shehechyanu. We hugged one another, kissed, laughed, and cried. After questioning by detectives and a visit to George Washington University Hospital, we were brought by buses to the Methodist Foundry Church, where our families were waiting. All the church bells in the city were ringing as we arrived. There will never be enough words to thank the Red Cross, the church, the Gramercy Inn, and the D.C. Police Department who brought us to safety.

Rae Ehrlich returned to work at B'nai B'rith's Hillel office ten days after the attack. Now 78, and still going strong, she is the oldest and longest-employed person in the building.

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Cantor's Notes

Purim is the most festive holiday of the Jewish calendar. It is an occasion for "serious partying." Purim marks the celebration of an ancient victory-when Queen Esther, a Jewish woman, found the courage to risk her life to save the Jewish people from an evil advisor who plotted to destroy the Jews of Shushan.

Purim is undoubtedly the most high-spirited of Jewish holidays and probably the easiest to celebrate. There are a few customs unique to the day,

On Purim, it is a mitzvah to hear the Megillah, the book of Esther. Purim's festivities center around this reading. The Megillah reading of Purim can be a wonderful opportunity

to introduce children to a synagogue. Even without understanding the context, children can learn to associate Judaism with joy and celebration. Giving Shalah Manot is a simple mitzvah, which reminds us that being a Jew means being part of the community and sharing celebrations with friends. On Purim, it is a mitzvah to celebrate and be happy. Parties, special meals, hamantashen, costumes, carnivals, plays and sounding groggers are all part of the Purim festival. Today, I want to say several words about the tradition and the sources for wearing masks and dressing up on Purim.

The earliest source mentioning the custom to dress up on Purim is the responsa of Mahari Mintz (late 15th century). He discusses the issue of whether men may wear women's clothing as a costume, and vice versa. Obviously, the custom to wear costumes was well established by that time. Among other things, masks and costumes on Purim in general are based on God's hiding His identity in the Megillah of Esther. The Purim events all happened in a seemingly natural manner.

The salvation of the Jewish People seems to be accomplished through the actions of people alone and God's Name isn't even mentioned in the Book of Esther! The very word "Esther" means "hidden," and it appears in the Torah in the Hebrew phrase "I will surely hide My face..." (V'Anochi halter astir panai...) 'haster' = 'to hide' - and 'haster' and 'Esther' are phonetically alike (Deuteronomy 31). The custom to wear costumes on Purim and to appear as non-Jews is related to our ancestor Jacob's wearing of Esau's clothes when he received the blessings that were due him. It is as if we announce that just as Jacob only had the outer appearance of Esau, but was inwardly holy and pure, so are all appearances of evil in Israel only external. From this we learn that hiding one's face is proper on the day of Esther.

Happy Purim to all of you! Please come and join us on Monday, February 25 at 7 PM for reading of the Megillah and Purim celebration. Please remember that Purim is a holiday not just for your children, but for you as well. Feel comfortable to dress up and to have fun.

B'shalom uv'shirah
In peace and in song
Cantor Sergei Schwartz

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