

EMOR 5773 SPEAKING PASSIONATE MODERATION



It has been quite a two weeks for the Boston area. Even though, thankfully, we were able to gather last Shabbat just after the largest lock-down of a large metropolitan area ever, residual tension and anxiety remain.

I don't know about you, but I have been fascinated by learning more and more about the victims and their lives: the dedicated restaurant manager Krystle Campbell, the sweet and kind 8-year-old Martin Richard, Lu Lingzi, the BU graduate student who fell in love with our city and Officer Sean Collier who loved his job.



May their memories be for a blessing.

I have also read about the courage and bravery of the injured – how they endured their pain, their long road to recover and how they will have to learn how to cope without limbs. Their will to live is inspiring and may they all be blessed with healing.



But I confess that I have also been fascinated by the perpetrators: Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev.



One the security level, why was it so simple for them to be able to commit these acts? How come our intelligence services didn't seem to connect the dots when Tamerlan went to visit Russia last year? Could the simple misspelling of someone's last name allow a terrorist into our country, – allowing warnings about potential terrorists to go unheeded?

Did we miss something?

But, more significantly, what motivated them? Why did they commit these heinous acts? Why did they choose to become terrorists?

What makes someone who seems fine in one moment perpetrate evil in the next?

Of course, we all face inner struggles, as well as, moments in life when we are good, and moments where we are less good.

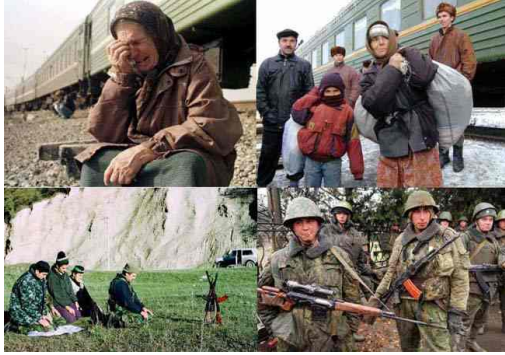
There is always some inner turmoil within



every human being between the good inclination and the inclination to evil.

But this is of a different order. And one of the tasks of adulthood is curbing our evil inclination.

Thinking of both of these brothers, their lives started under harsh circumstances, they were born into an oppressed ethnic group, which is also engaged in a considerable amount of violence themselves, but they were given a new start, a golden opportunity, in this country of blessings.



Why did they seemingly spit on this country that had given them so much?

Let's look at Tamerlan. He was an accomplished boxer, someone who had opportunities in front of him. But suddenly he veers off the track, becomes a more and more devout Muslim, and finally gets pulled into a totally different realm.



And his younger brother? He is described as an angel by his mother, as upstanding teammate by his wrestling coach, and as someone really nice by his friends, as
if he could have been a friend of any one of us.



He did well in high school and was well liked, but something happened. Under the influence of his older brother and his own decision making, he turned from good to evil.

What goes on within someone's inner psyche? What goes on inside our own souls?

Many of us face moments where we decide to behave morally or to behave immorally, to speak positively or to speak negatively, to make a situation better or to make it worse, to bring more healing and love into the world or to bring more destruction and negativity.

Sometimes it seems like a slippery slope, an easy slide, a quick descent into the abyss of immoral actions or negative words.

This week's *parashah*, *Parashat Emor*, is a Torah reading that contains many different themes. Today, we focused on the calendar of sacred time, the most succinct description of all of our holidays and observances. Within chapter 23, which lists all of the holidays and their core observances, we find where we are on the calendar today.

In the reading we learned of counting the *Omer*, counting the seven weeks



between Passover and Shavuot, between Exodus and Sinai, between redemption and revelation, between “freedom from” and “freedom toward.”

Now while the *Omer* may count simply from the beginning of the barley harvest until the time of the bringing of the first fruits and most likely has its most ancient roots in an agricultural observance, it became something much deeper.

In the mystical tradition, counting the *Omer* is about transforming one’s self, making ourselves ready for Shavuot. Shavuot is, of course, standing at Sinai, being ready to receive God’s revelation. In order to receive that, one must first go through an internal process of transformation, or renewal, and so the Kabbalists, those great mystical rabbis and teachers of some 500 years ago, made the counting more elaborate. Each day we are focused on a different value, a different aspect of ourselves.

One of my former congregants and a partner in my wife’s private practice in Chicago, Myra Dorf, produced a psychological

chart with questions to ask one's self on each day of the *Omer*, propelling us toward self-improvement.

The Kabbalists took the values of love and discipline, compassion, endurance, humility, bonding, and leadership, and wove them together into these 49 steps of self-improvement.

[CLICK HERE FOR THE CHART](#)

Today's question: *Do I worry that others will not acknowledge my contributions?* Tomorrow's question for the special day of *Lag Ba'Omer*:



Do I acknowledge that God gave us qualities and strengths to be used for a higher purpose? On another day: *Am I judgmental, lacking the capacity to appreciate the other's position?*

As I utilize her questions each day of the *Omer* in my own spiritual practice, I think deeply about what these seven weeks are all about. They are about appreciating the values of our tradition and how we can make ourselves into better people.

Ultimately, they are about bringing more love and hope and healing into the world.



Now there are many ways of bringing that love and hope and healing into the world. But the one our tradition offers is a very clear.

One of the most important ways that we accomplish that is through our communication. This morning's *parashah* is called *Emor* – speak. We find that speaking is the common thread throughout the Torah. The most common verse in the Torah is

“*Vayomer Adonai el Moshe Laymor* - God spoke to Moses saying ...” Within those five simple words, the root “*emor*,” *aleph - mem - reish*, appears twice.



Speaking is, of course, the way that God creates the world at the beginning of the Torah. And we communicate not simply through words, but through our body language, through our actions, through the love that we bring into the world.


I want to share with you a prayer that is not that well known. It deals with the counting of the *Omer*. The Kabbalists were champions of making moments magical. Sometimes the way a moment truly happens is by setting it up, or extending it, or deepening it. So, they encouraged us to add *kavanot*, introductory

prayers and intentionalities, before we perform a *mitzvah*, one of Gods commandments. Then the tradition has us recite a blessing that unlocks the full power of the commandment, just before we perform the commandment.

Counting The Omer

5773/2013

Instructions: Paste an Omer Sticker over the day as you count the omer from Passover to Shavuot

24	25	26	27	28	29	30	MARCH
			1	2	3	4	
31	1	2	3	4	5	6	APRIL
5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
7	8	9	10	11	12	13	
12	13	14	15	16	17	18	
14	15	16	17	18	19	20	
19	20	21	22	23	24	25	
21	22	23	24	25	26	27	
26	27	28	29	30	31	32	
28	29	30	1	2	3	4	MAY
33	34	35	36	37	38	39	
5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
40	41	42	43	44	45	46	
12	13	14	15	16	17		
47	48	49					

At Temple Emunah, we follow this pattern each evening; we recite a *kavanah* in English to help us be prepared for the act, we recite the blessing, and then we count the new day. But the Kabbalists wanted the counting to remain with you and have a deeper impact so, to follow it, they composed a less well-known prayer that I want to share with you in English.

“*Ribbono shel olam* - Ruler of the universe. You commanded us through Moses your servant to count the *Omer* in order to cleanse us from our incrustations of evil and from our contaminations. (As you have written in your Torah, we are to count from the day after of the rest day from the day that you brought an *Omer*-offering that is waived, there are to be seven weeks.) Until the morrow of the seventh week you are to count 50 days so that the souls of your people be cleansed of their contamination....”

Let me pause here.

The prayer admits that our souls get caught up with stuff, incrustations – the accumulated junk of life. Sometimes that’s fear, as I think all of us experienced to some degree last week. Sometimes that’s anxiety, which is pervasive in the modern, anxious, high-paced world that we currently inhabit. For some of us, it’s simply selfishness. But these incrustations, these things that accumulate, that cloud up our souls, that do not allow the pure soul to connect, to be present, to help us truly be one with

ourselves and then connect to others – that muck is real. It needs to be cleansed, the same way that the oil in our cars has to be changed.



The prayer continues.

“Therefore, may it be Your will, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors, that in the merit of the Omer that I have counted today, may there be corrected whatever blemish I have caused in the *sefirah* [in these Kabbalistic countings, in these 7 x 7 stages dealing with love, discipline, compassion, endurance, humility, bonding, and leadership.]

“May I be cleansed and sanctified with the holiness of Above and through this may abundant bounty flow in all worlds.



And may it correct our lives, spirits, and souls from all sediment and blemish; may it cleanse us and sanctify us with Your exalted holiness. Amen, *Selah!*”

It’s a wonderful prayer; I have been trying to say it through these countings of the Omer so that this process truly lifts me up and helps that inner struggle that lies within me.

As I think back to these two brothers, what they were truly missing was the true focus of religion that ties people together as a community and connects them to God. They developed instead a religious vision of extremism, of hate, and, tragically, they lacked a moderate spiritual path.

The world desperately needs a moderate spiritual path,
maybe multiple moderate spiritual paths.



Islam needs to accentuate that path; it needs to be preached
more consistently and forcefully.

The problem is that moderation isn't always appealing, it
isn't always exciting, it isn't always sexy.

Extremism is. It always seems to be growing. Look at our
political discourse, where the extremes seem to hold sway,
preventing even a simple law about background checks for gun
sales to be passed by our dysfunctional Senate.

54 Yes



46 No



Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) voted "nay" for procedural reasons. He was a supporter of the legislation.

Look at other aspects of life like the Internet itself, filled with extreme voices and comments filled with hateful words and spewing foul language of extremism and intolerance.

We need to create a passionate moderation, an exciting centrist voice.

We who sit in Conservative synagogues are very familiar with that centrist message. We occupy a shrinking, but sacred ground in the middle, a balance between modernity and tradition,

never veering so far away from the past that we lose our spiritual anchor, but yet not being so rigid that we are stuck in the past.

That is what Islam desperately needs, and that is what we continue to need in our own Judaism. We need *emor* - to speak passionate moderation.

We need it in the world, we need it in all religions, we need it in our political discourse, and we need it in our own spiritual tradition. Most of all, we need it in ourselves.

We need to make our own souls home to passionate moderation. It's too bad that these two brothers were not given that kind of model. They might have been running in the marathon instead of attacking it.

May we pray for a time when passionate moderation is spoken by more and more people, bringing more peace and light and hope into the world, and let us pray: Amen.

Shabbat Shalom.