

THE MURDER OF THE RABBIS

We gather this week to renew ourselves by experiencing Shabbat together, to celebrate a Bar-Mitzvah and several anniversaries, but we also come together to heal after a most difficult week. A week where three rabbis and a Jewish scholar were murdered in cold blood in their synagogue in Jerusalem as they were *davening* in morning minyan.

We also remember the fifth victim, an Israeli Arab, a Druze policeman, who laid down his life to save others. May all their memories be for a blessing.

While there has always been terrorism in Israel (even before it became a state), somehow this week felt a little different.



A little worse.

Perhaps because so many attacks were perpetrated by people wearing suicide belts where all they had to do was press a button to take the lives of their victims, this attack felt more savage, more viscerally

wrong. How can people who claim to be religious hatchet people who are engaged in prayer??

As I have shared before – when I lost two of my friends to a terrorist’s suicide bomb, they did not know their attacker. Their attacker did not need to see them. But this week, the terrorists saw their victims, that they were in a synagogue, that they were wearing *tallitot* and *tefillin*.

This is not the first killing of this kind – it has happened before, even to children, to infants, but it is still sickening, saddening, and most difficult.



“I’ve seen many, many incidents here and abroad, but I don’t ever remember the sight of something like this,” said Yehuda Meshi Zahav, head of the ZAKA emergency service.

“Like pictures we’ve seen of the Holocaust – seeing Jews wrapped in prayer shawls, phylacteries on their arms and heads, lying in an enormous pool of blood on the floor of a synagogue,” he said.

And the victims were leaders of their community. Rabbi Twersky (top, right corner below) who grew up in Boston, son of Dr. Isadore Twersky of blessed memory, a Harvard professor, who was also the Tolner *rebbe*, and his mother, Atarah Soloveitchik Twersky, daughter of Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik (the great Boston rabbi and leader of Modern Orthodox Judaism), and made *aliyah* twenty-five years ago made the loss more personal, closer.



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As it happened, that morning, I was teaching at Brookhaven. The topic, chosen months ago, was Cain and Abel: two brothers, the first brothers in human history.

And what happens?

One kills the other.

There is something terrible and violent that lies at the core of human beings.

While we believe that the essence of each person is good, that there is a divine spark, a unique soul filled with goodness, people can also perform acts of evil. We have a propensity to violence. We can be mean; we can be hurtful; we can be destructive.

But God does not simply leave us to our animalistic instincts. Think back to this narrative:

Cain and Abel both bring offerings to God – Abel’s is preferred; Cain is sad, most likely jealous and angry.



But before he kills his brother, there is another scene that sometimes gets overlooked. God, the ultimate teacher, pulls Cain aside to give him a pep talk.

“Lamah harah lekha – why are you distressed?

V’lamah naflu panekha – why is your face fallen?

Halo im teiteev, se’eit – if you do right, things will be better.

V'im lo teiteev, la'petah ha'tat roveitz – but if you do not do right, sin couches at the door?”

V'Eleikha Teshukatekha – Its urge is to you,

V'atah timshol bo – but you can be its master.” (Genesis 4:6-7)

Encouraging Cain, God tells him that he can do better; it's not easy to control our emotions, especially when they touch on core parts of ourselves, leaving us vulnerable, angry and scared, yet it can be done. We can change; we can do better.

Cain does not listen to God, but we, the readers are taught a lesson.

And in this week's *parashah*, we find two brothers engaged in conflict. The Torah reminds us that this is part of the human condition.

We will be jealous, we will feel intense emotions; the question is how will we react to them? How will we choose to be in the world? Will we be murderers like Cain? Will we be deceivers like Jacob? Or can we be more, as God suggests, and control our instincts?

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Like many of you, I wanted to reach out and support friends and family in Israel; I called my uncle, cousins and friends – some of them live in *Givah Tzarfatit* – French Hill, which is technically in East Jerusalem. That neighborhood is surrounded by Arab villages: Shuafat, where some

residents have attacked the new light rail that weaves its way around their community; the Annata Refugee Camp, where there has been violence as well and Issawiya, an Arab village just down the hill from their homes and their synagogue.

While they are usually pretty positive about things, even when things are not really that good, I detected a certain change. Things are not good; I could hear it in their voices. They do not feel totally safe. Their kids do not want to watch TV. It's too much

Not a good situation. Not good at all.

I received an email from their rabbi. She asked for funds so they could get a guard to protect their shul. I gave a donation. It was the least I could do.

One of my close friends is a professor at Yeshiva University. He told me how the murder of Rabbi Moshe Twersky z"l hit the YU community very close to home because his brother, Rabbi Mayer Twersky is a *Rosh Yeshiva* at YU. He told me that Rabbi Mayer Twersky is a very brilliant and gentle man, qualities that everyone says he shared with his brother.

My friend then wrote: "What can we say when we hear of Jews being murdered in Jerusalem while wrapped in *tallis* and *tefilin*, like so many

Jews before them in the Holocaust and throughout Jewish history. But Israel was supposed to be different....”



Let me state this clearly: it is time for the whole world in a clear and unequivocal voice to condemn attacks on Jews wherever they occur. Jews should not

be murdered in museums in Europe, at *seders* in Netanya or synagogues in Jerusalem.

The attacks on Jews and Israel – especially the escalation of anti-Israel and anti-Semitism on college campuses – has to stop.

Enough is enough!

If a person or an organization cannot do that in a straightforward manner, then that person or organization has no moral voice!



I don't care where one stands on the settlements or is right or left politically, this is and must be distinct from all that; it must be absolutely clear.

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The next day on Wednesday, I found myself teaching with Linna Ettinger the Shalom Hartman Institute's course iEngage 2.0. Our long-ago planned topic was to study the Arab Palestinian Israeli population of Israel. We explored how Israeli Arabs approach their multiple identities and explored if and how Jews and Arabs could get along.



Given the events of the previous day, there was a lot of understandable pessimism in the room. The situation in Israel seems to go from bad to worse. There is not a lot of good – there is more and more violence.

We discussed the terrible reactions:

On Tuesday just an hour after the synagogue atrocity, Hamas and other Palestinian spokesmen called the attack a “natural response” to the

crimes of Israel's occupation, with extremists casting the killers as defenders of Jerusalem's Al Aqsa Mosque against the evil designs of encroachment by Jews.

There was also the celebration that occurred in Gaza and on the West Bank – people handing out candies to children to “honor” the murder of Jews. Sickening.



But, I also received condolence emails from local Christian colleagues who were shocked by this brutal act.

One letter I read was from Pastor Chris Harris, the Pastor of a primarily African American church on Chicago's South Side:



“Dear Friends,

Psalm 122:6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee.

What do you say when your friends are hurting? At least ‘say something!’ Dr. Martin Luther King said “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” When I read of the recent tragedy in Israel, I immediately thought of you and wanted you to know that “Israel Matters To Me, My Family & Community.”

Over the past few years, my knowledge, love and concern for Israel and those closely connected to it has increased significantly. This feeling of connection and compassion is now spreading through my congregation/community in amazing and tangible ways. Our communities are talking together, working together and in times like these should be standing together with one voice against all vicious and barbaric acts of violence. Terrorism in any form should not be tolerated anywhere and the voice of the international community should be heard in solidarity when perpetrators choose to commit such atrocities.

In my opinion, saying something is good, but doing something is even better. My community stands poised and ready to do whatever we can do to send a strong message that ‘you are not alone.’ We look to you to

educate us on how we can best be of service to heal the wounds and know that our thoughts and prayers are with you and those (directly/indirectly) affected by this recent tragedy.

Please feel free to share this email with other friends of 'our family' whose email addresses I do not have. Thanks.

*Doing What I Can; While I Can; With What I Have; Within HIS Will.” –
Pastor Chris Harris, Sr. (PCH)*

BrightStarChurchChicago.com – Pastor

BrightStarCommunityOutreach.com – CEO

And then there was the letter from the families of the four Jewish men murdered in *Har Nof*.

“From the depth of our broken hearts and with tears over the murder of the holy victims, the heads of our families, we turn to our brothers and sisters, every Jew, wherever you are, and request that we all join together as one, to bring heavenly mercy upon us. Therefore, let us

בס"ד

**הרנינו גויים כי יקום דם עבדיו
וכפר על אדמתו ועמו**

פניית האלמנות השבורות והמשפחות השכולות

מתוך הלכות השבורים והמתמוססים בדמעות על שפך דם הקדושים - ראשי שפחותינו הי"ד.

פונים אנו אל אחינו כל בית ישראל בכל אתר ואתר, הבה נתאחד כולנו להרבות עלינו רחמי שמים ונקבל על עצמנו להרבות אהבה ואחוזה, בין איש לרעהו, בין ציבור לציבור ובין עדה לעדה.

בקשתנו שכל אחד ואחד ישתדל לקבל על עצמו בערב **שבת קודש פרשת תולדות**, לקדש את יום השבת (ערב ראש חודש כסלו) **ליום של אהבת חנינם**, יום בו נמנע מדבורי פירוד מחלוקת, לשון הרע ורכילות.

ויהיה בזה עילוי נשמה גדול לנשמותיהם של אבות משפחותינו שנטבחו על קדושת שמו יתברך.

ישקיף ה' ממרום, יראה את עניינו וימחה את דמעותינו ויאמר די לצרותינו, ונוכה לחזות בביאת משיח צדקנו במהרה בימינו, אמן ואמן!

החותמים בלב שבור ורצון

הל"ה

רבי דוד לerner
ראש תלמידי
התורה
בבית
המדרש
הגדול
בירושלים

accept upon ourselves to increase our love and brotherhood with each other, between each of us, between different groups, and between different communities.

We request that each person endeavors this Friday afternoon before Shabbat Parashat Toldot to sanctify this Shabbat (Erev Rosh Hodesh Kislev) as a day of causeless love, a day on which we all refrain from talking about our differences and grievances against others, and refrain from any slander or evil gossip.

Through this may there be a great merit for the souls of the fathers of our families who were slaughtered for the sanctity of God.

May God look down from above, and see our grief, and wipe away our tears, and proclaim ‘enough with the suffering!’, and may we merit to see the arrival of the Messiah, may it happen speedily in our days, Amen.

Chaya Levin, and family

Brayna Goldberg, and family

Yakova Kupinsky, and family

Basha Twersky, and family

(trans. Rabbi Pini Dunner, Young Israel of North Beverly Hills)”

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One of the emails I received and was able to read this week was from a member of the *shul* who sent me a link to an article http://www.salon.com/2014/11/17/6_reasons_why_religion_does_more_harm_than_good_partner/ about how religion is responsible for more bad than good in the world.

You could make that argument – there have been numerous wars and violence committed throughout human history in the name of various religions. And today, that continues.

It is a strong claim. If we go over human history, it would be hard to refute.

But violence isn't caused by religion – people use religion for destructive aims. Just like anything else, it's how we use it. Religion and spirituality may also contain the seeds of a better future, a future without so much violence.

It is my firm belief that if we and others can create more open religious and spiritual communities like our own, communities where we discover the ancient insights of our ancestors and combine them with our modern and moral understandings, we can create a new, more open

spiritual path that will enrich our lives, the communities around us, and yes, the world.



We have that power. Here, at Temple Emunah, we are engaged in creating a modern, innovative, yet traditional Judaism that blends the best of the past and present. Others need that.

Islam surely needs a more modern tolerant Islam.

We need to raise up those voices of peace – the interfaith voice of cooperation. And yes, even in this most challenging week, we saw those moments.

If I can think of a great action we can take, it is to come to the Interfaith Thanksgiving Service on Tuesday evening.

On the morning after the attack, religious leaders gathered at the same *shul* after morning minyan to support the Jewish community. Look at these pictures:

Here is
Jerusalem's chief rabbi
Shlomo Amar shaking
hands with an imam as
leaders from the
Christian and Muslim
communities show their



support outside Kehilat Yaakov Synagogue in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Har Nof, one day after two Palestinian terrorists entered the synagogue with a pistol and meat cleavers and killed four worshippers. November 19, 2014. (Photo credit: Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)



Here are leaders from the Christian and Muslim community come to show their support outside a synagogue after yesterday two terrorists from East Jerusalem entered the Kehilat Yaakov synagogue in the Jewish orthodox

neighborhood of Har Nof, Jerusalem, with pistols and axes, and began attacking Jewish worshippers. November 19, 2014. (Photo by Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

Sheikh Samir Assi, the imam of the Al-Jazaar mosque in the northern Israeli city of Acre, addresses Christian, Muslim and Jewish clerics outside the synagogue, where on Tuesday two Palestinians killed five Israelis, in



Jerusalem on Wednesday, Nov. 19, 2014. The clergy met to plead for tolerance amid spiking regional tensions. (AP Photo/Olivier Fitoussiz)



Police officers stand next to the coffin of Israeli police officer Zidan Saif, 30, a member of Israel's Druze minority, during his funeral in his northern home village of Yanuh-

Jat, on November 19, 2014. Saif was killed during a terror attack on a Jerusalem synagogue the day before. (Photo credit: AFP/Jack Guez)



Reuven Rivlin holds the baby daughter of slain police officer Zidan Saif while attending his funeral in the Druze village of Yenuh-Jat on November 19, 2014. (Photo credit:

Mark Neyman/GPO)

Growing up, I remember the old UJA bencher – grace after meals booklet. It contained a special *Haraḥaman* prayer:

Haraḥaman hu yitein ahavah ben bnei Yithak u'vein bnei Yishmael.

May the All Merciful bring friendship between the children of Isaac and the children of Yishmael.

Like Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Isaac and Yishmael had their problems. And their descendants – Jews and Muslims – have had tension.

But when we control our instincts and look to the good, we can remember that we can heal these relationships and move us all towards peace.