



BEREISHIT

Chayei Sarah

Jewish Massacre in Pittsburgh: What is Our Response?

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JEWISH MASSACRE IN PITTSBURGH

ABSTRACT

This week, our collective Jewish family sits shiva, mourning for our holy brothers and sisters. We are all mortified by the brutal murders of the eleven innocent Jews killed last Saturday in Pittsburgh.

During morning services, a Jew hating gunman stormed the Tree of Life Synagogue and opened fire on worshipers, yelling “All Jews must die!” This horrific massacre, considered the deadliest anti-Semitic attack in U.S. history, has left the community and the entire nation reeling.

This is not Nazi Germany of 75 years ago. This is not a pogrom of 150 years ago. This is not the Inquisition of 600 years ago. This is not the Roman occupation of 2,000 years ago. This is not the Babylonian invasion of 2,500 years ago. And this is not Egyptian domination of 3,400 years ago. This, my dear brothers and sisters, happened in America today!

But beyond shock and grief, how are we to respond to such unspeakable tragedy? What can we do about such hate?

1. From Morning Service to Mourning Service

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we do about such hate? Is there a way to fight anti-Semitism?

2. No Words

There are no words.

A great Rabbi once told his disciple who had suffered a terrible loss: “I have no words or answers for you. But I can cry with you.”

Words are simply inadequate to fathom and express the sorrow and the grief.

That is why the only true response to tragedy is silence. When the Roman emperor viciously murdered the ten martyrs (as we recount the heart wrenching story in our Yom Kippur service) Moses (and the angels) cried out to G-d: “This is Torah, and this is its reward?!” And G-d replied: Be silent...¹ Aaron was silent when his sons tragically died.²

But silence is not an escape or avoidance. It is the only true response to something unfathomable.

What can you say when eleven beautiful souls are mercilessly killed, with their only “crime” being that they were Jewish?!

What can you say when these kind and innocent men and women, aged 54 to 97, are sitting in a peaceful Shabbat morning prayer service, and their lives are suddenly ended in such horrendous fashion?!

Eleven individuals; amongst them a loving couple, brothers, doctors, a dentist, a professor, all with generous and open hearts, caring people who lived to give back to their families and community.

Shachrit, a morning service, has turned into *shiva*, a mourning service.

This week, as our collective Jewish family sits *shiva*, mourning for our holy brothers and sisters, we have no words. Yet we console the families and each other with these words:

May the Omnipresent comfort all of us among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. May God avenge the blood of His holy ones. Blessed is the True Judge.

¹ Menachos 29b. Midrash Asarah Harugei Malchus.

² Leviticus 10:3.

3. Actions

There is something more to our silence and lack of words.

We don't try to explain or justify tragedy. We don't ask "why" it happened. We ask "what we can do about it."

The Jewish response to pain and grief throughout history has been – action. We channel our grief into a powerful, inspiring way to strengthen ourselves and our communities. We transform negative energy into positive energy.

As many holocaust survivors remind us: Our vengeance against our enemies is not to fight hatred with hatred. Our vengeance is to build even stronger and healthier families, to bring even more light into this world – a light that is stronger than any darkness.

A holocaust survivor once pulled a book off the shelf, declaring: this is our vengeance – pointing to a photo album of his children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren!

Just witness the doctors and nurses who cared for the savage murderer at the Allegheny General Hospital in Pittsburgh – at least three of them were Jewish!

What a study in contrast: Just a short while earlier this killer was shooting Jews yelling "kill all the Jews," and here his life is being saved by... Jews!

It makes your cry...

4. Our Response

We have no answer. There is no answer. There never should be an answer. An answer justifies such unjustifiable evil.

We have no answer but we can have a response. We can respond by highlighting what we are, who we are, and why we are as a people. We respond by building what our enemy wants to destroy: Our faith, our commitment, our synagogues, our houses of worship and study (which are a *mikdash m'at*, "mini sanctuaries").

Though this is no answer, it is the quintessential Jewish response, something we can do – that which has kept our nation eternally alive and unvanquishable.

By stressing in bold letters who we are as Jews, what we represent as God's ambassadors, we can and must respond to the evil of our murderous foes.

With the help of God, this will give us strength to stand up from our collective *shiva* and show the world that no matter how much you hate us, we shall ultimately destroy your toxicity and transform all of your death into God's promise of life.

5. Our Torah Portion

This week's Torah portion is titled Chayei Sarah, the life of Sarah. And yet when we begin reading this chapter, we find that it is actually the story of Sarah's passing. Why then the title Chayei, life?

This question compels us to revisit the very definition and meaning of life.

What really makes us alive – is it the immediate and visible impact that we have on those around us, or is there something more?

The Torah tells us that life – true life – is our spiritual vitality, which can only truly be recognized after the person passes on and the physical is no longer distracting us. One could argue that as long as we are biologically alive our appeal and our influence are based on our physical presence and the power we wield. When do we know that someone is truly alive – an eternal life that never dies – when we see the effects and influence that have remained after they are physically no longer there.

Paradoxically, we learn more about true life after death than before it.

So, what is the secret to being alive in the fullest sense of the word, and how can we ensure that our lives have perpetual impact?

The life of Sarah (*after* her death) teaches us that true life is spiritual life – the eternal things we do today are the ones that never die. It bids us remember this with every breath we take, we every word we speak, and every action we engage in. It compels us to live our physical lives today imbued and saturated with spirit and soul.

The Talmudic sages teach³: “The good – even in their deaths they are considered alive. The evil – even in their lives they are considered dead.”

Look at the life of Sarah – a woman, a wife and mother whose life, love and inspiration influenced and motivated not only her husband Abraham and her son Isaac but has continued and continues to influence and motivate all the generations since her passing.

This is the heritage of Sarah, the first Jewish mother, our mother.

³ Talmud Berachot 18a-b. Rashi end of Parshat Noah.

And this is the heritage of the eleven beautiful souls who returned to their Maker in the midst of celebrating Shabbos. Eleven innocent souls who chose to be praying on a Saturday morning. Eleven kedoshim, killed *only* because they were Jewish.

It is our duty as Jews to make sure that we never forget them. Their souls will forever live on through us, through our voice and our actions. We have a responsibility to keep the Jewish spirit alive, keep our message strong, keep our faith burning. We have a responsibility to stand up to the world and say “All Jews must live. All Jews are ALIVE!”

Am Yisroel Chai!

6. Book of Formation

The Midrash⁴ relates that, in the beginning process of creating the world, God initially composed a book called *Sefer Yetzirah*, the “Book of Formation.” God then looked in this book and formed the world. When God concluded the creation process, God took the *Sefer Yetzirah* and put it into the Torah. Later he showed the *Sefer Yetzirah* to Abraham. Abraham could not understand a single word of it, couldn’t begin to understand how the world was formed or how to transform worlds. As he pondered, a heavenly voice called out and said, “Would you like your mind to resemble My mind? You will never be able to understand Me by yourself. Go to Shem and Ever.” So, Abraham went to the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever and enrolled there for three years, until he understood the “Book of Formation” of the world.⁵

What did he come to understand?

That God formed the world with a plan – for light to vanquish darkness, for purity to overcome impurity, for holiness to dispel evil.

We Jews are born into this world for this sole – and soul – purpose. We have to connect with our inner purity and innocence, so that we can bring the whole universe to its purpose of purity and innocence. It is no easy task but we can and will rise to the occasion.

[optional for Chabad Shluchim]

Indeed, by Divine Providence, over this Shabbat, the *Kinnus Hashluchim Haolami*, the annual International Conference of Chabad Emissaries is taking place in New York. This is a gathering of thousands of people who have dedicated their lives completely to this purpose.

⁴ See Otzar Midrashim, Pesikta, p. 487.

⁵ See also Toldot Yaakov Yosef on Vayeitzei (p. 80) where it compares the fourteen years of Jacob’s studying in the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever to the thirteen years of Rashbi in the cave, both studying the hidden divine mysteries of existence.

And we are reminded that ten years ago, almost to the day, evil tried to snuff out goodness and light at the Chabad House in Mumbai, India. And how can we forget that the same year as the attack in Mumbai, there was a vicious attack on the Jerusalem yeshiva known as Mercaz HaRav. In that massacre six yeshiva students were killed and a dozen more seriously wounded. And we also remember the horrific attack in a House of G-d in Jerusalem, where four holy souls were brutally murdered during morning services.

We Jews represent Godliness in the world and ungodly people cannot stand it.

7. Our Role

Evil can never stand our illuminated role. It always tries to stamp us out, for we are the cure to its cancer, we are the candle to its darkness.

We, as Jews, carry with us the secrets to existence – why and how God formed the universe. There are those that would kill us for it. Our mere existence undermines their falsehoods.

They are willing (and even eager) to walk into our homes, our sanctuaries, our yeshivas and places of holiness to try to spill our blood and snuff us out.

This is not going to happen.

We are here to teach the world what it means to be holy. Every Jew knows this; only some of us are not yet comfortable with this mission. Not yet.

But this evil reminds us of how pressing and immediate our goals of redemption are. We cannot relax for a second. We must turn the whole world into a sanctuary of prayer, Torah study, and divinity.

May God avenge the blood of our brothers and sisters only as God can. And may we avenge their blood only as we can – by dispelling all darkness and evil, and by permeating this earth with holiness and light.

8. What We Can Do

Every one of us can do much in response to this terrible tragedy. To honor the eleven neshamot/souls that have been taken from us.

We must build that which our enemy wishes to destroy. For every gruesome murder – for every terrorist attack – we must build an even stronger Jewish Nation, both physically and spiritually.

As a rabbi, as a representative of this community, I call on us all to declare a spiritual war of Torah and mitzvot. To reinforce and build our spiritual inner temples within each of our personal selves, homes, communities and the world at large.

These Jewish souls were ripped away for no reason at all, other than having a Jewish soul. Our response? We will rip away all evil, we will eradicate all hatred, by committing to be kind and loving and giving for no reason, other than having a Jewish soul.

Evil came into our community and tried to silence our prayers, our voices. Our response? We will pray louder and stronger. The Jewish people cannot be stopped. We will not be silenced.

Every kind deed, every mitzvah is an act of light dispelling darkness. But there are specific mitzvot that have divine protection against enemies – such as, affixing a mezuzah to the door, giving tzedakah generously, and donning *tefillin*.

When we see baseless hatred, we respond with baseless love and kindness – unconditional love to all.

In the merit of those who were mercilessly slaughtered, may every single male in this room commit to donning the *tefillin* every day, and if we already do, commit to encouraging and inspiring a friend, a co-worker, a family member, anybody and everybody to don the *tefillin*.

May we adorn our doorposts with holy mezuzot, thereby proclaiming that this edifice is dedicated as a sanctuary for God. The mezuzah simply and sweetly says: God resides here.

And tzedakah – which is not only giving charity, but also includes acts of righteousness and kindness. Tzedakah proclaims loud and clear: we Jews are here to change the world, to bring righteousness into the equation, to dispel the selfish darkness with our selfless light.

And let us not forget our children, our future. As King David writes in the Book of Psalms: *Mepi oililm v'yonkim yosadeto oiz l'hashbis oyeve u'misnakem* – “Out of the mouth of babes and infants You have established Your might – to answer those who deny You, to silence the enemy and the vengeful.”⁶

So, let us gather our children both at home as well as in assemblies and rallies, where we recite Torah verses together, pray together, and give tzedakah together.

Besides all the other benefits in doing this, your children will forever remember that we Jews do not retreat in times of challenge. We stand up with pride and embrace our faith and our traditions.

⁶ Tehilim 8:3.

9. Our Children

Let us close with the wisdom of children. The Midrash relates⁷ that when Haman, the evil Persian minister succeeded in having the king sign the decree to annihilate the Jews, Mordechai went out and stopped three young yeshiva students coming out of school and asked them to quote to him from what they had learned that day. Haman and his cohorts followed along to hear what the children would say. And this is what they said:

Said one: “Do not fear sudden terror, nor the destruction of the wicked when it comes.”⁸

Said the second: “Contrive a scheme, but it will be foiled; conspire a plot but it will not materialize; for God is with us.”⁹

And said the third [quoting God]: “Even to your old age I am with you; even to your elderly years will I sustain you; I have made you, and I will bear you; I will sustain and deliver you.”¹⁰

Shabbat Shalom!

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⁷ Esther Rabba 7:16.

⁸ Proverbs 3:25.

⁹ Isaiah 8:10.

¹⁰ Isaiah 46:4.