



VAYIKRA

Acharei

Sanctifying G-d in Poway

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SANCTIFYING G-D IN POWAY

ABSTRACT

Unprecedented Lessons of Strength in Face of Tragedy

Above all, our hearts are shattered as they go out to the husband, daughter, family and community of Lori Gilbert-Kaye, who was cruelly murdered by a terrorist in a cold-blooded attack on Jews gathered in prayer at Chabad-Lubavitch of Poway last Shabbat, the final day of Passover.

But within the tragedy and grief another story has emerged, one that is more powerful than the senseless crime perpetrated.

Millions, if not billions of people are being gripped by the heart-wrenching, yet formidable words of Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein, the Rabbi of the Poway community who survived the attack.

In articles and interviews, from his hospital bed and at the funeral service, Rabbi Goldstein is relentlessly focusing neither on his pain and loss, nor on fear and anger, but on his determination to transform this tragedy into a force of goodness and kindness.

Pointing his lost index finger to heaven, reflecting on G-d's omnipresence, Rabbi Goldstein is creating an awesome Kiddush Hashem. Rarely do we see such an overt demonstration of sanctifying G-d among us all - a theme we read about in these week's Torah chapters.

Most people would first be licking their wounds, stopping the bleeding. Rabbi Goldstein – in the spirit of being a true emissary of his Rebbe, the Lubavitcher Rebbe – proceeded to protect the children and his congregants, even while his hands were dripping with blood!

1. Thank you G-d for Not Creating Me Like Them (Story)

A heartbreaking but meaningful story: A pitiful Jew, about to be shot to death by a brutal Nazi guard, makes one final request: "Allow me to say a few words of prayer before you murder me." His request granted, the Jew begins to whisper quietly.

Viciously, the Nazi cries out: "Dirty Jew, what are you saying?" The Jew replies: "I am thanking G-d." "You wretched creature," exclaims the guard, "You are at my mercy. I am about to kill you, and your god can do nothing about it. What in the world are you thanking him for?"

The Jew answers simply: "I am thanking G-d for not creating me like you..."

2. Tragedy in Poway: A Deeper Story

Above all, our hearts are shattered as they go out to the husband, daughter, family and community of Lori Gilbert-Kaye, who was cruelly murdered by a terrorist in a cold-blooded attack on Jews gathered in prayer at Chabad-Lubavitch of Poway last Shabbat, the final day of Passover.

But within the tragedy and grief another story has emerged, one that is more powerful than the senseless crime perpetrated.

Millions, if not billions of people are being gripped by the heart-wrenching, yet formidable words of Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein, the Rabbi of the Poway community who survived the attack.

In articles and interviews, from his hospital bed and at the funeral service, Rabbi Goldstein is relentlessly focusing neither on his pain and loss, nor on fear and anger, but on his determination to transform this tragedy into a force of goodness and kindness.

In a New York Times op-ed, titled A Terrorist Tried to Kill Me Because I Am a Jew. I Will Never Back Down, Rabbi Goldstein writes “I do not know why God spared my life in my Poway synagogue. All I can do is make this borrowed time matter.”

3. The Index Finger

Who has not been riveted and who has not marveled while watching the Rabbi lift up his bandaged fingers – and instead of lamenting the loss of his right index finger, he points to heaven and to all directions, and lovingly remembers his father’s index finger doing the same, as he defiantly declares:

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“Use your finger to point in all directions and sing the song my father sang to me: ‘Hashem is here, Hashem is there, Hashem is truly everywhere. Up, up, down, down, right, left, and all around, here, there and everywhere, that’s where He can be found.’”

In his article the Rabbi writes about his lost index finger: “That finger I would use to point out God’s omnipresence was taken from me. I pray that my missing finger serves as a constant reminder to me. A reminder that every single human being is created in the image of God; a reminder that I am part of a people that has survived the worst destruction and will always endure; a reminder that my ancestors gave their lives so that I can live in freedom in America; and a reminder, most of all, to never, ever, not ever be afraid to be Jewish.”

Instead of expressing outrage at this horrific atrocity and blatantly evil anti-Semitism, he declares Am Yisroel Chai, and that “from here on in I am going to be more brazen. I am going to be even more proud about walking down the street wearing my tzitzit and kippah, acknowledging God’s presence. And I’m going to use my voice until I am hoarse to urge my fellow Jews to do Jewish. To light candles before Shabbat. To put up

mezuzas on their doorposts. To do acts of kindness. And to show up in synagogue — especially this coming Shabbat.”

Even as the media tries to elicit details about the shooting from the Rabbi, he insists on continuing to spread the transformative message that a little light dispels much darkness.

Imagine that! Most people would first be licking their wounds, stopping the bleeding. Rabbi Goldstein – in the spirit of being a true emissary of his Rebbe, the Lubavitcher Rebbe – proceeded to protect the children and his congregants, even while his hands were dripping with blood!

Simply astounding!

4. An Unbelievable Kiddush Hashem

Rarely do we see such an overt demonstration of positivity and broad vision; such an incredibly awesome expression of Kiddush Hashem – sanctifying G-d among us all.

In these week’s Torah chapters we read about the great act of Kiddush Hashem.

This week’s portion begins with the events that happened Acharei mos shnei bnei Aaron - after the death of Aaron’s two children, who were consumed in an “alien fire” sanctifying G-d

Next week we will be reading *Kedoshim ti’hiyu ki kadosh oni Hashem Elokeichem*, You shall be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy (*Kedoshim* 19:2). *V’nikdashti b’toch Bnei Yisroel*, I shall be sanctified amidst the children of Israel. I am the Lord Who sanctifies you (*Emor* 22:32).

This week we have seen and continue to witness an astonishing display of G-d’s sanctification – the best of humanity created in the Divine Image – while also seeing the worst.

Lori Kaye gave her life to save her Rabbi and others in her shul. Rabbi Goldstein through his actions and words, exhibited the noble majesty and dignity of a soul’s capability: not focusing on himself, but on his calling and mission.

5. Lessons for Us

What an extraordinary lesson in contrast.

What a concrete lesson for today’s media: to the finger-pointing pundits from all directions – some even stooping to blame President Trump as the cause of this tragedy - instead of mouthing platitudes and slogans, instead of just bemoaning the travesty – let them learn from Rabbi Goldstein to focus on what we can do to

better educate our children and ourselves; what we can do introduce a higher sense of accountability in our homes and schools; what we can do to bring more light and kindness into our world.

What we can do to inculcate the words of our own Declaration of Independence: all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness – words taken straight out of the Torah that Rabbi Goldstein and his community live by and celebrate.

Rabbi Goldstein writes: “America is unique in world history. Never before was a country founded on the ideals that all people are created in God’s image and that all people deserve freedom and liberty. We fought a war to make that promise real. And I believe we can make it real again. That is what I pledge to do with my borrowed time.”

What a lesson this offers the rest of us: Instead of focusing on our pain and suffering, on our discomforts and disorientation due to setback or failures, let us learn from Rabbi Goldstein to direct our feelings toward improving life.

Instead of focusing on ourselves and our needs, let us concentrate on our mission to serve others; what can we give, bring and offer to the world.

6. We Are Charged to Transform the Universe

Kedoshim ti'hiu, Be Holy, is our call to transform the universe. We have been charged with an enormous responsibility and a great gift.

We human beings are the only ones that can change the course of history. Our choices, each and every one of them, either sanctify or pollute our environment.

Can there be anything more motivating than knowing that the destiny of the universe – indeed the destiny of G-d Himself – is dependent on your actions?

Pharaoh gave us Passover. Haman gave us Purim. Antiochus gave us Chanukah. The terrorist – who we will not name – that viciously killed Lori Gilbert-Kaye, Leah bat Reuven – tragically gave us one of the greatest acts of Kiddush Hashem in our day, in Poway.

The tragedy in Poway teaches us much more than the story of hate; it teaches us to thank G-d for not creating us like them. And even more than that: it teaches us that we can and must change the world that still harbors haters and terrorists.

Needless to say, we must do everything we possibly can to prevent such attacks from ever happening again – to heighten security, uproot haters, eliminate their ability to carry arms; we must do everything in our power to eradicate such hate and evil from our planet. But this is a story much greater than its defensive angle. This is the story of how a soul can rise, transcend darkness and cruelty, and offer the ultimate and permanent solution to eradicating hatred and destruction – by filling the world with divine knowledge as the waters cover the sea. This is the story we read in the Haftorah on the last day of Passover, just around the time of Lori's murder.

The question each of us must ask ourselves today is this:

I who was blessed with life, health, an intact body, all my fingers, arms and legs; I who was blessed with all my faculties and gifts – how will I sanctify G-d's name in my life? How will I use my arms and legs, my fingers, eyes and ears, my mind and heart and all my other tools and resources to bring more light to the world, to be a more committed Jew, to inspire and educate everyone I come in contact with?

This is how we translate the Poway Passover story into our lives.

And this is the story we carry with us: we will live as Jews are supposed to live, a people divinely commanded to bring G-d's light into the world, so that Lori, Leah bat Reuven, will continue to live on through us.

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