

Sermon for #ShowUpForShabbat/Solidarity Shabbat
November 3, 2018
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Last week (Saturday, October 27th), during Shabbat morning services, an evil act of violence took place at the Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh. To find some words of meaning, consolation, and hope, I turn to the Torah.

The first place I turned to is Parshat Shemini – Leviticus, Chapter 10 – which contains the story of the death of Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu. Aaron was the *Kohen Gadol* (the High Priest), and his two sons died on a day of great celebration, the inauguration of the *Mishkan*, the travelling sanctuary. The Torah tells us that the two sons brought an “*aysh zarah*” – “a strange fire” – as an offering to God. It was strange in the sense that it had not been commanded. And when they did this unauthorized act, they were killed. Although they seemingly defied God, it’s unclear why they died exactly. And regardless, any way you look at it, it was still a catastrophic moment for Aaron.

One of things that’s striking about this story is that it teaches us, it doesn’t matter who you are – you could be a great biblical hero, you could be the High Priest, you could have a close relationship with God – and still that doesn’t protect you from experiencing deep pain in this world.

The reason I want to start with this story though, is because of Aaron’s reaction. After the death of Nadav and Avihu, Moses gives some explanation for their death to his brother Aaron. But Moses is trying to explain the unexplainable. Besides, when it comes to a shattered heart, only words of love and comfort – not words of explanation – have a chance bring comfort to someone who is grieving.

What was Aaron’s response to Moses? The Torah relays his response in two Hebrew words – “*Vayidom Aharon*,” (10:3) – which means “And Aaron was silent.” Sometimes there are just no words to describe the great pain, the complete shock, the utter disgust, the great despair we are feeling.

In some significant ways, this is one of those times. But we can’t end with silence.

I’m reminded of a wonderful teaching by one of my professors at JTS (the Jewish Theological Seminary), Rabbi Eliezer Diamond, a professor of Talmud and Rabbinics. One time Rabbi Diamond was talking about the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, and he asked, why do we blow the shofar? Now there are lots of traditional answers to this question, but Rabbi Diamond said something I had never heard before. He said, when we blow the shofar sounds, we are indicating to God that there is so much inside of us that we

cannot articulate and so we offer the sounds of the shofar instead. We cannot articulate all of the feelings of our blessings, or of our shortcomings, or of our hopes for another year of life, or of our desires to try to live our lives better.

And then what happens? 9 days later, it's Yom Kippur, and we say, even though we have indescribable feelings, we are going to try and say them anyway. And that is why we recite the *vidui* – the long and short confessional prayers, over and over again.

And so, I'm going to talk to try to find some words for my feelings.

Rabbi Sharyn Perlman, a newly ordained rabbi and a new member of TBI, recently told me something important about this story with Aaron. She said, just because the Torah says Aaron was silent, we should not learn from this that we should hold our feelings in. On the contrary, we must find the right people in our lives, with whom we can share our feelings. If we don't share our feelings with someone else, then we hold them in at our own peril.

Why did this evil act of terror happen last week?

Of course, we cannot explain why it happened, but I would like to share with you a verse from the beginning of the Torah – Genesis 1:27 – which is about God's creation of humanity. The verse says, "And God created [the first person] in His image; in the image of God, He created him, male and female, He created them."

First, it's important to state that since the Torah says, human beings are created *b'tzelem Elohim* – in the Image of God, this teaches us that all people deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. And it makes hurting, exploiting, and killing another human being all the more evil.

But what does being created *b'tzelem Elohim* – in the Image of God, actually mean? Many commentators understand this to mean that human beings, like God, have free will. That's why in the story of creation, at the end of Day 6 – the day in which God created humanity – it does not say, what it says at the end of each and every other day of creation, "*Vayar Elohim ki tov*" – "and God saw that it was good." Why not? The reason is, since human beings have free will, God was reserving judgment – God did not yet know if they were going to act in a good way or a bad way.

I now want to turn to *Parshat Vayera* (Genesis 18:16 – 19:29), which tells the story of the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Elie Wiesel, may his memory be for a blessing,

tells a story – it’s a modern-day midrash – about a man of conscience who arrives at these cities. The man sees the evil taking place, so he publicly protests. Once a week, every week, he goes out and protests. After many months, a young boy who was watching the man, approaches him and says, “nothing has changed since you came here, why do you keep on protesting?” The man replied, “when I first arrived here, I protested to change the city, now I protest so the city doesn’t change me.”

The United States, thank God, is not Sodom and Gomorrah. But that being said, there are some bad things happening in our society. One of the worst trends is the hateful and divisive words used on social media, in everyday conversations, and among our political leaders. We must do whatever we can, and make a conscious effort, not be changed by this hate and divisiveness. We must turn away from it, and debate our political adversaries with civility.

Going back to the stories of Adam and Eve, we see that murder enters human history very, very early – in fact, it’s in the second generation of humanity. Adam and Eve have two sons, Cain and Abel, and a short time later, Cain murders Abel. Just before Cain commits his grievous sin, he is jealous of Abel and filled with rage. At that moment, God says to him, “Why are you so distressed . . . [you should know that while] sin crouches at the door; [and] its urge is toward you, you can be its master,” 4:6-7. God is informing Cain, and acknowledging the fact, that human beings have weaknesses and constant temptations. The temptations have a strong pull on us, but in the end, we can overcome them.

When it comes to our shortcomings and temptations, social media can be poisonous. While social media can be neutral, or a blessing, it can also exploit our weaknesses, pulling us down low into a negative and hateful place. So we must be mindful of how we are using Social Media. We must be committed to being part of the solution, and not part of the problem. If someone we consider a real friend (and not just a facebook friend) posts hateful, inflammatory, and divisive words, we should privately encourage them to remove the words and refrain from such behavior. It may not change the world, but we must start with our corner of the world.

One time, I was reflecting on the most radical implications of free will. I was in college, travelling through Europe, and I went to Auschwitz to bear witness. Standing in the lone gas chamber that still remains intact, I prayed to God, saying, “Dear God, free will is an incredible gift. It makes us human, it enables us to have moral responsibility, and it provides us with the opportunity to partner with You, in repairing the world. But this

much free will??? Why did you create human beings with so much free will that they could perpetrate this kind of evil?!”

No answer was forthcoming, but a thought came into my head, which was a little bit of a silver lining. That thought was, if human beings have this much free will to do unspeakable evil, then on the opposite end of the spectrum, human beings have this much free will to do indescribable acts of goodness and love. In fact, in this morning’s Torah portion, *Chayei Sarah*, we see Rebecca, Isaac’s future wife, model an act of amazing *chesed* (lovingkindness). When Abraham’s servant asks her for water, she responds by saying, not only will I give you water, but I will also water your 10 thirsty camels. Each camel, when thirsty, can drink 10 pitchers of water, which means Rebecca went up and down the steps of the well 100 times.

This is a super-hero act of *chesed*, and while we should aspire to it, there are many times when we won’t achieve it. That being said, we should strive to fill our days with more simple acts of *chesed*.

In this moment, after this evil act – community is more important than ever. We have our TBI community, the larger Jewish community, and the larger Port Washington community. Here and around the country, our non-Jewish neighbors, friends, and co-workers have joined ranks with us – to support us and send love and healing our way. Their presence with us is also a statement, which says we are not alone in this. We are blessed to live in the United States at this moment in time when there is so much friendship and respect between the Jewish and non-Jewish communities.

Just as other are standing with us, giving us strength and comfort at this very difficult time, we need to stand with other minority groups when they are attacked – so that we can share with them, the same blessings that we are receiving now.

Thank you for being here today on #ShowUpForShabbat. Let’s go out into the world and bring light to the places in our society where there is darkness.

And let us say: Amen.