

## Have Hope

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Temple Beth Torah – Fremont, California  
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Over the years that I have lived in the Bay Area, I have been to plenty of festivals. I have been to Hardly Strictly Bluegrass in Golden Gate Park; the Fillmore Jazz Festival held every Fourth of July; and Fremont's Festival of the Arts.

But until this summer, I had never been to the Gilroy Garlic Festival. But near the end of July, Eve and I had an unscheduled day and we agreed to go. Though I am not a huge fan of garlic, I welcomed the possibility of taking in the festivities that celebrate the town's most famous product.

Eve and I arrived fairly late in the day. What immediately struck me was the wonderful vibe surrounding the event. Throngs of people of every age were out enjoying a beautiful day. Yes, it was really hot but everyone was happy sampling garlic fries, garlic ice cream, and drinking plenty of beverages. We watched a cooking demonstration and were amused by the chefs throwing whole bulbs of garlic into the audience. Later we strolled by a huge tent where underneath thirty or more people were making garlic bread to sell. Though these folks were working hard, everyone was smiling, volunteering their time to make the day a success.

Eve and I walked all around the festival and had a great time. After a few hours, we decided to leave. Late in the afternoon we boarded a bus that took us to the remote parking lot; found our car; and headed home. During the hour long drive, we listened to a Giants game.

But as soon as we got home, we heard the horrifying news. Just before the festival closed, a gunman cut through a perimeter fence, evading security screening. He opened fire with a semi-automatic rifle, indiscriminately targeting anyone in sight. Three people were instantly killed, Stephen Romero, age 6; Keyla Salazar, age 13; and Trevor Deon Irby, age 25. An additional 17 people were wounded.

Hearing the news, I was stunned, almost beyond comprehension. My heart broke for the families of the victims; 3 beautiful young innocent people, senselessly murdered. I ached for the people of Gilroy who had worked so hard to provide a family friendly event; now shattered by violence. And I was gripped by the awareness that on that Sunday afternoon, July 28, had Eve and I stayed just a little longer, we could have been killed or wounded during the mass shooting.

At some point on that terrible Sunday night, I reached for a siddur to offer a prayer. I wanted to say the Birkat HaGomeil. It is a prayer we recite after surviving trauma. I offered these words, *Blessed are You, our God Eternal; Your majesty fills the universe –She'gmalani kol tov – through Your generosity I have experienced Your goodness.* And while I was deeply grateful to be alive, I also felt guilty as I said this prayer.

For if I am thanking God for being alive does that imply that God determined that others should not be? I do not believe that God selected me to be saved and another to be shot. I resolutely reject a theology that declares that God determines who shall live and who shall die.

But wait, isn't that what we affirmed earlier in the service with the poem Unetaneh Tokef? We recite it on the mornings of Yuntiff saying:

On Rosh Hashanah it is written; on Yom Kippur it is sealed,  
Who shall live and who shall die;  
Who shall reach the ripeness of age,  
Who shall be taken before their time.

Unetaneh Tokef has brought intense pain to people I know. There is an individual who years ago celebrated with her husband the arrival of the High Holy Days with great joy. But two weeks after Yom Kippur, her husband suddenly died. She has not been back in synagogue for the High Holy Days because she is angry at God for presumably decreeing her innocent husband's death.

Unetaneh Tokef causes anguish for some people. In the wake of suffering, some question their faith in a benevolent God. In the face of critical illnesses, some cry out: Why is God punishing me?

Who shall live and who shall die? What are we to make of this assertion?

Unetaneh Tokef is deeply troubling. It is legitimate to question whether it even should be included in our High Holy Day services. I readily admit I struggle with this prayer's assertion. But a brilliant teacher at my seminary, Rabbi Larry Hoffman, offers a way to make sense of this liturgy.

He writes, Unetaneh Tokef, "is not an easy prayer to handle – some congregations purposely omit it – why, in fact would anyone say it? On the face of it, it is infuriating."

But the power of Unetaneh Tokef, Rabbi Hoffman further states, is that it forces us to confront two key questions: The first is: "How do we face the reality of being powerless over our own lives?" And secondly, "How do we remain faithful ... in our own way?"<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Hoffman's two questions help frame our understanding of Unetaneh Tokef, and by extension, our comprehension of the world we inhabit. Again, his first question is: How do we face the reality of being powerless over our own lives? Unetaneh Tokef punctures our sense that we have control over our lives. Oh certainly we do all in our power to prevent a catastrophe from occurring. We tell our kids to look both ways before crossing a street. We buckle our seatbelts and take our medicines. In the event of a natural disaster, hopefully we have an emergency kit prepared.

But Unetaneh Tokef forces us to acknowledge that life is unpredictable. A speeding car runs a red light and slams into the drivers' side of your car. In the middle of the night, you suddenly sit up in bed, gasping for breath and fear that you are having a heart attack.

We all know people who for no discernable reason are afflicted by disease or ravaged by an accident. We think we control our lives but the truth expressed by Unetaneh Tokef is that

there is a reality to this world; we are not in charge as much as we think; we cannot control every outcome. In life, tragedy and suffering are inescapable for far too many.

However, it is one thing to recognize accidents or a random sequence of unfortunate events as part of the human condition. But what are we to make of evil? There is the evil perpetrated by a killer, so filled with senseless anger that he opens fire at the Gilroy Garlic Festival? There is evil when someone so consumed by anti-Semitic hatred that he enters a synagogue in Pittsburgh on a Shabbat morning and murders eleven Jews.

The mass shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue last October was the deadliest attack on a Jewish community in US history. We all were horrified when we heard this terrible news. On a personal level, I was deeply affected by because my parents are from Pennsylvania and I have many relatives in Pittsburgh. My cousin Lissa and her family are members of Dor Hadash, a Reconstructionist congregation that holds services at Tree of Life. That Shabbat morning, Lissa was not at services, but she knows people who were killed and wounded.

The massacre at Tree of Life synagogue traumatized the victims' families, the tightknit Jewish community in the neighborhood of Squirrel Hill, as well as the people of Pittsburgh. It has affected us here as well at Temple Beth Torah. I know there are people who ask: Are we secure as we hold services during the High Holy Days? Are we safe as a Jewish congregation during an alarming rise of anti-Semitism across the United States?

How do we cope with our fear when we perceive that no matter what steps we take, we are powerless to prevent all evil from causing harm? For as Rabbi Hoffman teaches, Unetaneh Tokef asserts that as much as we think we are in control of our lives, the reality is that we are not.

But that is not the only aspect to interpreting the meaning of Unetaneh Tokef. For Rabbi Hoffman raises a second, primary question. He asks, in the aftermath of pain, suffering, and even unspeakable evil, how do we remain faithful?

Rabbi Hoffman is not specific about what he means by faithful, but I will offer this interpretation. By faithful, I think he means that despite all the horror and cruelty in the world, we Jews remain faithful to the belief that human beings are fundamentally good. We believe in the Torah's teaching that we are created in the image of the God. We have the holy responsibility of bringing healing to this broken world.

We find this faith articulated when we listen to the words of Dan Leger, a member of Dor Hadash congregation in Pittsburgh. He is a dear friend of my cousin, Lissa. Dan is by training a hospice nurse and provided loving care to Lissa's husband, Chas, before he died of cancer.

Dan was at Dor Hadash on the morning of October 27. When the first heard shots rang out, he rushed to provide aid to the wounded. He was shot in the stomach and severely wounded. After five months of surgeries and hospitalization, Dan spoke for the first time about the mass shooting at a public event.

He was asked, "How do you find God when something like this happens?" Dan answered, "God can handle it so we don't have to worry about being angry with God. God is used to it. I'm convinced that the people who do these awful things missed the point of love your neighbor as yourself...God is not a person that pulls puppet strings. God gives us the potential to be the best that we are and endure the worst that can befall us."

He was also asked whether the experience of October 27 has changed the way he looks at other people? Dan replied, "We all make this strange journey in life. We have to find our way through it and we can't find our way through it alone. We need our neighbors to be able to help us in every conceivable way."

He went on to say, "I cannot believe the comfort I got from the cards I received from people around the world who I never met. (So) reach out. It means something. ...That kind of human contact is the accompaniment we all need to give each other through this life."<sup>2</sup>

Dan Leger is a living example of what it means to remain faithful in the face of suffering. He refuses to abandon his belief in people's goodness. The love and support of his wife, his congregation, and his community sustain him through his process of recovery. He finds grace in the bountiful acts of kindness shown to him by complete strangers.

Dan's testimony about love and kindness reminds me of what we experienced in our community following the massacre in Pittsburgh. That Shabbat, I was shell-shocked. But friends in my Interfaith Council reached out to me and told me they had organized a vigil. That Saturday night, we gathered in the dark and lit candles to illuminate our hearts. We offered prayers for those who were killed and prayers for healing for those who were wounded. Some of us spoke of the pain we felt; but also the strength we drew in standing together: Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Hindus.

In the days that followed, I received messages of support for our congregation from people throughout Fremont.

And so, time again, when tragedy strikes, good people come together. In cities throughout the United States, communities unite and declare themselves:

Pittsburgh Strong.  
Parkland Strong.  
Las Vegas Strong  
Gilroy Strong.  
El Paso Strong.  
Dayton Strong.

Our faith in goodness, our unquenchable hope, can never be extinguished.

In the wake of tragedy, what sustains our faith? Sometimes it's by reaching out to a higher power. We Bentsch Gomeil, offering a prayer thanking God for having survived calamity. As we affirm our faith, we transmute our trauma into gratitude.

Beyond saying a Gomeil prayer for ourselves, we become sensitized to the need to show kindness to others. A central teaching of Judaism is that our world cannot exist without loving kindness. Shimon the Just in Pirkei Avot teaches *Al Shlosha D'varim Ha'Olam Omeid*, the world stands on three pillars:

The first is Torah, the second is Worship, and the third pillar is Gemilut Chasadim, acts of love and kindness.<sup>3</sup>

Gemilut Chasadim makes no distinction among people, races, nationality, or creed. Gemilut Chasadim embraces everyone, declaring we are all created in the divine image; we all deserve love, kindness, and respect.

Hatred, bigotry, fear, and violence are the opposites of Gemilut Chasadim. But when good people of faith join together, in houses of worship; in the streets of our cities; in the town halls of our communities; and in the hallways of power, we CAN overcome those who seek to destroy our belief in goodness. We believe in a world where truth shall reign; justice shall prevail; and hope will blaze forth against the darkness.

In the Bible, the prophet Zechariah declares that as a Jewish people, we are *Asirei HaTikvah*, we are prisoners of hope. It is elemental to our very identity as Jews to have faith in the ultimate triumph of good.<sup>4</sup>

In the year 70 of the Common Era, Rome destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and the Jewish people were dispersed from the Land of Israel. Yet we never abandoned the hope that we would return to our ancestral homeland. Against all reason, after 2000 years we succeeded and HaTikvah, "The Hope" was enshrined as Israel's national anthem.

During the 1970s and 80s, Jews in the Soviet Union wanted to leave that land of oppression. In 1988, in the deep of winter I visited refuseniks in Moscow and Leningrad and I freely admit I doubted whether these brave men and women would ever be free.

"The struggle for Soviet Jewry...seemed all impossible. Could one really hope to overcome the all-powerful Soviet empire and obtain freedom for Jews? Yet their hope was eventually realized. The Evil Empire collapsed and (the refuseniks) prevailed."<sup>5</sup>

Yes, the world is beset by horrific problems: rampant climate change menaces life on this planet; rising anti-Semitism threatens Jews both here and abroad. Mass shootings have become the norm in our society. Our country is seething with unrest.

We might feel overwhelmed by despair. But we are reminded time and again not to abandon hope. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches, "The Jewish way is to rescue hope from tragedy. However dark the world, love still heals. Goodness still redeems. Terror, by defeating others, ultimately defeats itself, while the memory of those who offered kindness to strangers lives on."<sup>6</sup>

Gemilut Chasadim, acts of loving-kindness, enables us to not only face our challenges but to overcome them. This hope in humanity is an enduring gift that sustains us even in the darkest times. Elie Weisel reminds us that "Hope is like peace. It is not a gift from God. It is a gift only we can give another."

So in this New Year of 5780, let us never give in to despair. Let us never abandon hope. Let us never lose faith that we can create a better world.

Through generosity of spirit and acts of kindness we can bring healing to those who are suffering. We can bring light to those who dwell in darkness. We can bring salvation to a world that cries out to be redeemed.

Throughout the High Holy Day season, it is customary each day to recite the words of Psalm 27. The psalm concludes with these words:

*Kavay El Adonai  
Chazak V'ya'amaytz Libecha  
V'kavay El Adonai*

*Have hope in God.  
Be strong and of good courage!  
And continue to have hope in God.*

In this New Year, let us have hope in God and in one another. Let us find faith in our shared humanity and our essential goodness. Let us be strong and of good courage.

Amen V'Amen.

#### Notes

1. *Making Prayer Real*, Rabbi Mike Comins, pages 154-155.
2. *First Person Accounts of the Squirrel Hill Massacre*, compiled and edited by my cousin, Rabbi Erin Hirsh,  
[http://www.jewelconsulting.net/uploads/5/5/4/7/55477145/dan\\_leger\\_first\\_person\\_account\\_of\\_the\\_squirrel\\_hill\\_massacre\\_final.pdf](http://www.jewelconsulting.net/uploads/5/5/4/7/55477145/dan_leger_first_person_account_of_the_squirrel_hill_massacre_final.pdf)
3. Pirkei Avot 1:2.
4. Zechariah 9:12
5. *Prisoners of Hope*, Rabbi Reuven Hammer, September 9, 2011
6. *Future Tense*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, page 20.