

Thoughts From THE HEART

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"LOOKING THROUGH THE DARKNESS
AND SEEING THE LIGHTS"

NEWS ABOUT THE SHOOTINGS AT SANDY HOOK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, CAME TO ME JUST BEFORE SHABBAT, THE SEVENTH DAY OF HANUKKAH. CANDELS LIGHTING SEEMED MORE NEEDED THAN USUAL THAT EVENING. IT MUST HAVE MEANT A LOT TO OUR JEWISH ANCESTORS, WHO LIVED IN DARKNESS SO MUCH MORE THAN WE DO. TO HAVE LIGHT IN THEIR HOMES EIGHT NIGHT IN A ROW. IF MONEY WAS SCARCE, THEY MIGHT NOT HAVE SPENT IT ON OIL AND WICKS HAD THEY NOT BEEN COMMANDED TO DO SO. WE TODAY FEEL THE "NEED" FOR LIGHT KEENLY WHEN A TRAGEDY LIKE THE ONE AT THE SCHOOL PLUNGESES OUR VERT SOULS AND SPIRITS INTO DARKNESS. I THINK WE ARE COMMANDED IN ITS WAKE TO DO THE EQUIVALENT OF LIGHTING CANDLES, EVEN IF THE COST IS GREAT. "WE" AS A COUNTRY, "NEED TO THINK" "TOGETHER", AS "WE" "GRIEVE TOGETHER", ABOUT WHAT ALL THIS MEANS TO "US" AS A SOCIETY.

Rituals like Hanukkah are wonderfully simple in their directives. That's the beauty of rituals. Say the "prayers", light the "candles", put them in the window, and you're done. We embrace rituals in part because we have the chance to get it right, unlike life, which is so complex that we sometimes feel hopeless about the chance of getting anything right. Can we as a society, figure out how to ^{get} guns out of the hands of individuals who cannot be trusted to use them properly?? - can we as a society, get trouble minds and souls the care they really need?? Can we as a society, cure ourselves, especially, our young-men of the violent streak that is as old as humanity itself?? Questions are many, and it's difficult to sort through the answers proposed.

It's clear to me that we can't protect ourselves and our children from every danger and expect them to grow into independent adults. But, it is also clear, that we must do something, obligation is heavy in the face of "murdered children" and "we" are prohibited from "^{just}" throwing up our hands in the face of the task's enormity. Moses, facing his own imminent death, tells the Jews that he has set before them life and death; blessings and curses; good and evil, and commands them to choose life.

OURS IS A TRADITION THAT HAS ALWAYS PRIZED LIFE, VALUED EVERY SINGLE LIFE, TAUGHT THAT IF WE SAVE A SINGLE LIFE, IT IS, AS IF WE SAVE THE WHOLE WORLD. WE NEED TO FIGURE OUT, AS INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES, HOW TO DO SO IN EACH INDIVIDUAL CIRCUMSTANCES. WE WILL NOT FIND DEFINITIVE ANSWERS TO TRAGEDIES LIKE THE ONE AT SANDY HOOK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, MUCH LESS TO THE PROFOUND QUESTIONS OF MORALITY, SOCIAL POLICY, AND EVEN THEOLOGY ("WHERE WAS GOD?") THAT IT PROVOKES. BUT WE KNOW TOO, AS TRULY AS WE KNOW ANYTHING, THAT SAVING ONE SOUL MAKES INFINITE DIFFERENCE.

I SUBMIT THE FOLLOWING THREE THOUGHTS: FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION:

1. FIRST, LET US REDUCE OUR EFFORTS TO PERFORM THE TWO ACTIONS AT THE VERY HEART OF OUR TRADITION: BUILDING STRONG FACE-TO-FACE COMMUNITIES AND FILLING THEM WITH MEANING TO "LIVE" BY. COMMUNITY HAS THE ABILITY TO HOLD US TIGHT IN THE FACE OF SUFFERING.

IT OVERCOMES THE ISOLATION THAT IS OFTEN ONE OF THE INGREDIENTS THAT LEADS TO VIOLENCE. MEANING WITH A CAPITAL "M" SUSTAINS US WHEN HEADACHE SEEMS TOO GREAT TO BEAR. IT HAS PROVEN CAPACITY TO WARD OFF DESPAIR. WE SHOULD EXTEND THESE GIFTS TO ONE ANOTHER WITHOUT "STINT" IN COMING WEEKS. THERE IS NO BETTER

way to heal broken spirits and souls than to gather them together in bonds of solidarity and reach out to them with ageless truth and wisdom. Let's all of us, offer testimony in "words" and "deeds" that one choose "good", choose "blessing", choose "life".

SECOND: Let's do the hard work on social policy that will allow us to figure out how to take guns—especially "assault weapons" from those who should not have access to them. I agree, along with President Obama and many individuals from across the country and the political spectrum, that we as a society can find a way to respect the proper use and possession of firearms for hunting and defense and still make it harder for individuals with a history of violence or mental illness to get hold of them. Jewish tradition requires us to secure the conditions that allows for proper functioning of society, and the American Constitution too orders us to provide for the common defense and promote the general welfare. Weapons laws should not remain a matter of right-vs-left, urban-vs-rural, Republican-vs-Democrat, black-vs-white, poor-vs-rich. But rather a honest conversation on this matter, at this time stands a good chance of leading to an outcome that

SAVES LIVES, ESPECIALLY THE LIVES OF "OUR CHILDREN!" - THIS IS NOT A BLACK OR WHITE ISSUE, REPUBLICAN OR DEMOCRAT ISSUE, RICH OR POOR ISSUE, BUT RATHER, IT IS A HUMAN ISSUE.

THIRD: LET US PROVIDE TREATMENT FOR THOSE WHOSE VULNERABILITY IN MIND, SPIRIT AND SOUL MAKES THEM MORE PRONE TO VIOLENCE. I KNOW THAT THIS COUNTRY'S UNDERSTANDING OF MENTAL ILLNESS IS WOEFULLY INCOMPLETE - I SEE IT HERE AT THE NORTH CENTRAL PRISON - ON AN DAILY BASIS. I SEE THAT RESOURCES ARE TOO FEW OR NONE; TO CARE FOR EVERYONE WHO NEEDS MEDICAL CARE FOR BODY, MIND, SPIRIT, OR SOUL. I DO NOT TAKE THE POSITION, OR MEAN TO IMPLY THAT EVERY VIOLENT CRIME RESULTS FROM ILLNESS OR NEGLECT. OUR TEACHERS OF THE TORAH TEACH THAT THERE IS "EVIL" IN THE WORLD THAT WE NEED TO PUNISH AND FROM WHICH WE NEED TO PROTECT OURSELVES. THEY ALSO INSTRUCT US THAT THE MATTER IS NOT SIMPLE. I DON'T THINK THAT THE "BIBLE," "KORAN," OR THE "TORAH" HAS AN ANSWER TO THE QUESTION OF "WHERE GOD WAS" AT SANDY HOOK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ON THE DAY OF THE SHOOTING. BUT ALL THREE HOLY BOOKS

DOES GIVE DIRECTIONS FOR HUMAN ANSWERS TO
SUCH TRAGEDIES, AND COMMANDS US TO WORK
"TOGETHER" AT FINDING AND IMPLEMENTING THEM
FORTHWITH. ACTION OF THIS SORT IS IN OWN COMFORT
AT TIMES LIKE THIS ONE. WE OWE IT TO OUR
COUNTRY, OURSELVES, BUT MOST OF ALL TO THE SOULS
THAT PERISHED ON THAT FATEFUL DAY. UNTIL NEXT
TIME BEZRAH HASHEM - ["WITH GOD'S HELP"]

"[ISAIAH 49:13]"

SHALOM ALEICHEM
[PEACE BE WITH YOU]