

[Eitan Weinstein](#) is with [Emtza Region Usy](#).
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Every time I daven (pray), I always start by reading a passage that is found at the beginning of the siddur (prayer book) that puts me in the mindset of what it really means to me to be Jewish. I don't know when I first noticed it because it's often passed over during a regular service, but ever since I first noticed it, I can hardly daven without reciting these words:

“Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai once was walking with his disciple Rabbi Joshua near Jerusalem after the destruction of the Temple. Rabbi Joshua looked at the Temple ruins and said: ‘Alas for us! The place which atoned for the sins of the people Israel through the ritual of animal sacrifice lies in ruins!’ Then Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai spoke to him these words of comfort: ‘Be not grieved, my son. There is another way of gaining atonement even though the Temple is destroyed. We must now gain atonement through deeds of chesed (lovingkindness).’ For it is written, ‘Chesed I desire, not sacrifice (Hosea 6:6).’”

This passage from Avot D'Rabbi Natan reminds me that the most important thing in the world is the care and love for other people. That no matter the destruction and despair, we can save and redeem ourselves by sharing the light of God within each of us.

Yet, yesterday afternoon, when I was davening mincha (the afternoon service) at shul (synagogue), I found that those words did not come to me so easily. How could I sit here in the safety of my comfortable St. Louis Park sanctuary saying that chesed is some kind of spiritual panacea when, just hours before, a gunman entered a Chabad synagogue in Poway, California, killing one woman and injuring three other people? I was at a loss, and, honestly, I still am.

This is all coming less than a week after the horrific terror attacks against Christians in Sri Lanka on Easter and just over a month after the mosque shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand. I feel like a modern day Rabbi Joshua; seeing the Temple, a symbol of peace and unity, crumble before me while I stand by powerlessly.

But no matter how hard it may be, I cannot forget the words of Rabbi Yochanan, pleading for me to find a way out of the confusion and the horror to see that we really can effectuate a change. No more blood needs to be shed before we can take his teaching of chesed and infuse it into the world. It seems daunting, it seems unfair, but it is the only way to persist and it is the way that the Jewish people have persisted forever. By unquestioningly bringing kindness to the lives of the people around us, we have the holy power to stand up to this evil in its face. And that's not say that the evil in the world will be extinguished or eliminated, but it reminds us that we can overcome it and bring a goodness that shines brighter than the malice.

I have no desire to make a political statement right now, even though I could write thousands of words on that alone. I have no desire to call out individuals or groups that I feel are responsible for the tragedy. It needs to be said, but I don't know that I can find the right words to say it. The one thing that I do know how to say in the midst of all this chaos, six months to the day after the shooting in Pittsburgh, is how to start to find that difficult path towards chesed. The natural difficulty of this task reminds me of another passage from Psalm 91, which is customarily read at the end of Shabbat and Chagim (holidays):

“Fear not the terror by night or the arrow that flies by day, the pestilence that stalks in darkness or the plague that rages at noon. Though a thousand fall at your side, ten thousand close at hand, it will never touch you; God’s faithfulness will shield you.”

Again, these words felt heavy saying them last night, but I had to remember that yesterday we closed the holiday of Passover and not the mourning day of Tisha B’Av. On Passover, we were liberated from slavery, and from that moment on, we have had fear in hearts. We read during the seder (Passover service) that in every generation someone will try to rise up and wipe us out, but the statement does not end there. It continues that in every generation someone will try to wipe us out, but we will prevail, the Jewish spirit will not be erased. Yesterday was not the day when the Temple was destroyed and yesterday was not the day when we were exiled from the Promised Land. Yesterday was the day when we were forced even more as a community to come to the realization that it is our duty to actualize the words of Rabbi Yochanan, Psalm 91, and the Passover Haggadah (liturgy). We have the obligation to each other and to the world as a whole to ensure that no one has to experience that fear of the “arrow that flies by day” or the bullets that seem to fly far too often. Our own faithfulness will shield one another. And in that act of communal chesed, we can then find God.

Our hearts go out to the family of Lori Gilbert Kaye, who died in her own shul protecting those around her, and those who are recovering physically and emotionally from the attack. We can overcome this as a community. No more sacrifices need to be made. “Chesed I desire, not sacrifice.” Embody that chesed. Live it with all your spirit, as if your life depends on it. It will not be easy. It cannot be easy. But it is the only way to shield each other. “Though a thousand fall at your side, ten thousand close at hand, it will never touch you; God’s faithfulness will shield you.”

Am Yisrael Chai -- עם ישראל חי

The people of Israel lives.

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Emtza USY Regional President 2019-2020