



Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

THE KOSHER AMONG THE AMERICANS: THE SHOOTINGS AT THE JCC

Every Jew in Los Angeles can recall where we were and what we were doing when the ghastly news intruded itself: 5 people shot at the Jewish Community Center in Grenada Hills! I was in my office when a colleague ran in share the anguish and to find out more details. People turned on radios, clicked on web sites, anything to try to ascertain who was hurt, who would do such a deed. There wasn't much to know: a middle-aged man shot somewhere between five to seven people. Two were children; one was critically hurt. We all felt queasy; we all felt weak.

Most of all, we all felt — once more — alone. Someone was shooting at our children simply because we are Jews. Once again, we all are the targets of a bigot's violence because of raw Antisemitism. Los Angeles now joins the long, tragic list of sites in our history where innocent Jewish blood was shed: move over Buenos Aires, this time our JCC is under attack.

It is so easy, in such moments of desperation, sorrow and rage, to feel alone. The lunatic bully has again found the Jewish prey. Are we always to be the target of bigotry and ignorance? Is this the age-old pattern of Jewish life? Are we always to have our lives defined for us by hateful non-Jews?

My mind turned to more immediate issues: What would I, a Rabbi, say to the community that built up that JCC, to the people who use it as a center for their children and for themselves? What words of wisdom does Jewish tradition offer to those children, herded out of the building by caring police?

It says something important. Our Torah teaches us that we are never truly alone. Even in the darkest time, we can look to God for courage and strength. And we can look to the righteous among the peoples of the world for solidarity and common cause. Take a moment to consider the Torah's paradigmatic tale of Jews as victims. Recall the mad Antisemite, Pharaoh, who enslaved our people and embittered their lives because of his lust for power and his inflated need for glory. Under his lash, Jewish children were brutally murdered, the weak and the elderly were beaten, and the Jew seemed for all the world to be an isolated, miserable victim.

Yet the Torah tells a different tale for those who would slow down and savor its words. Even in the midst of that hellish night of Egyptian brutality, we were not alone.

We were not alone because God was there too. God heard our cry, and God gave us the strength and courage to reach for freedom of body and spirit. But God was not our only ally.

We were not alone because there were Egyptians of conscience who stood with us even in our weakness. The Torah tells us that after our ancestors made unleavened bread in a rush to leave, they “requested from the Egyptians silver vessels, gold vessels, and garments. God gave the people favor in the eyes of the Egyptians, and they granted their request (Ex 12:35-36).” Would our ancestors have approached Antisemites and brutes? No, surely there must have been brave and sensitive Egyptians who could see the Israelites as their brothers and sisters, despite the official hatred, despite the Pharaoh’s ruthlessness. Ancient Jewish legend has it that the garments the Israelites wore in the 40 years of wandering never wore out. Those garments were the very ones given them by Egyptians willing to stand with the oppressed against the brutality of their own thugs. And their gift kept Israel warm until it reached the Promised Land.

Even more impressive, these Egyptians did not just give the Israelites *things*. Many of them went with the Israelites, linking their destiny in an indivisible oneness: “The children of Israel journeyed... also a mixed multitude went up with them (Ex 12:37,38).” According to the ancient *Midrash Sh’mot Rabbah*, these were the *kasherim sheh-be-Mitzrim*, the kosher among the Egyptians.

There are the kosher among the Americans too. However much we rightfully lament the Jew-haters and bigots alive today, however much we properly bemoan acts of hate and words of discrimination, we need to recall those kosher Americans with whom we stand in common cause. While the assault was against us this time, the President of the United States stood with us. So did communities of different faiths: Catholic, Protestant, Muslim and other religious leadership condemned the crime publicly and immediately. Across ethnic and racial groups, African American, Latino, Arab, Asian and other organizations issued strong statements of support for us and for fighting this moral blight. We need to remember our friends, so that we can get through this terrible time, and so that we can keep our moral compass fixed where it should be: hating evil, pursuing justice, and loving our fellow as ourselves.

That a person could be so vicious, so blind, and so weak as to strike out at children and adults in a nursery center is beyond understanding. We must fight to stop such atrocities. But as much as I grieve and I chafe, I also feel solace from the recognition that the Jewish people are not alone. Our God has not abandoned us; neither have the kosher Americans.

Together, we will fight this fight. And, with God’s help, we shall triumph.

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