

If you've heard this poem from the pulpit already, I apologize – not for repeating it, but for the fact that it needs to be repeated.

The Diameter of the Bomb, by Yehuda Amichai

The diameter of the bomb was thirty centimeters  
and the diameter of its effective range about seven meters,  
with four dead and eleven wounded.

And around these, in a larger circle  
of pain and time, two hospitals are scattered  
and one graveyard. But the young woman  
who was buried in the city she came from,  
at a distance of more than a hundred kilometers,  
enlarges the circle considerably,  
and the solitary man mourning her death  
at the distant shores of a country far across the sea  
includes the entire world in the circle.

And I won't even mention the crying of orphans  
that reaches up to the throne of God and  
beyond, making  
a circle with no end and no God.

Rashi at the beginning of this week's parsha says that the departure of righteous people from a place leaves an impression, and changes that place irreversibly, taking away its splendor and its shine. That happened last week in multiple places in a big city in India, and as Amichai suggests, it rippled out to leave an imprint on the world. It was and continues to be an event that frightens us about the possibilities of violence in this world and compromises our sense of safety as people. When 10 men kill 200, it is a moment of fear and trembling.

Although this was a universal tragedy, I want to focus on the impact on the Jewish community and the deaths of Rabbi Gabi and Rivki Holzberg – in part because they have become the most real victims for me. We had many mutual connections, and I related to them as people committed to service and to the Jewish community.

And they were my age.

I know each of us was affected by the tragedy in different ways, and we came together to mourn as a community earlier this week, and I want to talk about one thing I am trying to raise from the ashes and the rubble of this hateful, violent series of attacks.

Two days ago, Thursday night, December 4<sup>th</sup>, we began to say v'ten tal umatar livrakhah, give us dew and rain for blessing, in our Shemoneh Esrei, a prayer for rain. Why do we start this prayer on December 4<sup>th</sup>? That is a story in itself, of astronomy and calendars, but in short, we pray for rain according to the rainy season of Babylonia in the time of the Talmud.

Now you may say to me, "but we don't live in Babylonia in the time of the Talmud!", and I won't disagree with you! Even more, I'll tell you that you're in good company. The Rosh, one of the great medieval halakhists who traveled through Germany, France, and Spain in his life, also noticed that those places needed rain well before December, and they needed it long after Pesah, when the Talmud legislates that we stop saying v'ten tal umatar. He made compelling textual and legal arguments why the tefillah should be said in concert with the rainy seasons of every region on its own, and not simply follow the custom of Babylonia where few Jews even live altogether. I agree with those arguments myself. But so far the Rosh and I have been overruled by the popular vote, and the tendency not to change our liturgical calendar, and so we began v'ten tal umatar this week and we will end on Pesah.

There's something critical to keeping our prayers in step with the 5<sup>th</sup> century Babylonian rainy season, though, and I think we have to understand it.

When we stop for a second and think about the fact that the reason we are saying v'ten tal umatar now is because that's when they needed rain 1700 years ago and 7000 miles away, we remember how bound up we are with Jews of different places and different times. Our lives today were shaped by the Jews of Babylonia of nearly 2000 years ago. Their Talmudic debates and the rich culture they lived and transmitted basically birthed who we are today, what our Bayit is, and what we do in it and the Jewish lives we lead in our own homes and on the street. More than many other liturgies, almost because of the near absurdity of following the weather of modern Iraq, v'ten tal umatar reminds us that who we are is inextricably linked to Jews across the globe and across history.

Now return with me to another group of Jews halfway around the world – those of Mumbai. They are reexamining their communal infrastructure and asking hard questions, this week, as the NYT reported:

"Many Jewish institutions have remained closed this week as a security precaution. Jewish leaders said they might have to begin restricting access to synagogues and community centers... "After being used to living fearless for so long we are going through a phase where we are debating with ourselves about being careful and whether we need to change our mode of existence."" (Jews of Mumbai, a Tiny and Eclectic Group, Suddenly Reconsider Their Serene Existence. By JEREMY KAHN, Published: December 2, 2008, NYT)

If we take the meaning of v'ten tal umatar to heart, it means we are connected to this loss. Our lives are bound up with the lives of Jews halfway around the world, the Jews who died and the Jews who lived, and now are asking whether they need to live differently, in fear. That does, and that must affect us.

And we lost in this catastrophe two people who really understood what it means to be inextricably connected to Jews halfway around the world – R Gabi and Rivki Holtzberg, who gave their lives to go serve Jews whom they never met and whose world they had never imagined.

Among the torrent of words that poured out over the Internet and at memorials this week describing Rivki and Gabi, I want to share a few from friends of mine who spent time with them in India:

"Gabi and Rivki understood how to make people feel known. It is simply not enough to say that they lived the Jewish value of Hachnasat Orachim, of welcoming guests into their home. They did more than offer a place to stay and a meal to eat... They not only saw the Godliness in others, they embodied the idea that everyone was created B'Tzelem Elohim, in the image of God.

"What makes Gabi and Rivki all the more inspiring is that they were able to do this within the context of one of the most chaotic and inefficient cities in the world... no matter what they had been told before they left,

nothing could have truly prepared them for what awaited them the first time they touched down in Bombay. It has been written that Gabi and Rivki made sacrifices. That they left the comforts of home in order to help other Jews continue on a Jewish journey of their own. They did this by creating, from nothing and in the epicenter of the craziness of Bombay, a space that was safe and comfortable for everyone who walked through the doors." (Reuben Posner)

"I remember asking Gabi if he was afraid of potential terror threats. Although his demeanor was so sweet and gentle, Gabi was also very strong-minded and determined. He told me simply and sharply that if the terrorists were to come, "be my guest, because I'm not leaving this place." Both he and Rivky believed that their mission in Mumbai was far greater than any potential terror threats." (Hillary Lewin)

What's left for us to do, then, I believe, is to take to heart that in a global age, when terrorism is not an act of war between countries but a more complex action which raises real questions about evil, responsibility, and binds us together as human beings across the globe, that we hear the message of v'ten tal umatar. Our fate is tied up – always – with the fates of different people in very different circumstances and places. This is true for every victim of this terrible tragedy, Jewish or otherwise, and it feels especially true to me for R Gabi and Rivki, people who lived out that message. We offered this prayer just a few minutes ago as we do every Shabbat, for אחינו ואחיותינו עם ישראל בכל מקום שהם, for our brothers and sisters, the Jewish people, everywhere they are, among כל יושבי תבל, among all people of the world. We have to really feel that connection of Jewish siblinghood and of universal citizenship.

As we pray in the coming months for rain – a sustaining, nourishing element in this world, and that it be for blessing – livrakhah, let's also feel and strengthen our connection to people around the globe and to our Jewish siblings around the world – whether it be by opening our homes to travelers here, visiting communities around the world, opening the newspaper to the international section, or simply learning more about people around the world and connecting to them in whatever means possible. In this way the memories of those who died, and our own lives in a global community, can, too, be Livrakhah – for blessing.