

From Har Nof to Har Shalom, Terrorism Affects Us All
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Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom, Potomac, MD

The screensaver on my office computer is a picture I found on the internet of a titled green Israeli street sign with the words “Har Shalom,” along with a big white arrow pointing down the street. I have yet to locate that exact street sign, but I know it is somewhere in the vicinity of B’nai Brak, a town you probably recognize from the Passover Haggadah, where the five famous rabbis were conducting an all-night seder that was interrupted by their students telling them the time had come to recite the morning prayers. Har Shalom is a neighborhood within B’nai Brak, just east of Tel Aviv, and every time I turn on my computer I feel that our Har Shalom and that Har Shalom are connected, at least in cyber space. My screen saver is but one of the many ways that Israel is a part of my daily consciousness. Har Shalom, the one in Bnai Brak, is about an hour from Har Nof. And besides sharing the same first word, *Har*, both are bastions of fervent religiosity. Har Nof, the Jerusalem neighborhood, is the epicenter of the latest terrorist massacre, in of all places a synagogue, where four rabbis and a Druze police officer were murdered by Palestinian terrorists bearing meat cleavers, knives, and pistols. The images of this attack are so gruesome I have wondered about the casualness with which they have been shared on Facebook and other media. I’ll never get out of my head those pictures of blood stained siddurim and tzitzit, and lifeless, tefillin-strapped arms. A few days ago, a congregant who is currently out of town called me with an urgent message. I was in another part of the building and Leslie, my assistant, tracked me down to take the call. The congregant said, “I am calling to offer you my condolences.” “Your condolences... Why?” I asked. “Because four of the five men who were so brutally attacked were rabbis, and as a rabbi, you must feel a sense of loss too.” To tell you the truth, I hadn’t thought of it quite that way, until he mentioned it. Now I can’t help but feel that sense of kinship when fellow religious leaders are martyred.

I found out about the attack on the Kehilat B’nai Torah synagogue in Har Nof after taking a red-eye flight from a wedding California last Tuesday. My plane from San Diego landed in Atlanta at 5:00 in the morning. The airport was pretty desolate; the newspaper shops and souvenir stores still hadn’t opened. But my bleary eyes focused on the massive flat screen TV’s throughout the terminal. The volume was tuned louder than it needed to be, since the corridors were so empty. The first thing I heard upon stepping off the jet bridge was a CNN reporter’s voice describing a vicious attack at a Jerusalem synagogue. After watching the report, the images, the statements by Mark Regev and others, I felt the urge to rifle through my suitcase to find my tallit and tefillin. I had already justified to myself that I wasn’t going to davven until I got home, around 10:00 that morning. After all, though technically morning, it was still quite dark outside, and I was far from fully awake. But after viewing the savagery of those attacks, my visceral act of solidarity was to don my tallis and tefillin right there in Concourse-T of the Atlanta-Hartsfield International Airport. The rabbis who were killed had little in common with me. They are ultra-Orthodox, black hat, yeshiva *rebbe*s. I am an American, congregational, Conservative rabbi. Their views of Torah, Israel, gender, modernity, are undoubtedly different from mine. But none of that matters. They were Jews; *am echad im leiv echad*; we are one people with one heart, and when there is a loss among the Jewish people it affects all of the Jewish people, pure and simple.

The truth is that this attack made no objective sense whatsoever. Har Nof is not a settlement. It is not contested or disputed territory. It is completely within the western part of the City of Jerusalem, and is not a place that would ever change hands as part of any kind of peace negotiation. Not only that, but the

population, like that in the Har Shalom neighborhood of B'nai Brak, is totally homogeneous...it is a monolithic, ultra-Orthodox community, where wearing any color clothing other than black or white would make you stand out like a neon sign. What makes the attack there so inexplicable and absurd is that the ultra-Orthodox community is the *least* Zionistic Jewish community in Israel. Until very recently, the members of this community did not serve in any capacity in the Israeli Army, and from a fundamental theological point of view they do not endorse the existence of a modern, secular Jewish state. Rather they believe the third Jewish commonwealth can only be established by the Messiah himself. As targets of Palestinian terrorism and violence, this particular population makes no sense! Recent Palestinian propaganda suggested that religious Jews were planning a take-over of the Temple Mount, wresting control of that sacred site from its current Muslim authority and placing it under exclusive Jewish auspices. But even if that false rumor were true, it wouldn't be *these Jews*. *These Jews* in Har Nof would never come near the Temple Mount. *These Jews* teach that because of our state of ritual impurity, setting foot on the place where the Temple once stood would be a transgression of that holy space. So *these Jews* would not be part of any conspiracy to overtake that space. If there are any Jews that the Palestinian militants should like it's *these Jews*!

But that's exactly the point. As Yishai Schwartz so convincingly wrote in the *New Republic* this week,¹ this attack was not about politics; it was not about religion. It was about one thing and one thing only: Hatred...and the maniacal desire to shed Jewish blood. The two Palestinian cousins who collaborated in these grisly murders did not make any distinctions between ideological factions or political inclinations; they didn't care if they were Zionists or anti-Zionists, if they were soldiers or civilians, religious Jews or secular Jews. The only thing that mattered is that they were **Jews**, and those terrorists woke up that morning with the exclusive goal of shedding Jewish blood. Hatred is, beyond anything else, the powder keg of the region. I felt a surge of nausea as I watched the footage on the streets of Jabel Mukaber, the east Jerusalem neighborhood where Palestinians danced and sang, holding axes in the air and photos of the attackers; where they passed out candies and cake to passersby as they celebrated the meat cleaver attack on the Har Nof synagogue just minutes away. How deep and primal is the hatred that can cause someone to celebrate such barbaric, sadistic crimes? It is a hatred that starts at the very top of Palestinian society, whether Hamas leaders who regularly call for the murder of Jews, to President Mahmoud Abbas in the West Bank who recently called for a holy war against "Jewish contamination of the Temple Mount,"² to the very textbooks used in Palestinian classrooms that are laced with the most reprehensible depictions of Jews and Israelis, and accomplish more poisoning and indoctrinating than educating. The saturation of hatred among Arabs for Jews makes the prospects of a meaningful, lasting peace seem so remote and increasingly improbable.

In the midst of this uncertainty, I turn to the Torah for guidance and perspective. We read this week of another primordial conflict. Rebekkah feels the impending struggle even while her children are still in the womb. *They don't even wait to be born to start quarreling!* Esau emerges first, ragtag, hairy, ruddy; holding onto his heel, Jacob emerges second.³ The great 19th Century promoter of Religious Zionism, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Ha'Kohen Kook wrote: "Esau represents the raw, base forces in this world. His reddish complexion indicated the violent, brutal nature of his personality." But listen to this stunning

¹ Yishai Schwarz, "Politics Can't Explain the Israeli Synagogue Attack. Only Hatred Can." *New Republic*, November 18, 2014

² *Ibid*

³ Genesis 25:25-26

statement: “Jacob did not prevent Esau from coming into the world: after all, the world needs Esau and his raw power. Rather, Jacob held on to Esau’s heel, hold in him back. The name Jacob refers to this aspect of restraint, reining in the fierce forces.”⁴ And so it was written: Jacob, Israel, is the force for restraint in the world. It seems that the destiny of Jacob’s descendants is to restrain Esau’s descendants! And it seems like, more often than not, Israel is the battleground where that perpetual struggle is played out. I have my fears about how long the Jewish people can assume this role of restraint. Already there has been vigilantism, and destructive outbursts as the pressure cooker of the situation continues to increase. God forbid that we should ever match the hatred and viciousness that is directed against us. God willing, the reconciliation that eventually occurs between Jacob and Esau will be the culmination of our painful journey with the Palestinians and Arabs, sooner rather than later. Jacob and Esau never become best friends, or the closest, most adoring brothers. But they do manage to bury the hatchet, and live lives that no longer involve threatening or menacing one another. Please God, may that be our blessing.

The day after the massacre at Kehilat B’nai Torah synagogue in Har Nof; the very next morning, after the carnage had been mopped up, the synagogue was brimming with men, women, and children. Shula and Dov Sorotzkin were there pushing a stroller carrying their newborn baby. That morning, they celebrated the baby’s bris in that very synagogue that 24-hours earlier was a crime scene. The baby’s grandfather said that morning, “We are doing what the Jewish people have done throughout history; every time there has been death and destruction, we keep moving and creating.”⁵ May the bris and naming of this little child, who was named Eliyahu Me’ir; Eliyahu being the name of the prophet who will announce the ultimate redemption of the Jewish people, and Me’ir coming from the word meaning illumination and light indeed be a harbinger for better days to come, when hatred gives way to understanding, and bloodshed to peace.

⁴ Morrison, Chanan. *Gold from the Land of Israel*, A new light on the weekly Torah portion from the writings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook, *Parashat Toldot*, pp. 58-59.

⁵ Silverman, Anav. “Day after deadly attack, family holds brit at synagogue,” Ynetnews.com, November 20, 2014.