

Aharei Mot-Kedoshim 5773

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One of my Facebook friends, who is actually a dear friend, not just an electronic friend, posted yesterday: “Have we ever wished more for Shabbat?” After a week like the one we’ve endured, Shabbat is a more welcome gift than ever. And if you wonder about Sabbath observers like me who turn off all television and internet connections for 24 hours, perhaps now you see the wisdom of taking a brief respite from a deeply unnerving news cycle...the Boston Marathon bombings and the manhunt for suspects, the Senate’s rejection of a bipartisan bill on background checks for gun purchasers, the Berkeley student body voting to divest the university from Israel, poison laced envelopes sent to a U.S. senator and the president, the massive explosion in Texas in a town Sari and I drove through regularly when taking our kids to summer camp...our cup runneth over! Dayeinu! How much more can we take??

Yet, it never ceases to amaze me that in the midst of chaos like what we have witnessed this week we get perhaps the clearest picture of humanity; the most unvarnished, salient examples of human nature. On the one hand, we humans are incredibly dangerous creatures. We have destroyed more of our own kind than any other animal species in the world! The Talmud records that for two and a half years the iconic schools of Hillel and Shammai debated the question of whether it would have been better if humans were not created at all! Hillel expressed the opinion that it is a good thing we were created, while Shammai held the view that it would have been better had we not been. And after exhaustive debate, these two opposing camps actually managed to reach a consensus...They agreed that it would have been better had human beings not been created at all! It’s a shocking, unsettling compromise...but one that was invariably reached because to be human is to witness an inordinate amount of suffering in the world. And to be subjected to a great deal of suffering as well! The Torah acknowledges in the wake of the very first homicide, following Cain’s murder of Abel...Sin crouches at the door, its urge is to dominate us. So many people are unable to master or conquer those unhealthy urges. Like the attackers at the Boston Marathon...what possesses people to commit such acts of savagery? How can a person be so barbaric; so coldblooded? Events like this can make you question the whole human race! Some of you may be familiar with the custom on Purim to drink intoxicating beverages...to drink enough that you can’t tell the difference between Mordecai—the hero, the

good guy, and Haman—the villain, bad guy in the story. One powerful explanation for this very bizarre custom is to remind us that the distance between Mordecai and Haman is much less than we might like to admit; That we humans walk a fine line between decency, and outright cruelty, and if we're not extremely careful we could very well end up on the wrong side of that fine line.

But that's not all our tradition says about human nature. Psalm 8:5 describes human beings as "little less than angels." If we are just below angels in the hierarchy of the universe, then it's hard to make the case that we shouldn't exist at all. And I believe that it is precisely those angelic people, those people who exude such overwhelming goodness that tip the cosmic scales in favor of all the rest of us. I thought about this upon seeing what I think was the first image to be blasted around the world after the Boston Marathon bombings. It is a picture of a guy with long curly hair beneath a cowboy hat running alongside a badly injured victim of the bombing. The injuries were so severe in fact, that they were intentionally blurred so people couldn't see them in all their gruesome detail. It turns out that the man in the cowboy hat is himself no stranger to grief or catastrophe. Carlos Arredondo was seated in the VIP section near the marathon finish line to greet a group of National Guard runners. One of those guardsmen was running in memory of Carlos' son, a Marine who lost his life in Iraq. When the bomb blast went off, and people began running in all directions, Carlos ran in one direction—toward the scene...toward the injured...toward the hurt and maimed. While others were running for their lives, Carlos was running to save other people's lives. He broke through the snow fence and scaffolding that separated him from the street and began wrapping the wounds of the injured with his own clothing. His hands covered with blood, he steered the wheelchair of the gravely injured 27 year old Jeff Bauman who ended up losing both of his legs below the knees, but likely survived the blast because of the hero in the cowboy hat, as Carlos Arredondo is now being called.

There is a famous question in the Mishnah that asks: Who is strong? Who is a hero? *Aizeh hu gibbor?* The answer: *Ha'koveish et yitzro*...a hero, a truly strong person is someone who is strong enough to conquer their urges. Prior to the events of this week, I always read that Mishnah on a much different scale. I conquered my urge to eat another rpiece of chocolate cake! Heroic! I conquered my urge to gossip, to hit send on the scathing email I'd like to send, to not exercise...whatever. If I can be stronger than those inclinations, then I'm a hero. But Carlos

Arredondo provides a whole new twist on the meaning of this Mishnah. The urge, the inclination, the impulse when a bomb goes off, when something perilous occurs around us is to run as fast as you can...in the other direction. To get away! To save your life! But the hero's urge is to run towards the needy, the hurt, the injured, the infirm. It's interesting there is some debate in Jewish law about what to do in a situation like this...The Jerusalem Talmud teaches that one who is in *possible* danger must act to save another who is in *certain* danger. The Babylonian Talmud does not, however, preserve this teaching, and it is not at all clear that there was consensus among the Sages about what one is obligated to do in such life threatening situations. But Carlos did not stop to weigh the options or consider the consequences...and he did not succumb to fear or to the instinct to run away. And this act of courageousness and kindness is what makes him and everyone else who risked their own lives to run into the bloody scene of that attack, a true hero...and what restores confidence in humanity for me, and hopefully for you too. This all comes on the heels of the parasha which declares: *lo ta'amod al dam rei'echa*—you must not stand and do nothing as your neighbor bleeds. Carlos Arredondo fulfilled that mitzvah as well as anyone ever has. He and the many other regular people—not necessarily trained and certainly not motivated by fame or notoriety—who give us reason to believe that human beings while having the capacity to be so wildly destructive, also have within us the capacity to demonstrate incredible love, and courage, and selflessness. Thank God for people like that. Thank God for heroes in cowboy hats.

The Talmud teaches that just as we bless God for all the good things that happen to us, so too we are obligated to bless God for the bad things that occur. Now it's hard to imagine saying a blessing for some of the egregious things that have happened in this past week. But remember, a blessing is not always a statement of gratitude. A blessing, a *beracha*, more than anything, is an exclamation that God is present in this moment; that even in suffering and sorrow it is possible to detect holiness. Friends, in the midst of the chaos, the fear, the violence that we have witnessed in these past days, there have also been moments of undeniable holiness. Moments that have made regular human beings into heroes—like the hero in the cowboy hat. Even as we pray that peace come speedily to us and to all the world, we still bless God for creating people with the capacity not only to rescue themselves in times of terror, but to save others as well. Because of those holy deeds committed by holy people who are little less than angels, the rest of us can

salvage a remnant of faith in humanity, and maybe even have the courage to say that it was a good idea after all that human beings were created.