

Lessons in the Wake of Colleyville

Parashat Yitro

Rabbi Carl M. Perkins

Temple Aliyah

Needham, MA

January 22, 2022

“Layehudim haytah orah v’simchah v’sasson vikar” -- ken tihyeh lanu”

“And the Jews had light and joy and gladness and honor” (Esther 8:16)

So may it be for us!”

(A passage customarily recited responsively
before the Havdalah blessings at the conclusion of Shabbat.)

This is not an easy Shabbat on which to speak. Just last Shabbat, as we all know, a rabbi and three congregants in a shul in Colleyville, Texas, were held hostage at gunpoint for eleven hours.

As we also all know, it could have ended very badly. As it was, it ended with all of the hostages safe and sound, and with the gunman dead.

I’m sure that many of us followed the news of this, if not in real time, then, as I did, as Shabbat came to a close that evening.

What lessons does our tradition -- in particular, this week’s *parashah* -- have to teach us at this time?

I. The highlight of today’s *parashah* is the Giving of the Ten Commandments, which comprises the first half of Exodus chapter 20. But before chapter 20 comes chapter 19, which is filled with *preparations* for the giving of the Torah. Summing up that whole chapter, in a sense, is the famous phrase that Moses shares with the



people, “*v’hayu nechonim*” -- וְהָיוּ נִכְנָיִם -- “Be prepared!” “Be ready!” (Exodus 19:14)

It makes sense: Just as earlier in Exodus (in chapter 12) when the Children of Israel were told that they would soon be freed from slavery, they were told that they had to prepare for the Exodus -- by getting a lamb and setting it aside for four and a half days, and by doing other things, in anticipation of what was to come -- so too here the Israelites are told to “Be Ready!”

A lot of Judaism is about getting ready. What would Pesach be without *getting ready* for Pesach, clearing out the *hametz*, getting our kitchens ready for the holiday? How could we ever celebrate Shabbat the way we’re told to celebrate it in the Torah, by doing all of our preparatory work ahead of time, if we didn’t start preparing for it well in advance?

And so it is with just about everything that matters, such as our own safety. Think about the environment in which we now live: someone can wake up in England, hop on a plane, arrive in the United States, somehow get to Texas, buy a gun on the street and walk into a synagogue intending to threaten the lives of whoever happens to be there to achieve his political objectives.... How can we ever hope to protect ourselves in such an environment unless we **think ahead**, unless we take pains to **be prepared**?

Fortunately, we have made many, many preparations during the past few years. Ever since the massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh toward the end of October 2018 ([11 Killed in Synagogue Massacre; Suspect Charged With 29 Counts - The New York Times](#)) our synagogue has benefited from strong and laser-focused lay leaders who have taken crucial steps to strengthen our security. I’m not going to detail those steps, except to say that they have included hardening our physical structure, in order to make it more resistant to intruders, and educating and training our staff and our lay leadership. Those efforts are not one-offs; they are on-going. That’s the way it has to be when it comes to preparation. As our staff changes; as our lay leadership changes, as the environment changes, we need to bring ourselves up to speed, time and time again.

What happened in Colleyville might have turned out very differently had the staff of that synagogue not received the kind of training they did -- training which was, in essence, the fulfillment of the *mitzvah* to protect ourselves.¹

II. There's another lesson to be learned from what happened last week. Throughout that day -- that very long day during which Rabbi Cytron-Walker, a member of the local clergy association, was being held hostage -- his fellow clergy members held a vigil nearby. Catholic, Christian and Moslem leaders -- and faith leaders from other faith traditions as well -- gathered to pray and support one another.

Rabbi Cytron-Walker was part of a strong network of mutual support among, yes, his fellow clergy, but also law enforcement and the ADL and other Jewish and non-Jewish agencies.

I would like to remind everyone of a fact that we may be oblivious to: On the one hand, from the perspective of Jewish history, what we saw last Shabbat was not surprising: after all, as has occurred many times in the past, Jewish people were targeted; Jewish people were attacked. That is neither surprising nor, sadly, rare.

But the fact that those sworn to uphold the law in the jurisdiction -- the local police, and the FBI -- the fact that they saw their role as protecting Jews under attack, even at risk to their own lives? That is the part that, from the perspective of Jewish history, is truly rare. We must not assume that. We must not pass over that without expressing deep gratitude. It almost never has been the case in the many places in which we Jews have lived.

III. There's a third lesson to be learned from what happened last week.

Last week's incident was a reminder that an important challenge we face is to protect ourselves. But is that our *only* challenge? No. For there is much more on

¹ The mitzvah arises from two verses in Deuteronomy: "Guard yourself and guard your soul very much (Deut. 4:9)" and "You shall guard yourselves very well (Deut. 4:15)." We are taught to take proper precautions, particularly when it comes to protecting our health and safety, and not to rely on miracles.

our agenda. Protecting ourselves may be our challenge, but it is not our mission. We owe it to our identities as Jews to do more than to protect ourselves.

At one point in our parashah, the Israelites find the experience of revelation to be extremely frightening. The lightning, the thunder, the sound of God's voice — it's all too much for them. They've been told that if they see God directly they'll die, and now they're worried that hearing God's voice might have the same consequence. "'You speak to us,' they said to Moses, 'and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die.'"

And how does Moses respond? With the words, "*Al tirau.*" "Don't be afraid." (Exodus 20:17).

Now, what does that mean? After all, let's face it: the easiest way to get someone to be *aware* of their fear is to say, "Don't be afraid." Fear is an emotion! It's a natural emotion! If you're afraid, you're afraid.

So what then is Moses saying? I think he's saying, "Don't allow yourself to be ruled by your fear. Go beyond it." Do you remember the character of Anna Leonowens in *The King and I*? When she was afraid, she whistled a "happy tune," and she found that her will to overcome her fear actually worked.²

It's not as ridiculous as it may sound. Rabbi Cytron-Walker spoke about this in an interview this past week. He spoke about the rabbinic concept of striving to be a non-anxious presence -- a concept that was undoubtedly of help to him last Shabbat.

Yes, we may be afraid, but we must move beyond our fear and not allow it to deter us from gathering, as Jews have gathered for thousands of years, to worship. Just as the Israelites overcame their fear and stayed near the mountain, we must not allow our fear to deter us from gathering at our holy mountain and doing everything else that our religious tradition invites us to do.

² The lyrics of the song include the following: "*The result of this deception; Is very strange to tell; For when I fool the people I fear; I fool myself as well.*"

We have to continue to look out for the stranger, for the marginalized, for the vulnerable. The notion that we have to make a choice, either to protect ourselves or to care about others -- that's a false dichotomy, a false choice. If we don't protect ourselves, of course, we are unnecessarily putting ourselves at risk. We have to do that. But that's not enough. It's not enough to care about our own safety. We have to protect ourselves *in order to fulfill our mission*.

It's customary, before reciting the Havdalah blessings, to recite several verses from the Bible. One of these is, "*And the Jews had light and joy, gladness and honor*" (Esther 8:16). Immediately afterwards, we add, "And so may it be for us!" That verse is a cheerful one. Yet it comes only toward the end of a very dark story. After all, for most of the *megillah*, things look very bad for the Jews. It's only very close to the end that the tide turns.

There's a lesson there. We draw on that verse for its hopeful message -- even though, as we know, there are Hamans still lurking in the world around us. Our eyes are open: we know that antisemitism and other dangers exist. And yet, we need to make space for light and joy.³

At the end of our service this morning, we will recite Adon Olam. The closing words of Adon Olam, the final words we say as a part of our service, have a similar message: "ה' לִי וְלֹא אֶיֶרָא"-- "God is with me, I shall not fear."

"*V'hayu nechonim!*" Let us be prepared -- but let us not allow our fears to rule over us. May we practice our Judaism and find meaning in its teachings. May we seek out and maintain meaningful relationships with those within *and outside of* the Jewish community. And as we do, let's move forward with hope: hope that, one day, "the One who maintains peace in the heavens will bring peace to us, to the entire household of Israel, and to all the inhabitants of the world. And let us say, Amen." Shabbat shalom.

³ Many thanks to Rabbi Barry Dov Katz for this insightful interpretation.