

Violence in Arizona

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There are two kinds of people in the world: those who are inclined to say, "things happen for a reason," and those who believe that various occurrences are random, and have no rhyme or reason.

Regardless of which approach you take, or which camp you are in, even if you subscribe to the notion that things happen for a reason, one thing is certain, and that is: the reason, whatever it may be, may not be clear right away. The root cause may not be readily apparent and difficult to uncover, and it may take a long time to understand its impact and significance.

It takes time to process and comprehend things, to see the bigger picture, all of which requires reflection in order to gain perspective. I think being reasonably intelligent people, we can all agree on this -- unless of course you are a commentator for a cable news network in a 24 hour news cycle. In that case you are required to go on the air with immediate analysis, which may require jumping to conclusions; conclusions which are not necessarily accurate, and are much more indicative of your own perception and reflect the orientation of your segmented audience than of reality.

I say this at the outset because we have yet to know the motivation or motivations behind the Arizona shooter. The more we learn about him and of his background, the more it appears that the perpetrator is mentally unstable. Perhaps we need to focus our attention more on how best to deal with the deranged in our midst, what to do about the easy access they have to firearms, and other such related matters.

We do not yet know if he was poisoned by the vitriolic political debate of the last campaign, or if he was oblivious to it. We do not yet know if this contributed to his pathological view of the world. We do not yet know if access to hateful things on the internet or anti-Semitism played a part in what he did.

So instead let us focus on what we do know.

We do know that a young 9 year old girl is dead in the tragic aftermath of the violence, that a federal judge was killed, that a promising young Congressional staffer is gone, and that other innocent victims lost their lives in a senseless tragedy in which the primary victim was a Congresswoman.

I know Gabby Giffords, and have met with her on a number of occasions, as recently as a week before the shooting, when she introduced me to her husband. She is everything the press has said about her. She is bright, warm, caring, and intelligent. At a lunch I had with her in the House members' Dining Room about a year ago I recall how nice and friendly and unpretentious she was to everyone, considerate of all, including the waiter serving us. We spoke about a wide range of issues, both political and personal,

including her upbringing, her feelings about Israel and pride in her Jewish identity. She told me how honored she felt to have just been appointed to the US Holocaust Memorial Council. We talked about a speech she was going to be giving at a Hadassah convention the following week.

It is hard to believe that anyone would ever wish her ill or want her dead. Worried about the extreme positions being taken on the contentious issue of immigration, especially as it was playing out in Arizona, she had issued a position paper in which she crafted an extremely reasonable middle ground approach which did not give in to hate while taking into consideration the feelings of all sides. When I dropped her an email in May congratulating her on such a well crafted and reasonable position paper, she wrote back to me, "tough times in Arizona now."

She wrote a campaign statement some of you may have seen and read,

Growing up, my family's Jewish roots and tradition played an important role in shaping my values. The women in my family served as strong role models for me as a girl. In my family, if you want to get something done, you take it to the women relatives! Like my grandmother, I am a lifetime member of Hadassah and now a member of Congregation Chaverim.

When I served in the State Senate in Arizona, I had the opportunity to visit Jerusalem. It was one of the most memorable experiences of my life. I had the opportunity to meet with the then-mayor of Jerusalem, Ehud Olmert, and I got to see firsthand the sacrifices that Israelis make in the name of security because of the dangerous state of affairs there.

I will always be a strong supporter of Israel. As the only functioning democracy in the Middle East, Israel is a vital strategic ally of the United States. I believe the United States must do everything possible to secure Israel's long-term security and achieve a lasting peace in the region.... We cannot forget our past.....As a woman and as a Jew, I will always work to insure that the United States stands with Israel to jointly ensure our mutual safety, security, and prosperity."

We do know that she is a brave and noble woman, we can be proud of. How fortunate we are that people like this choose to dedicate their lives to public service.

So what about those who said that our political campaigns contributed to the carnage in Arizona?

I say it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if it did or did not, if those who say this are right or wrong on this point, because they are absolutely correct about the larger point. And that is, we must find a better way to have our public discourse across the political divide. We must find a way to conduct political campaigns and to express our differences in a way which is not so defiant and so divisive. This is the challenge of living in a democracy, but we must rise to meet the challenge.

All who contribute to this poisoned atmosphere need to step back from the precipice and see this moment as an opportunity for self reflection and evaluation. There has to be a way to debate, even with passion, but with civility.

We Jews have something to contribute to the discussion. Last year both the Jewish Council for Public Affairs and the Rabbinical Assembly adopted resolutions calling for greater civility in public debates. The JCPA resolution is predicated upon the recognition notion that –

“The decline in civility in our community and broader society is a matter of urgent priority that demands we issue a Call for Civility and institute a campaign to address this urgent challenge.” It recognizes that,

“Robust, vigorous debate about the pressing issues of the day is vital and essential in a pluralistic society, including within our diverse Jewish community.

Deep divisions are to be expected over how to address many issues...A frank and civil exchange of ideas helps to inform and distill consensus...

(But) As differences devolve into uncivil acrimony, dignity is diminished and people holding diverse viewpoints cease listening to each other, it becomes more difficult if not impossible to find common ground...

Civility is neither the lack of difference nor the squelching of debate. It is the application of care for the dignity of every human being, even those with whom we may sharply disagree.

It is listening carefully when others speak, not just to understand what they are saying and thinking, but to open ourselves to the possibility that they may have something to teach... As Jews, our shared past, present, and future require that we find ways to work for a common good, toward Klal Yisrael. Each of us has a sacred obligation to heal our broken world. This repair requires that we recognize that the divine is in every one of us.

The resolution calls for mutual respect, shared listening and learning, so that our community can serve as bridge builders to navigate sensitive issues.

The RA resolution reminds us that the Book of Proverbs teaches that “life and death are in the power of the tongue” and that Rabbi Israel Salanter, the 19th century founder of the Musar movement taught, “Be vigilant in protecting the honor of all people, especially those with whom you disagree.”

The Talmud is a model of pluralism and shows how it is possible to respect different opinions and conduct vigorous debate without resorting to abusive language or trying to browbeat an opponent. The House of Hillel and the House of Shammai constantly disagreed on just about everything. And yet the Talmud states, “*Elu ve’elu*, these and these are both *divrei Elohim chayim*, the words of the living God.”

We as a society must treat important issues and ideas as serious questions that require critical thinking of us. Such an approach will engender greater tolerance which in turn will lead to more respectful discussion.

We read in this week's Torah portion of the Israelites' crossing of the Sea of Reeds. As many of us know there is a famous midrash which tells us, that God admonished the people of Israel not to celebrate their victory too much, or to gloat over the vanquished for it came at the cost of the lives of the Egyptians, and they are also children of God.

Less famous is another midrash, which comments on the biblical passage which says that as the Israelites passed through the sea of Reeds, there was a wall, *homa*, on the right, and a wall on the left. Think not of the imagery of Cecile B. DeMille, and the dramatic portrayal in the movie. Instead listen to how our rabbis in the midrash change the vocalization of the wall *homa* slightly to yield a very different spin. It says that rather than read it as *homa*, instead it should be read as *hama* – hatred, and that there was a wall of hatred on the right and hatred on the left. Our sages cautioned that this kind of vitriolic hatred could be combustible and dangerous.

Rabbi Nahman Bratzlav was fond of saying, "*Kol haolam kulo gesher tzar me'od* , all the world is a narrow bridge *ve'haikar lo lefached*, and the main thing is not to be afraid." We should not be afraid to help to build bridges and to serve as that bridge. So let us resolve to do what we can in our personal nature, as well as by our acts to lower the temperature of our debates, to encourage and support those who choose this path and to build bridges.

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