

A Rabbinic Perspective *By Rabbi Seymour Rosenbloom*

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What Is. And What Ought to Be.



As I write this article, the funeral services for Officer Charles Cassidy of the Philadelphia Police Force have concluded. His killer is in custody. And it seems as if we have breathed a sigh of collective relief. He was the city's 339th homicide, on the 304th day of the year.

The funeral itself was remarkable. It was attended by the governor and mayor, and virtually every other community leader. It was broadcast live on television. The procession to the cemetery stopped traffic on every road including the Schuylkill Expressway. It was worthy of a presidential motorcade. Early in the morning, I was going north on Broad Street at Old York Road and an impressive procession of police cars approached me going south, lights flashing silently. As we passed each other, I could make out the names of many different police departments and knew that this was an honor guard of brothers and sisters in blue on their way to the funeral. Ever since Officer Cassidy's shooting on Wednesday, October 31, the city was focused on his death with a rare sense of unity. It was the lead story on every newscast. The search for his killer involved a manhunt of proportions rarely seen.

Officer Cassidy was shot just a mile south of AJ, at a Dunkin' Donuts shop where, doubtless, many of us have stopped for a cup of coffee on our way into the city or across town. I know I have stopped there many times, as I did the day after the funeral when the shop reopened. The memorial of spontaneous offerings was still in the parking lot, but everything inside had returned to normal.

So a number of thoughts linger in my mind. Why did this shooting capture our attention as none other that I can recall? What have we learned from it? Have things, indeed, returned to normal? And is that a good thing?

I think we were focused on this murder for many reasons. It was so public. In a public place. Where any one of us could have been. And it was caught on tape. We could see the images over and over again. (As an aside, with the ubiquitous presence of surveillance cameras, and knowing the high quality of even the most inexpensive cameras that you and I can buy, it continues to amaze me that the images taken from these cameras are so poor and virtually indecipherable. It would seem that it should not take much to get better quality images and resolution.)

But I think that the most important reason that this murder caught our attention was that we are appalled

at the out-of-control homicide rate in Philadelphia. Day after day the news leads with another round of senseless shootings, and at least one murder. We are weary of it. And when a dedicated policeman is gunned down it seems to be the ultimate societal indignity. Enough, we shout out. This has to stop. It is not only the officer's death.

It is the slow death of a community that we are witnessing. And his death punctuates it for us and focuses on the broader community issues.

So have we learned anything from it? Like the Dunkin' Donuts shop in its reopening, have we simply moved on? I hate to say it, but it seems like we have.

I, for one, am tired of politicians and leaders who bemoan the out-of-control murders in Philadelphia but are too timid to push for strong gun control laws. Gun violence accounts for almost 90% of the murders in Philadelphia, and still the apologists for the gun lobby insist that guns are not the problem. School shootings, workplace murders, now a policeman — will anything arouse our community outrage significantly to ban handguns? And will anything less curb the violence?

And then there is the murderer. John "Jordan" Lewis. Twenty-one years old. His life is over before it has a chance to begin. Perhaps it was already over before he pulled the trigger. We can pontificate all we want about individual responsibility and right and wrong, but this man appears to be such a lost soul. A desperate individual with no hope and no future. And in an act of senseless stupidity and fear, he took a good and noble life, unlike any he could ever aspire to.

Perhaps the saddest thing about this incident is that it points out to us what historian Hannah Arendt called "the banality of evil." Most evil acts are not perpetrated by people who are evil to the core, but by ordinary people whom circumstance, misfortune, and bad judgment have put in the wrong place at the wrong time with tragic consequence.

What will we do as a community to mitigate the chance that other young desperate boys will become the next John "Jordan" Lewis? Whatever it is, I think we all know that we are not doing enough. We are a society that is content to go about our business, thinking that "they" are far away from us.

And so we do go back to our routine lives. The governor goes back to Harrisburg. The mayor goes back to City Hall. We go back to buying our daily cup of coffee.

And the city continues to writhe and seethe. The day Officer Cassidy was buried, an oil repairman making a house call to fix a broken furnace was shot and killed in North Philadelphia. A gunman who robbed a grocery market was shot and killed by an accomplice. These murders didn't make it to the front page. They were on page 4 of the second section of *The Inquirer*. Just "normal" murders in the city of brotherly love.

Transforming our urban landscape from one of carnage to one of peace is no easy task, I know. There are political, economic, sociological, and cultural issues. We desperately need leaders unafraid to do more than orate about ending the violence; unafraid to do more than wring their hands when a murder is committed; unafraid to do more than apprehend the killer; unafraid to do more than sit in a pew while a good man is carried out in a casket.

It requires a citizenry that is concerned, not only about their own individual lives, but about the life of the community. It requires a sense that what happens anywhere in our region, no matter what municipality we live in, happens to us all. Sometimes we think that North Philadelphia is as far away as Afghanistan and of little consequence to us. As long as we can move far away to where we think it is "safe." But in taking that attitude, we turn our back on our brothers and sisters in need, we betray our lack of civic duty, and we delude ourselves. We fiddle while Philadelphia burns. But the fetid odor of the smoke is unmistakable.

Has anything changed? I fear not.

Should anything change? How can it not?

Can we traverse the chasm that separates what is from what ought to be?

This lingering question is the legacy of Officer Cassidy's murder. The answer will tell us if it was just a punctuation mark in the endless march of slaughter, or the beginning of a new direction of community resolve and concern.

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