

Rabbi responds to Charleston Massacre

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“God Bless America!” In these times especially we implore: “God Bless America.” How we need your blessings, O God. How we long for your presence, your grace, your forbearance, in the face of the horrific massacre in Charleston.

In Your house O God, in your own house the Emanuel AME Church, the murder of your faithful, quakes the very pillars on which our nation stands. Nine citizens of the United States of America gathered to exercise their constitutional right to free expression of their religion, executed, not by some young outlier from our culture, but from the learned hatred endemic in American society. We cannot afford to sweep this under the carpet like we have the white gunman in the Colorado movie theatre, or the white gunman who murdered the Sandy Hook school children. We dare not pigeonhole these murders as the random acts of a crazed loner.

The racist ideas that filled Dylann Roof’s head did not come from random thoughts – one is not born a racist. Racism is a bred response. Roof’s actions reflect his environment. They reflect the Confederate battle flag that hangs outside of South Carolina’s Capital. They reflect the actions of the white policeman who gunned down an unarmed black man running away from him in South Carolina, just weeks ago.

That is not to say that Dylann Roof is not accountable for his heinous actions. The courts will undoubtedly rule swiftly on his guilt. Nonetheless, we have an accounting to make as well. Twentieth Century theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel reminds us that: “few are guilty, but all are responsible.”

The mass shooting at the historic Emanuel AME Church, comes after a year of turmoil and protests over race relations, policing, and criminal justice across America. Up until now that unrest has been punctuated by a series of police killings of unarmed black men sparking a renewed vigor in the civil rights movement under the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter.

Clayborne Carson, founding director of the Martin Luther King Jr Research and Education Institute at Stanford University framed the Charleston violence: "The reality [is] that racism is alive and well and that we have a problem with guns. People will throw up their hands and say 'how terrible' ... and then will get back to passing more laws that allow people to carry guns."

Ecclesiastes teaches:

“For everything there is a season...

A time to be born and a time to die...

A time to keep silence and a time to speak...”

Nine citizens of the United States of America executed, citizens participating in the constitutionally protected right to freely express their religion, gunned down in the service of God, and before the

stunned hearts of America. It was not their season to die. Another United States Citizen, not some foreign terrorist, but a 21 year old, soft spoken, white man, sat in bible study and prayer with them for about an hour before he took out his gun and began shooting, reloading time after time.

Today their relatives in mourning rightfully bemoan: “It was not their time to die, not their time.” God bless America, how we wish we could wash over the pain with bucolic mountainsides and sandy beach shores. How we wish that post card of America was not marred by the racist actions of Dylann Roof. How we long for an America that elevates God’s blessings over man’s curses.

“There is a time to keep silence and a time to speak.” Do not heed the voices isolating the perpetrator, making him sound like a freak of nature, rather than a product of American culture. The mayor and governor of South Carolina have been beating that drum this week, while they desperately try to console and heal their City and State.

Charleston’s Mayor Joseph Riley said in an interview with TIME: “Whether he was a terrorist and exactly how you define a terrorist, I don’t know,” he says. “I put him more in the [category] of the shooter of the children in Connecticut, the shooter in the movie theater—they’re deranged people.”

“The takeaway, Riley says, isn’t about racial hatred as much as it is about the easy availability of guns. “This guy that obviously wasn’t 100% emotionally stable could get a gun as easily as he could buy a diet beverage. I think this raises that same alarm bell that our country just hasn’t been able to deal with.” He also pointed out that Roof grew up over 100 miles outside of Charleston, noting that this “wasn’t something that emanated from the civic culture of this city.”

While Riley is right on point about the availability of guns and their link to violence, he misses a real opportunity when he denies the racism endemic to his city, to every American city.

None of us want to believe that the civic culture of our city could produce a Dylann Riley. Even in the town where he grew up they deny that he could have learned racism in their back yard. In Mr. Bunky’s Market across from Roof’s father’s home, Preston Rivers Jr., a 68-year-old bricklayer who is black, said even during segregation black and white children got along

“They came to our house to eat and we went to their houses to eat,” he said. “We didn’t have a problem. We hunted together, fished, no problems. Manager [of the store] Kim Fleming, who is white, said most of the people near the store are black, and she never felt any racial tension. “His issues were his issues only,” she said of the alleged shooter. “I don’t see [racial tension] in this community.”

No, not in my back yard – no racial tension here. I have lots of black friends. We hosted an African American Church in our Temple for three years. I sit on the Triangle Martin Luther King Jr. Committee and am committed with the MLK Committee to spreading King’s message of economic justice and civil rights, not just on the MLK Commemoration holiday, but day in and day out.

And I also have a grandmother who was a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Daughters of the American Confederacy. My grandfather’s family owned farm land in Mississippi before the Civil War. My grandmother has letters written to her grandmother from a Confederate soldier fighting in the war.

“There is a time to be silent and a time to speak.” As much as I work for Civil Rights, as much as my life and my rabbinate have been influenced by outrage at the racist and classist effects of American society, I cannot be silent about my own part in that society. I cannot deny that I have never lived nor

worked in a racist free community. And yet, I have never spoken about the racist culture that so surely had to be tied to that plantation my ancestors owned in Mississippi.

If we are to have a true conversation about racism, we cannot be silent about our own country, community or family. We have to own that we live in a country that has harbored and nurtured racists for all of its existence. We have to admit out loud that we, each one of us, have our own prejudices that plague us.

We must have these conversations both intra and inter communally. We dare not pretend that the racism all around us does not exist, just because the Emanuel Church murderer grew up across the street from a country store that employed blacks and whites.

We have to have these conversations, and we have to act in ways that work to curb the gun violence that pervades America like no other civilized nation. “If guns were outlawed only outlaws would have guns,” they say. And if reasonable restrictions were put on gun ownership, there would still be unreasonable people who found a way to get a gun – but statistics in nations around the world prove there would be a lot less gun violence in America, if we strengthened our laws on who can own guns.

We cannot be silent in the face of repeated fire arm massacres in the United States of America. How many more have to die before their time? How many more will not see the next season, because we did not demand change?

“God bless America, land that I love, stand beside us, and guide us.” If we truly love the America that we ask God to bless, then we must seize this moment to speak up and to speak out. To assure that along with God’s blessing it will be our voices and our actions that transform the racism and violence of our nation.