

Dear Friends,

I don't have a message about the Parsha this week, or about Pesach. Like so many of you, I have spent this week grieving, and at something of a loss as to how to respond to and absorb the horrifying news from Atlanta. I grieve for the eight people who lost their lives, for their families and friends. My heart is with the Asian American community, for whom this incident comes in the wake of a year in which close to 3,000 anti-Asian hate incidents were reported.

The murderer, as we know by now, told police that he did not choose his victims because they were Asian. However, I'm not sure that what he has to say on the subject actually matters. While the Jewish American experience and the Asian American experience are not identical, Jews of every racial identity know what it is like to be treated like a foreigner and an outsider in our own country. We know the fear and anxiety that come when you see members of your community attacked for who they are. I can only imagine that if, G-d forbid, someone murdered 8 people and six of them just happened to be Jews, my fears would not be calmed by assurances that he claimed didn't seek them out BECAUSE they were Jewish. At the least, I would be worried about the other people who I know are out there who do want to target Jews, who might feel inspired to copy the crime.

So, even if the murderer in Atlanta didn't have a goal of killing Asians for being Asian, or spreading fear in the Asian American community, we know there are others who do have that goal, even if their actions, so far, haven't been so extreme.

There's another reason I don't think the statements of the murderer on this subject matter terribly much. Even if he didn't consciously decide to kill those women solely because of their racial identity, in order to pull the trigger and murder them, he had to be able to see them as something less than human. You can't decide to murder someone if you recognize their full humanity. The fact that that this white man thought it was acceptable to travel to places of business that are staffed by Asian women, in order to commit mass murder, tells us something about how he saw the people working there. I have to believe that it was at least a little easier for him to make the leap to committing mass murder because his intended victims looked different from him, and were members of a group that he, as a white man, could see as other and as foreign.

Of course, there's another dimension to this, which is that this man claimed that

he targeted these women because he did not know how to control his own sexual desires. So it wasn't JUST the women's identity as Asian that made them fair targets in this man's mind, but the fact that he saw them as objects of temptation.

There is a long history of men blaming women for their own sexual misconduct. It's not always as egregious as someone committing murder, or even as bad as when a victim of sexual assault is told that she should have dressed or behaved differently. I'm sad to say that even in the Jewish community, even in the Orthodox community, we often talk in a way that suggests we hold women responsible for men's actions and desires.

Too often, when discussing Orthodox norms of modest dress, women and girls are told that they need to cover up in order to avoid causing their male peers to have sinful thoughts. This rhetoric has become ubiquitous in the Orthodox world, in spite of the fact that the Talmud and later codes of Jewish law never say any such thing, instead placing responsibility on men for avoiding situations that might arouse inappropriate thoughts and desires (the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, my rabbi and teacher, Rabbi Dov Linzer pointed this out in an [op-ed in the New York Times](#) some years ago). And yet, for some reason, in the Orthodox world, instead of talking to men about how to deal with and control their desires, to avoid sinful behavior, instead, we focus on telling women how to dress to prevent men from sinning.

To be sure, there are reasons to encourage and celebrate modesty of dress, as a value for Jewish women as well as men. It can be an expression of humility, of self-respect. It can help us move through the world with dignity. Not least, it can serve as an outward marker of Jewish identity. But when we tell women to dress modestly merely in order to prevent others from sinning, we are sending a clear and unambiguous message, that men are not responsible for their own behavior, and that it is women who are responsible for what men think, feel and do.

When men and women, girls, and boys hear this message, it is very dangerous indeed. It tells them that whatever men do, it is not their fault, and whatever women experience, it is their fault. This is, in fact, the same logic that can lead a man who feels guilt over his own sexual behavior to decide the solution is to murder women.

Whenever tragedy strikes, we have to begin by acknowledging the pain of it, and reaching out to offer support to those more directly affected by it than we are. But then, the next task is to ask ourselves, what can we learn from this? How can we use this experience to improve ourselves and our communities in order to make crimes like this less

likely, less possible in the future?

One thing we can always do is to reject rhetoric that blames women for men's sexual desires, or language that in any way suggests that Asians or members of any ethnic minority don't belong here. It's not always as blatant as a racial slur or telling someone to "go back where you came from." Something seemingly minor, which non-white Americans experience all the time, are questions which presume they are not from here: "Where are you from? No, where are you ORIGINALLY from? I mean, where is your FAMILY from?" People don't ask these questions of white people, unless they have an accent. No matter how innocently intended, this kind of question tells people that America is a country for certain kinds of people who look a certain kind of way, and that anyone who doesn't fit that image doesn't really belong here.

If we can take our grief and outrage over these murders and channel them into changing the way we talk, and the kind of rhetoric we tolerate, we can make a real change in ourselves, the people around us and the culture of our community, a change that will make crimes like the one in Atlanta this week less likely and less possible in our future.

Shabbat Shalom!

Garth Silberstein