

Thoughts on Colleyville

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My colleague and friend Rabbi David Wolkenfeld of Chicago said it best in a tweet at the beginning of this week. “Being a Rabbi means knowing when to pour a cup of tea, and when to throw a chair.” I’ve been thinking about that a great deal as I reflect on this past week’s events. By now, all of us are familiar with the heroism, bravery and intelligence Rabbi Charlie Cytryn Walker displayed during his 11 hour traumatic ordeal. After a week in which we have been inundated with news, with opinions, with phone calls, with security briefings- how should we respond? I’d like to share with you a few somewhat related ideas I’ve been mulling over.

Our parsha begins by telling us that Yitro heard what God did for the Jewish people, and joined them.

וַיִּשְׁמָע יִתְרוֹ כֹּהֵן מִדְיָן חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה אֶת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אֱלֹהִים לְמֹשֶׁה וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַמּוֹ כִּי-הוֹצִיא יְהוָה אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם:

Jethro priest of Midian, Moses’ father-in-law, heard all that God had done for Moses and for Israel His people, how the LORD had brought Israel out from Egypt.

What did Yitro hear? Rashi offers two explanations-

רש"י

וישמע יתרו. מה שמועצה שָׁמַע וּבָא? קְרִיעַת יַם סוּף וּמִלְחָמַת עַמְלֵק:

The splitting of the sea, and the battle against Amalek. The miracles performed for the Jewish people would be enough, I would think, to cause anyone to want to affiliate with us. Nowadays, I meet potential conversion candidates who envy the family life of observant Jews, who want to experience the spiritual and intellectual heritage of observant Jews- so why wouldn't anyone want to experience the miracles that Jews do? But what was it about the battle against the Amalekites that made Yitro want to join us? It was just a military victory, albeit one with some miraculous assistance thrown in. I'd like to suggest that it was his understanding of what the Amalekites were about- pure and unbridled hatred, especially directed against Jews- that sent him in our direction. ***Yitro was the first non-Jew to fight Antisemitism.*** He understood how irrational, dangerous and contagious the oldest hatred is, and he was committed to combat it, even as the rest of the world refused to name it and fight it. The events of this past weekend left many of us, I think, feeling both very supported and extremely alone. We watched with bated breath as the situation unfolded, and breathed tearful sighs of relief when the hostages broke free. The expressions of support and prayer from non-Jews across the political spectrum and spanning all religious traditions were truly touching. But as heartening as it was that so many joined with us in praying for a positive outcome, it was equally infuriating that so many refused to identify what it was: an act of antisemitism at the hands of an Islamic terrorist. Even saying this sentence can cause someone to be labeled an Islamophobe, so let me be clear that I do not consider all Moslems to be terrorists, God forbid. But this was an act of terror with a distinct Islamic motivation, as the terrorist attempted to use it secure the release of one of his most infamous colleagues, Dr.

Aafia Siddiqui. As I'm sure everyone knows, Dr. Siddiqi- "Lady Al Qaeda"- is the subject of an aggressive campaign to secure her freedom, and the organization that is at the forefront of this effort is the Council on American Islamic Relations. It must be said that CAIR *did* condemn the events of Sunday, and that not all Moslems consider CAIR to be their representative organization. But CAIR spokespersons have called Zionist Jews the enemies of human rights, and have said that "We need to pay attention to the Zionist Synagogues ."

Aafia Siddiqui is one of the most infamous architects of acts of terror currently in captivity. In the terrorist world, she is a cause celebre, and her antisemitism is legendary: she unsuccessfully demanded that all jurors in her trial take DNA test to prove they have no Jewish blood. When she was sentenced to 86 years in prison, she turned to the jury and said, "This verdict is coming from Israel, not America." Rabbi Cytryn Walker said that the terrorist repeatedly expressed his belief that Jews control the world, yet another iteration of that conspiracy theory that regularly rears its ugly head, as dangerous as it is irrational. Right now, in the northwest provinces of China, millions of Malik Faisal Akram's fellow Moslems from the Uighur ethnic group are being subjected to an actual, modern-day physical and cultural genocide at the hands of the Chinese government. Yet, when looking for a cause with which to express solidarity, and a target for his deranged, murderous designs, Akram traveled halfway around the world and chose a synagogue, a place where Jews pray, where Jews gather in community, where Jews perform acts of kindness- the very pretext he used to insinuate his way into the premises in the first place.. So when the FBI said that the demands of the terrorist had "nothing to do with the Jewish community" it was false. To say that this had nothing to do with antisemitism is an act of antisemitism itself. And yet, we continue to

allow ourselves to be gaslit by government officials and in media coverage of this incident. We have been told that the FBI freed the hostages, when they freed themselves. Media coverage has called Malik Faisal Akram “The hostage taker,” a euphemism only reserved for those who attack Jews- as if taking hostages is like taking your temperature or taking a census; attacking an Asian salon or a Church or a mosque would justifiably label one a racist terrorist, but somehow that appellation is not granted to those who attack Jews. Yitro joined the Jewish people because he knew which side of history he wanted to be on. It should not be the job of Jews to fight antisemitism; we shouldn’t have to educate others on what *is* and what *isn’t* antisemitic. The sad reality, though, is that we have to, because it is part of our daily lives yet no one really cares all that much about the fear and defiance with which we live. The message of Yitro is that the least we can do is welcome allies of any faith and all political persuasions who will fight with us and for us without trying to change us, in good faith and without ulterior motives.

So I’ve been thinking about how the *world* reacted to this incident- but I’ve also been thinking about how *we* reacted to this incident. In his Torah commentary titled *Ktav Sofer*, Rav Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer of Pressburg offers a fascinating insight. We think of the revelation at Sinai as a moment of mass unity- as our sages tell us,

ויחן שם ישראל. כָּאִישׁ אֶחָד בְּלִב אֶחָד, אָבָל נֶאֱדָר כָּל הַחַיִּימוֹת בְּתַרְעוּמוֹת וּבְמַחֲלָקֹת: וִיחַן שֵׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל

AND THERE ISRAEL ENCAMPED as one man and with one mind — but all their other encampments were made in a murmuring spirit and in a spirit of dissension (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 19:2:10).

The Ktav Sofer pointed out that it defies belief that *every Jew* wanted to accept the Torah. No doubt at least several weren't on board. But they recognized that it was the right thing to do, so they suppressed their misgivings or negativity for the sake of unity- an example I wish some of us had followed. First, it was the report on The Yeshiva World News accusing Rabbi Charlie Cytryn Walker of a lack of faith and belief because he didn't mention God in his facebook post right after he escaped (though he did repeatedly in the service his community ran on Sunday night). Then, it was the extensive discussion about Rabbi Charlie in the aftermath- the news reports that his congregation had voted not to renew his contract and the anonymous congregant who said that the event of Shabbos had "changed nothing." There were the repeated references to Rabbi Cytryn Walker's views on Israel that so many people sent me, as if he therefore deserved to be taken hostage, or was less deserving of his subsequent freedom. Rabbi Cytryn Walker has since then asserted his strong support for Israel, and has denied, on record, stating that Israel is an apartheid state. But even if he did think that, it would be irrelevant. It didn't matter to the terrorist, that's for sure- political and religious viewpoints never do, not in Colleyville or any of the other locations that were the sites of recent terror attacks. They didn't care that Tree of Life is a Conservative congregation, that Chabad of Poway is a chassidic community and that Congregation Beth Israel is a Reform temple. Rabbi Cytron Walker was taken hostage for one reason, and one

reason only: he is a Jew, and that's reason enough to identify with him, to empathize with him, to pray for his family and his community, to praise his heroism and to thank God without qualification and with no asterisk that he emerged safely. Yes, we may have religious differences with our heterodox brethren, and we may have political differences with plenty of other Jews, but the lesson of the unity of receiving the Torah is that if you are *thinking* something wrong or divisive, it might not be the most opportune time to *express* it- now, and maybe not ever. This kind of negativity is not who should be! I am deeply proud of the way this community responded on Saturday, as 210 members of our broader community participated, with just minutes' notice and a mid-course change of channels, in the recitation of Tehillim- and again on Thursday night, in a display of unity, support and solidarity. This *is* who we are. There are times when we need to make tea, and times when we need to throw chairs- and this was a time to make tea.

Finally, a word about security. With a pandemic still raging and now the threat of terror rears its ugly head, shul has become, for some people, a fulfillment of the verse in Parshat Haazinu-

מִחוּץ תִּשְׁכַּל-תָּרֵב וּמִתְּדָרִים אֵימָה

The sword shall deal death without,

As shall the terror within,

All me, therefore, to share one final thought.

The Parsha closes with both a directive and a prohibition.

מִזְבֵּחַ אֲדָמָה תַעֲשֶׂה-לִּי וְזִבְחָתָּ עָלָיו אֶת-עֹלֹתֶיךָ וְאֶת-שְׁלֹמֶיךָ אֶת-צֹאנֶךָ וְאֶת-בְּקָרְךָ בְּכָל-הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אֶזְכִּיר אֶת-שְׁמִי אָבוֹא
אֵלֶיךָ וּבֵרַכְתִּיךָ:

Make for Me an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your sacrifices of well-being, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause My name to be mentioned I will come to you and bless you.

וְאִם-מִזְבֵּחַ אֲבָנִים תַעֲשֶׂה-לִּי לֹא-תִבְנֶנּוּ אֶתֶּנּוּ גִזְיֹת כִּי חֶרֶבְךָ הִנֵּפֶת עָלֶיהָ וְתִחַלְלָהּ:

And if you make for Me an altar of stones, do not build it of hewn stones; for by wielding your tool upon them you have profaned them

The word for tool here is חֶרֶבְךָ, your sword. Why is it prohibited? Wouldn't hewn stone be more elegant and more efficient?

The Mechilta offers several explanations:

ותחללת. הָא לְמִדַּת שְׁאֵם הִנֵּפֶת עָלֶיהָ בְּרִזָּל חִלְלָתָּ. שֶׁהַמִּזְבֵּחַ נִבְרָא לְהַאֲרִיךְ יָמָיו שֶׁל אָדָם וְהַבְרִזָּל נִבְרָא לְקַצֵּר יָמָיו שֶׁל אָדָם, אֵין זֶה בְּדִין שְׁיֻנָּף הַמְקַצֵּר עַל הַמְאֲרִיךְ (מכילתא).

The altar is designed to prolong the life of a person, whereas metal shortens it; the latter cannot be waved over the former. Indeed, this is the same rationale Rabbi Aharon HaKohen of Lunel employs in his work Orchot Chaim when formulating the prohibition of entering a shul sanctuary itself while carrying a weapon. Ideally, this would always be the case; in Israel, IDF soldiers often leave their guns outside when entering a Beit Midrash or a shul. We live in a reality where a professional security presence, a well-trained volunteer security team and

an educated laity are of the essence. We need to be well-versed in the kind of protocols that saved Rabbi Cytryn Walker and his fellow hostages. But if we are concerned about *physical* security, we must also take steps to ensure our *spiritual* security. If we have to introduce *life-ending* weapons in the defense of our shul, we must also take steps to make our shul even more *life-affirming*. The Torah is called the *Eitz Chaim*, the tree of life, and there is nothing more life affirming than studying Torah together, and becoming what I spoke about on Rosh Hashanah- not just a community of learners, but a learning community. Today's kiddush is sponsored by two groups of people making siyumim: The women of Nach Yomi, who made a siyum on Wednesday night, and the participants of our Daf Yomi program, who are making a siyum on Masechet Megillah right after davening. Since Jessica sent out word of the Nach Yomi program beginning, eight women (and at least one man) told her they were signing up, spanning all age demographics of the shul. This is a **400% increase** over the last round- and it's not too late to sign up! Or think about the youth groups that are still going on, in the safest way possible, despite a global pandemic. Pandemics are scary, but they come and, BE"H, they will go- yet our investment in our children endures forever. Finally, if Jewish blood is considered cheap, we must show how precious it is. I am pleased to announce that, on Sunday February 27th, from 9 AM to 2 PM, Shaare Tefilla will be the site of a blood drive. At the moment, the US is experiencing its worst blood shortage in 30 years; medical procedures are not taking place because there is not enough blood for transfusions. One unit of donated blood can save up to three lives! This event will be advertised in the broader Jewish community, but I would love a robust showing from our shul. A formal sign-up notice will be sent out shortly.

There is a verse in Yeshayahu that many have the custom of saying after Aleinu:

עָצוּ עֲצָה וְתַכְּרֹךְ דְּבָרָיו דְּבָרָיו וְלֹא יִקְוֶה כִּי עֲמָנוּ אֵל: {ס}

Hatch a plot—it shall be foiled;

Agree on action—it shall not succeed.

For with us is God!

Let us thank God that, in this case, the verse came true and let us pray that we know no more echoes of it, or any other ugly acts of anti-Jewish violence. May God bestow upon us both strength and peace, and may we see the fulfillment of the verse that describes these attributes:

ה' עוז לעמו יתן, ה' יברך את עמו בשלום