

A Letter from Israel: The Price Tag of a Murder

Dear Friends,

When a child dies, there are no words which are sufficient for parents to express their pain. Every time I have comforted parents and their family, and I remember every time, I have felt the poverty of language as I attempted to summon from within the right words which might, somehow, mitigate the anguish. There are no such words. Today, once again, I search for those words.

Only a few days ago, we learned of the murder of three Israeli teenagers, children on the way home from school, who were abducted, kidnapped and murdered. To accomplish this, to perpetrate such a pointless crime, to inflict such excruciating pain, requires thoughts and actions which defy the most basic understanding of what it means to be human. For those of us who belong to a religion which affirms life, which appreciates the richness of the lives with which we are blessed and enjoins us to bring to the world a message of holiness, the killing of children is antithetical to every instinct we possess. The murder of three children whose bodies were discovered a few days ago, left me, and many others, stunned into silence.

Today we have learned that the perpetrators of another recent crime, the murder of a Palestinian teen, were Jews. This murder, by all accounts, was perpetrated as an act of revenge for the deaths of the three teenagers, an act intended, it seems, to make the point that the spilling of Jewish blood will come at a high price. Indeed, a rogue group in Israel, which calls itself "Tag Mechir"/ "Price Tag", has made this point explicitly. I do not know if the perpetrators of this most recent murder were members of that group, but the vigilante-style murder surely has that feel. It is widely assumed here that the perpetrators acted out of revenge, that this murder was the "Price Tag" which this fringe group has placed on the murder of Jews.

For some this visceral response, this biblical "eye for an eye", may seem satisfying and just. But, as I sit in Jerusalem, reading, listening and watching, more serious thought and introspection leads us to the opposite conclusion. This murder has not evened the score. It has brought shame and dishonor to Jews, to Israel and to humanity. And for those who have dismissed terrorism as something that only "they" would do, think again. This murder is a sobering reminder that, in some ways, "they" are "us". And that is the "Price Tag" we now must pay.

The Price Tag requires of us to re-double our efforts to see the humanity of every person. We must reject the lessons of perpetrators of evil, of murderers of children and embrace the humanity of every person, even those we may not like.

The Price Tag of this murder of a Palestinian by Jews requires that we look within and answer the question of what it means to be a Jew. To be a Jew does not mean that we embrace victimhood. It means that we embrace justice and the rule of law. It means that we cherish all life. It means that we internalize the notion that one who destroys a life, destroys an entire world. Each life created possesses infinite value. Each life destroyed creates a void which can never be filled.

And the Price Tag on this murder requires a communal act of Teshuva, an act of self-examination and self-scrutiny. Have we, in anger, spoken words that, if heeded, might lead to pain and/or violence? Have we, in the midst of our own pain, expressed our desire to lash out in revenge? There is surely distance between them and us. That distance, however, may not be as great as we once may have thought.

We mourn our losses more directly and celebrate our joys more deeply in proportion to our proximity to that pain or that joy. We connect most directly with our family and friends. In our community, we sense the pain and celebrate the triumphs of our People wherever they are. And, as the distance from the center of that sorrow or celebration grows, we feel less empathy, less of a connection. But the murder of this Palestinian teen comes with a Price Tag. Through the actions of Jews, this tragedy has occurred. That tragedy is now ours. And so today, I am in pain. I feel shame. And I believe that this is part of Price Tag which we must pay.

From Jerusalem,

Neil S. Cooper

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