

# IN MEMORY OF GEORGE FLOYD: MAY WE FINALLY LEARN

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I want to thank all of you who are with us this evening through the miracle of technology. I even want to take a pause for a moment so that you can quietly flip through the pages of your screen so that we can see each other's faces.

(WAIT)

Genesis records after twenty-one years of separation between them, when Jacob first reunites with Esau, Jacob exclaims, "To see your face is like seeing the face of God." I understand the sentiment behind those words now in a new way—in this period of pandemic when I see so few faces on a daily basis. The faces on the screen in those little squares have come to mean so much. A wonderful Micah member said to me right before another very sad occasion, when we gathered for the Pittsburgh Tree of Life Massacre Memorial service, "We are a congregation—sometimes we simply need to congregate." That is how I feel this evening. Sometimes we simply need to be with each other.

We have gone through recent days in shock as the events set off by the murder of George Floyd continue to reverberate around our land. There is searing pain being expressed. Years of racism on top of pandemic on top of job loss on top of fear and death and the failure in every sector of our Federal government to effectively lend a helping hand to those most in need has brought us to this precarious and fearful edge. It is as if we are crossing a weak and narrow bridge.

Yesterday the staff spoke of the need to protect our beautiful synagogue building—or at least its contents. Our Torah scrolls are no longer there. We have removed them for their safe keeping--we are doing the same with our siddurim.

I am looking at two of our scrolls right at this moment. They are here safe in my home on the dining room table across from me right now. They are here.

After the conversation about protecting the Torah scrolls, I thought of a lesson that Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg once taught. We know the lesson that if you come

upon a synagogue on fire and you have a choice between saving a Torah scroll and saving a person, you save the person—of course.

Rabbi Hertzberg tells the story of meeting a French priest after World War II who proudly told him a story of France under Nazi occupation. “A Jewish man knocked on the door of the church in the dead of night holding a Torah scroll. He asked me to hide the scroll which I did.”

Hertzberg’s response—“Next time hide the Jewish man and let the scroll go.”

I realized that we had to not only protect the scrolls from possible vandalism but even of greater importance, to remember George Floyd—to say his name again – as we did on Shabbat and to think of his loved ones. And even as we do that—even as we say the name George Floyd, there are so many other names that we must say and mourn—Michael Brown, Ahmaud Arbery, Philando Castile, Breonna Taylor, Sean Reed, Tony McDade and many more. And as we mourn these names, we know that each of them is a world lost forever—their lives are gone and their communities suffer intolerable loss. So many more names. So much loss.

We weep.

Hannah Arendt, the Jewish philosopher who left Nazi Germany as a refugee, wrote about and covered the Jerusalem trial of Adolf Eichmann, the mastermind of the Final Solution of European Jewry. She taught us that not all killings are the same. A life taken by violence is a horror but a life taken by the police is something more. Hannah Arendt introduced into our vocabulary the term, “banality of evil.” This is the banality of a person who in going about their work on an ordinary day commits murder as part of their work. The murder need not be on the scale of an Eichmann. The banality of evil is in murder being an ordinary act of work. This is where we are.

We ask ourselves, who scares us more -- the protestors or the police?

I know that this is not an either or question.

As Jews, we know to be terrified of both—our people have suffered the random violence of pogroms and the sanctioned violence of governments.

Yet—in this moment, there is even more to consider.

Rabbi Crawley said to our staff this morning that yesterday she was looking for the police force to not fire their tear gas and rubber bullets into the peacefully and lawfully gathered crowd in Lafayette Park. We know that to obey an immoral

order is a crime. This is what we saw yesterday—an immoral order from the White House carried out by an obedient police force. We have sunk very low as a nation. We know what it is to follow an immoral order. We know. This is in our memory DNA.

This is what it has come to in this country. This is where we have sunk. And we have no one to turn to but ourselves—no one to look to. We have no leader. We have worse than no leader. We have a monster in the White House. That is right. We have a monster in the White House and we must not be afraid to say that. We must say that. To not say that is to ignore our reality. To not say that is to deny the teachings of our history and heritage. We stood at Sinai for a reason.

We are as Ezekiel who in his time sought a leader to stand in the breach. There is no leader who will stand in our breach.

It is we who must pull ourselves up. No one can do it for us.

One of you sent me these words today from a UCLA faculty member.

“Let each of us find our personal leverage and use it to push for change. It could be the business or company where you work. It could be the local school district. It could be pressuring a philanthropic foundation to do more. It could be helping to oust an elected official. It could be personally donating time or money to improve the situation. It could be hiring someone out of work who desperately needs a job — even if it will damage your profit margin. ....”

He continues--

“I know that many of you care, and many of you have made efforts. But if we do not elevate our impact, these past few weeks will simply be a passing-through point on our way to even greater depths of national failure.”

Peter Kareiva, Director of the Institute of the Environment and Sustainability,  
UCLA

I think that this is what it means for us to lift ourselves. Cain cried out “Am I my brother’s keeper?”—

This is the answer—we each are called to elevate our game.

In a moment, we will be joining in the Kaddish, as we prepare to end our service.

The word Kaddish—as I explained to last week’s bar mitzvah student -- means holy.

This week we are tragically learning once again, how far our nation has to go in learning that all life is holy.

In fact—if God has one true symbol on Earth—it is each one of us. Of all creation, it is each one of us who is created in God’s image. To kill a person is to diminish God’s presence in the world. To murder a person is to eliminate a reflection of God’s image in the world.

The Cain and Abel text that we showed on the screen just a moment ago is instructive. It reveals the deep meaning of murder in our Jewish mindset. It is one of those times when the English cannot quite capture the Hebrew. “Your brother’s blood cries out from the ground.” The Hebrew for “blood” is in the plural, “DAMIM.” The Hebrew for “cried out” “tsoakim” is also in the plural. To kill a person is to kill many bloods. It is to destroy a world—the world, not only of future unborn progeny—but the world of their community, their family, the world in which they live. All this is destroyed when there is murder. Take a life and you have taken a world.

That diminishes holiness.

And this is why we say

YITGADAL, V’YITKADASH SHMEI RABBAH

May God’s great name be magnified and made holy in the world.

We say these words when someone has died because when a person is taken—but especially a life taken before its time—and most especially when a life is taken in such a murder—God’s presence is diminished in the world. We pray that God’s name be magnified because we fear the diminishment of God’s presence. It is as if each one of left living must try harder to keep God’s name great. We must up our game.

This is the world we are in.

This is nation we are in.

We must all—up our game—only then can we even begin to restore some semblance of even partial meaning to the words we used to say when we were grammar school children standing in our classrooms—“one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

We join together in Kaddish.