

Awe is not a feeling I have felt much of in my life. If I were to have described it before this week, I probably would've said something like an awareness of something grand and incomprehensible beyond the self. That feels stilted. We use the concept of awe in Judaism often as it captures the feeling of God's presence, attested to throughout the Bible. In modern Hebrew, it can take on a more negative valence, something like awful or terrible. This week was one in which I felt both ends of that spectrum.

On Wednesday morning, I was sitting with Lauren in the perinatology wing of Greenwich hospital as we watched the anatomy scan for, God willing, our first child due in October. Seeing our child's face, ears, belly, feet, toes, fingers and all the various parts of the body they account for that I had no idea existed was a powerful experience. I was staring at this pixelated screen with my mouth agape at this magical creation that exists but doesn't yet exist.

I found myself thinking of all the things I hoped for this child. I thought about the memories I have of my own parents' rearing of me and the ways in which we want to live those out. I thought about the ways in which Lauren and I want to parent differently.

As Lauren likes to say, if our children go into therapy for something different than what we're in therapy for, we'll have succeeded.

I thought about vacations I want to take this child on. I thought about the pop culture education I want to give this child. I wondered if this child would hate cilantro like me. Then, I thought about this child's safety. How amid all the trivialities of life that seem

more and more picayune as I imagine this child coming into the world, I just want this child to be healthy and safe. I felt like I was floating the rest of the day...

And then the news slowly started to trickle in: reports of a shooting...at a school...law enforcement surrounding the elementary school...injuries...death...dear God what have we done? I still remember April 20th 1999. I had just turned 12 and I was at my childhood best friend Micah Fredman's house playing after school. I had an awareness that a TV was on, showing reports of somewhere called Columbine and something called a school shooting, but I don't remember thinking that even then, as a 6th grader that something was amiss. Surely this was an aberration. I didn't have to worry about it.

And now, here we are 23 years later with a list that could take the length of a whole sermon of school shootings, and most certainly we do have something to worry about.

I have to be honest with you. I am not sure what to say. I could've gone back into the google drive folder where I keep my sermons and offered up one of the ones I have given before. I feel more enraged than Sandy Hook. I want to yell at the people who we put in power who continue to tell us that we shouldn't politicize moments of bloodshed. There will be a time for that, they say. I have yet to see that time. It makes me feel as if our priorities have been so wildly misplaced, deeply reflective of the time and culture in which we live, in which soundbites and performative pontificating drive our politicians.

Yet this is an ancient problem as much as it is a modern problem. We just read a *haftarah* today that feels like a fitting reminder for the week we've had. If the Torah reading from *Be'hukotai* is the rebuke, the *haftarah* is meant as a response to that rebuke. While it does contain notes of consolation, it doesn't provide a consolation that is rose-tinted or that makes far reaching promises. That is because this *haftarah* comes from a section of Jeremiah that is dealing with dark times and desperation from a society that is ill at its core. What makes it particularly afflicted is told to us early on:

“The guilt of Judah is inscribed
With a stylus of iron, Engraved with an
adamant point On the tablet of their hearts,
And on the horns of their altars,
While their children remember-Their altars and sacred posts,
By verdant trees, Upon lofty hills.”

Worded in a complex manner, this phrase is challenging to parse. Judah has sinned so much so that their sin is etched within them and their places of worship. This sin as explained by *Rashi* is:

“Just as they remember their children, so, too, they remember their idols”

In other words, Jeremiah admonishes the people for having the same level of love for idolatry as they do for their children. One wonders what he might say today about the things our country worships?

While the consolation isn't full and complete, it does come in the form of recommendations by Jeremiah. Confession is the start. The ability to recognize that those who came before failed and now the nations come to God open-minded and open

hearted creates an opening. There's still hope if people can be accountable and recognize the wrongs of the past.

Jeremiah continues that it's all about trust with God. In the *haftarah* it is a trust that exists equally in moments of joy and darkness. Because from that trust comes hope. From that trust comes a notion of partnership with God, where prayer can foster change, even when things look bleakest.

That gets us back to the events of this week and the "thoughts and prayers," a topic of much back and forth. "Don't pray-just do something," one group says. "Storm the heavens with prayer for our babies. That's all we can do" says the other group. Me, the Rabbi? I am somewhere in the middle as usual.

I am certain that our politicians' first and major response should probably be something other than prayer, but I am also certain that prayer can be effective, both for its ability to change a person and for its ability to beseech the One who is beyond our comprehension. Prayer can stir us to act if it is offered wholeheartedly and with intent. Yet, when we hear statements from the people who have the ability to enact legislation, demanding that the time is right, and then not acting on it or taking a recess, it crushes us.

From our crushed spirit, we can turn once more to our tradition. Our sages spend a lot of time talking about prayer: the hows, the wheres, the whats, and the whens. In the *Tosefta*, an ancient text from around the same time as the *mishnah*, there is a long

ranging discussion on the nature of blessings and in chapter 6, *mishnah* 12, it says the following:

“There are prayers that are frivolous” the word here being “*shav*”, the same word we use when describing something in vain. “How so? If a person gathered one hundred Kor [of grain, and then] said [to God] “May it be Your will that there will be two hundred [Kor of grain]. [A person] obtained one hundred barrels [of wine and then] said [to God] “May it be Your will that there will be two hundred [barrels of wine].” All of this is a prayer in vain.”

For the Rabbis, praying for something that is scientifically, logically, or economically impossible is a prayer that is in vain. We know this to be the case in our country with over 300 million guns. To beseech God as the object of this prayer, to ask God to stop people from murdering one another with these weapons of bloodshed is for naught.

So what does the *Tosefta* suggest we do in moments like this? Here is how it ends:

“But a person may pray that they (i.e. the grain or the barrels) should be blessed and not be cursed”

Instead of God being the object of the prayer, the blessing is called upon the object itself. Praying that the situation around the objects will be activated and changed for goodness and for it to be imbued with blessing. That comes from us and our prayers.

As one of my dear teachers, Rabbi Aaron Alexander wrote this week,

“We, since Abraham’s journey began have been gifted the ability to confer blessing. To identify what it is in the world that needs blessing—that needs love and compassion and courage and determination—and to use prayer to activate the capacity and infrastructure for those necessities. To abdicate this responsibility is to affirm the end of the last line, the possibility of curse. In this case, the status quo.

That is what I know so many of us buck up against when we hear thoughts and prayers. You’re the ones that can do something but for all the reasons, money, personal power, cowardice, you let time pass and pray that God won’t let it happen again. That is a prayer in vain. God has charged us to be God’s partners. So please pray. Pray for fortitude, for once. Pray for courage. Pray for accountability. If they can’t do it, and they’ve proven they can’t before, then their legacies, already tarnished, will remain that way forever.

I still don’t know exactly what to say. I’ve gone through so many revolutions of emotion this week. Even as I am writing this and listening to the changing stories from law enforcement, I find myself enraged yet again. I also know that I can’t let that rage just sit there and fester.

Thinking about this lesson from the *Haftarah* and from our Rabbis reminds me that we don’t have to be absolutists. We can start our response with prayer and know that it is just the beginning. We can activate ourselves and others. We can organize against those in power who continue to turn a blind eye to these horrendous acts of violence. We can donate money. We can run for office. We can protest. We can change

our legacy and the legacy of those that are still young or are not even born yet. We can rage and bellow because we are the children of Prophets.

Then, I am back in the room at Greenwich hospital with awe two ways. As the technician moves the ultrasound wand around, she notes that the baby's various anatomical parts are hard to spot because the baby seems to be cozy in a little nook, hiding from her. I can't help but think about those poor children hiding this week in their classrooms.

I want to tell our baby to keep hiding, safe and protected in the womb while it's still possible. Because God willing when this baby comes to the world, I want the world to be better for all of us but especially our youngest and most vulnerable. Maybe we will be blessed by this baby and others of the next generation that will activate and actually change what we have failed, for:

- [Eva Mireles, 44](#)
- [Xavier Lopez, 10](#)
- [Jose Flores, 10](#)
- [Irma Garcia, 48](#)
- [Nevaeh Bravo, 10](#)
- [Ellie Garcia, 9](#)
- [Tess Mata, 10](#)
- [Alexandria "Lexi" Rubio, 10](#)
- [Jacklyn Cazares, 9](#)
- [Jailah Nicole Silguero, 10](#)
- [Jayce Luevanos, 10](#)
- [Miranda Mathis, 11](#)
- [Amerie Jo Garza, 10](#)
- [Makenna Lee Elrod, 10](#)
- [Layla Salazar, 10](#)
- [Maite Rodriguez, 10](#)
- [Annabell Rodriguez, 10](#)
- [Eliahana Cruz Torres, 10](#)
- [Rojelio Torres, 10](#)

- Alithia Ramirez, 10
- Uziyah Garcia, 10

May their memories spark a revolution.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Adir Yolcut