

After Tel Aviv and Orlando

Shabbat Naso 5776 -- 12 Iyyar 5776, June 18, 2016

Rabbi Jon Spira-Savett, Temple Beth Abraham, Nashua NH

These is a slightly edited version of the words I delivered these words as an introduction to the Torah reading at Shabbat morning services, on the day we celebrated a Bar Mitzvah in the congregation.

Shabbat Shalom. It is so good today -- **הנה מה טוב ומה נעים שבת אחים גם יחד** *hinay mah tov u'mah na'im shevet achim gam yachad* -- so particularly good at the end of this week to have occasion to be together as a sacred gathering. To celebrate, to be in a place where we have already touched the Torah, and looked at each other as the Torah has gone around. A place where we will hold Torah up in the air, and lift our faces and our hands toward it.

There is a hill in Jerusalem that you might not know about; it's not famous like the Temple Mount. It is across a valley from the walls of the Old City. If you follow the valley below as it winds down to the east, for maybe half a mile, you get to the most ancient part of Jerusalem. Today there is a church called St. Andrews on the hill, but the first sacred use of the place might have been a burial cave that is at least 2600 years old.

In 1979, the team excavating the site found two very small scrolls made of silver. How the archaeologists knew that they were scrolls boggles my mind. When the scrolls were painstakingly opened up, there were inscriptions written in Hebrew, characters different than the ones we would recognize easily today. One of the scrolls had these words:

יברכך ה' וישמרך יאר ה' פניו אליך וישם לך שלום

Y'varech'cha Adonai v'yishm'recha, ya-ayr Adonai panav aylecha v'yasaym l'cha shalom.

May Adonai -- may God -- bless you and protect you

May Adonai shine his face to you and place on you peace.

You probably know these words, or similar ones. They are almost identical to the blessing of the *kohanim*, the priestly blessing found in the book of Numbers, in today's section from the Torah.

They are the oldest written text we have of anything in the Bible, written down more than 2500 years ago.

A blessing from God of protection and peace. An image of God as a shining, smiling face.

The site where these words were found is separated from the ancient city of Jerusalem by a valley called Hinnom. The Bible tells us about this place -- it was where an ancient Canaanite tribe used to bring children to offer as sacrifices to their god. Quite a different image of the divine than the one found on the hill. This was what the Bible rebelled against. In Jewish tradition, the name of that valley -- *Gai-hinnom* or *Gehenna* -- became the word for hell. What happened in the valley was the absolutely opposite of paradise, of our vision for the world perfected.

I try mightily on the day of a Bar or Bat Mitzvah to stay away from heavier topics. But I know what we have almost all been thinking and talking about, and I know who we are, and I know Davida and Yami and can imagine who you are who are here because you are connected to them. So I know we should speak about the two weeks that have been.

I tremble at the thought that some deaths in the world are more worthy of our attention -- but this has been a couple of weeks when our attention has been drawn to the Valley of Hinnom, to murder in the name of God, and we are trying to reach for the hill where peace and God's shining, smiling face are inscribed. The murders -- at the Sarona Market, in Tel Aviv; at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando; of a British parliamentarian, and of police in Paris. All in the name of sick allegiances to false gods -- whether it's a nation, or racial purity, or a twisted version of religion. All taking the lives of people whose lives the perpetrators thought meant less -- Israeli, American, gay, free.

As I look at what I have preached about for the past five months, I feel as though it is always the same thing. But I think we need to repeat these as theme and variations, and I think I myself am coming to understand some things better -- not about the world, maybe, but about what it means

to be a religious person and a Jew at this moment.

This week, we are heartbroken, and angry. We are fearful for our safety, and the safety of our children and the people we care about. We feel helpless and cynical, as even our own society seems susceptible to hate in ways we thought were behind us. These are all natural, and reasonable, ways to respond. But in a sacred gathering, I say that there is more.

I've been studying the priestly blessing, the 2600-year-old words, which I and many of you say to our children every Friday night. And they strike me differently this week. Over and over this week, one phrase in it has been pushing itself in front of me: **יְשׂא יי פָּנָיו אֵלַיךְ**. *Yisa Adonai panav aylecha* -- May God lift God's face to you.

This unusual metaphor of “lifting the face” means particular things in the Bible. It means to direct one's attention, and to show special favor, even favoritism. *Yisa Adonai panav aylecha* -- I have been imagining God's face looking right at me this week, paying attention to me, in a way I cannot avoid. Confronting me with the question: During this week time when murders are being committed in the name of God and religion, what are you representing about what it means to be religious?

This week, my colleague and friend Rabbi Shai Held wrote about how God pays attention, how God shows favor, in an open letter to the LGBT community after the Orlando attack. Shai wrote:

What it really means to be a religious person is to strive to love the people God loves—which means, ultimately, to try to love everyone. Where this is concerned, the history of human civilization is filled with one horrific failure after another. White people still struggle to see that people of color are no less human, and no less precious than they; people who are wealthy often forget that people who are poor are no less human, and no less precious, than they; people who are able-bodied all too often fail to see that people with disabilities are no less human, and no less precious, than they; and yes, people who are

straight are just beginning to see that people of varying sexual orientations and identities are no less human, and no less precious, than they. As a theologian and a pastor, I would just like to beg you: don't let other people's confusions and biases make you forget: God loves you, and you are no less human, and no less precious than anyone else.

Yisa Adonai panav aylecha -- When God's face is paying attention to me, this is who I strive to be. One whose own face is turned toward more and more people, not just beyond but far beyond the groups I already know well and move comfortably in.

I was struck this week by a piece in the Washington Post by another colleague, an Orthodox rabbi in DC named Shmuel Herzfeld. He heard about the massacre in Orlando during the holy day of Shavuot, when he and his community were not connected by internet and television. On Sunday evening at services, Rabbi Herzfeld announced that the next night at 9:17 PM, the instant the holiday was over, he would be gathering people to travel to a gay bar to stand in solidarity.

Rabbi Herzfeld wrote that he didn't much know what he was doing or what to expect. he hadn't been a bar in ages, and never to a gay bar. His Orthodox congregation tries to welcome LGBT Jews, struggling with words in the Torah that would make them unwelcome. So maybe not the most likely group to go across town, about a dozen Orthodox Jews from the nearly suburban northwest of DC to the center of the city and what turned out to be a largely African-American gay bar.

In the bar, surprising onnections were discovered and more were made. The bartender at one point shut off the music, and prayers were said. The people in the bar sang together, and put arms around each other. When the Jews left, they joined an impromptu memorial service outside.

Rabbi Herzfeld wrote:

As we were singing, I looked over at some gay members of our congregation and saw tears flowing down their faces. I felt the reality that we are living in a time of enormous pain. But I

also felt that the night was a tremendous learning experience for me. I learned that when a rabbi and members of an Orthodox synagogue walk into a gay African American bar, it is not the opening line of a joke but an opportunity to connect; it is an opportunity to break down barriers and come together as one; it is an opportunity to learn that if we are going to survive, we all need each other.

Some people have criticized the rabbi, for his one night at a gay bar when he hasn't yet opened up his Torah to gays and lesbians -- they say he hasn't really learned the lesson he was trying to teach. And if that's partly right, it applies to many of us as well. It applies to me, who waited until last year to lead our congregation to celebrate gay marriages, as we know do. I see Rabbi Herzfeld pushing himself and his congregation to be in the mode and the process of *yisa panav*, of turning his face toward more and more people.

There is another group in suffering, of a different kind, who I am thinking about -- Muslims, particularly in this country. Not the victims of murder this week, but struggling to be seen, reeling from identification with the killers in Tel Aviv and Orlando and Paris, and attacked in a blanket way by a man running to be president of the United States.

To my Muslim friends -- and I have often said, I do not have nearly enough -- I say a couple of things. First of all, I want to tell you that my memory is longer than this past century of conflict between us. I remember when it was safer, relatively, to be a Jew in the lands of Islam than in the lands ruled by Christianity. I remember that you were the ones who taught us science and philosophy; that the greatest work of Jewish philosophy, Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, was written in Arabic. Rambam could certainly have written it in Hebrew, but he wrote as part of a conversation with your own great philosophers. So I resist attempts to label you, and speak out against those accusing you of being a religion of murder and murderers.

I don't mean to simply your history, or ours together, and so the other thing I have to say is that if we could find a way in this country to stand together, Jews and Muslims, we might have something to teach you, even as we learn more about you and your faith and your story.

Like you, we Jews have had to battle our demons, the ones that tempt us to hate back -- and we still battle them. We know, like you, what it's like to have grievances against the world, against the West. We know, like you, what's like to have to negotiate a modern world, to hold our identity and traditions and stand for our values, while we figure out how to dress and work; how to be distinct and stand out and how to blend in; how to live fully in the experience, still new for us and for you, of being free.

If we could lift our faces toward each other, American Jews and American Muslims, maybe we could teach you about our experiences, in America and over centuries, as you once taught philosophy to us. Not out of a posture of superiority, but out of common experiences and concern for you. And out of divine love.

As broken as we are this week, we have tremendous cause for hope. Because of Emet [the Bar Mitzvah] and his classmates, for one thing. Partly because to them so many differences that cause hate in the world don't mean a thing, which is partly what they are teaching us and partly because we have been good parents and teachers to them.

We have hope because, even though there is still violence because of racism and religious fanaticism and anti-Semitism and homophobia, there have never in human history been more allies, and there have never been so many people with political and cultural power who are part of formerly outside groups or who are allies.

We have work to do. The world isn't neatly divided into haters and those who love -- we don't get a card indicating that we have stopped hating, and now we can stand over here. We all still have many more faces to lift our own faces toward, and we have to be better and more active and more effective. Like the leaders we will read about in today's Torah reading, not household names like Moshe and Aharon, who come one by one, each bringing individually an offering of dedication.

In the Torah, God tells Moshe to instruct the priests on how to deliver the blessing: "In this way shall you bless the Children of Israel, saying to them." Rashi, the great medieval commentator,

notes that the Hebrew word for “saying” is written not as a command, but as an infinitive, an unlimited and continuous verb, in an elongated form. He says this is to teach: Do not bless them in a cursory or confused way, but with intention and a full heart.

So may it be for us. As we try overpower the valley of death, to reach the heights where God’s smiling face and peace are inscribed, may we lift *our* faces, not in a cursory way, nor with confusion, but with intention and a heart ready to be full with all of humanity.

Shabbat Shalom.