

Parshat Emor
April 27, 2013
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Because last week was Sisterhood Shabbat – it has been only two weeks, one Shabbat, since I have spoken to you from this bema -- but so much has happened in those two weeks. On Monday April 15 we all watched with horror as terror struck the Boston Marathon. Our hearts went out to those who were the victims of this terrible crime. We were saddened by the dead and heartbroken at the sight of those who were maimed and will spend the rest of their lives rebuilding their lives. But we had little time to absorb the grief then we were riveted to our television screens as the perpetrators of this terrible crime were first identified and then apprehended – and it all played out before our very eyes. It all culminated last Friday when the first brother was killed and the second was arrested and taken into custody. But having settled the “who” and the “how” of this terrible act of terror, this past week has seen our attention turn to the third and most difficult question, the “why.”

Why would two young men do this? What kind of hatred could fuel an act that would kill and maim innocent people? Liberals began speaking of root causes of alienation and Conservatives began speaking of the reach of radical Islamic fundamentalism. I wish to take a few moments this morning to humbly suggest where I believe the blame – or at least some blame needs to be placed.

Now I need to make one thing absolutely clear: for the most part, the blame begins and ends with those two young men – period. We are all responsible for our actions. The older brother paid with his life, and the younger one will probably spend the rest of his life in jail, and that is how it should be. He will be tried and if convicted, the who and the how of it will be all the evidence we need and all the explanation the courts will demand. That is precisely how it should be.

But outside the criminal proceedings it is more than appropriate that we try and understand where these young men are coming from. If right wing Conservatives are to be believed we should mount a full-scale war against Islamic Fundamentalism. If left wing Liberals are to be believed a revamping of the injustices of our American way of life might be in order. And while a little more vigilance against those who seek our destruction and a little more attention to the values for which we stand are always in order, this morning I want to direct your attention elsewhere. This morning I want to speak not about the threat of Islamic Fundamentalism or the nature of our American way of life. I want to speak about these boys parents. I find their parents fascinating. And I can't help but wonder how they contributed to the sequence of events that ended with the terror of April 15.

Now, first a disclaimer: I am not suggesting that parents are responsible for the behavior of their children. I have counseled too many parents who were distraught over decisions their children have made. We all know that children raised in the same home by the same parents can turn out very differently. Each child is born with their own make up, their own unique personalities and as much as we parents like to take credit for all the good things our children achieve – we understand to so much of what they do and who they are is a mystery and when

you add to this that they come under the sway of outside influences – peer influence and so much over which we have no control – no I would be the last to offer such a simplistic analysis as to suggest that we are all merely the result of our parental influence. But if parents are not wholly responsible for the way their children turn out, neither are they absolved of all accountability. And when two brothers join in a combined effort to terrorize a city and a nation we are allowed to at least wonder where were their parents and how did they contribute to this tragedy. And the more I listen to the interviews with these parents the less sympathetic I am to their innocence as agents in the creation of these young terrorists.

We have been told that these young men were alienated; they were angry over the way this country treated Muslims, Muslim countries, or any of a long line of grievances of what they perceived were the injustices perpetrated by our country. Things weren't quite working out as they had expected. Their parents had come to this country seeking asylum from the persecution and war of their native land and had hoped this country would be the answer to their prayers. But it is not easy to come to a new land, and learn a new language and adjust to new ways. I find it interesting that both of the parents are back in their native land, leaving their children here. And their children could hardly be described as failures. They had a life, they had clothes and money. One was in college and had become a naturalized citizen. So why were they so angry?

I had the experience of visiting the Tenement Museum on the Lower East Side recently. Have you been there? If not you should go. It is certainly worth the time. It is a wonderful glimpse into a formative period in American history and for many of us a glimpse into our own history. How many of your parents or grandparents spent time on the Lower East Side? What the museum does a wonderful job of reminding us is both the hardships and the beauty of that chapter in American and Immigrant history. It is not easy to be an immigrant. Our parents and grandparents came to this *Goldena Medina* for the same reason that those Boston boy's parents came here. And in many ways our immigrant parents and grandparents were just as disappointed. Not only were the streets not paved with gold but living and working conditions were beyond hard. Go visit the museum and you will be reminded: the families living on top of each other, the disease, and the sweat shops. Compared to what our ancestors experienced these boy's parents had it easy, and to my knowledge not a single terrorist came out of the Lower East Side Immigrant experience; a few criminals, yes, but no terrorists. Not one! What the Lower East Side did produce were labor unions, a few Supreme Court Justices, more than a few medical discoveries and too many doctors, lawyers, successful business people and academics to count.

Why? Why did *our* crushing experience not make us angry at America? Why did the fact that Jews and Italians and Irish were all equally rejected at one time or another why did this not result in our alienation?

I think the credit goes to our parents. I do.

As I stood in the Tenement Museum, in the magnificently preserved apartments that were too small and too hot and too poor for the people who lived there, I was transported back to a world of our fathers and mothers but I was able to glimpse at something beyond the poverty and the stench and the closed quarters. The table was set for Shabbat, there were tefillin on

the shelf, and books – these immigrants brought with them a set of values that saw them through the hard times and gave them a vision of what life could be and a plan for how to create it. When a young Jewish immigrant child came home angry by the injustices of the world, their parents told them to study. When they complained they were hungry, their parents told them to go to work. And when life became unbearable they had each other, and Shabbat and the strength and warmth that community and Jewish values can provide.

That is what these immigrant boys in Boston were missing and that is why I blame their parents. These parents inform us that their children were not happy and they themselves were disappointed in America. I try and imagine how our immigrant parents would have reacted to their children's complaints about being "unhappy"!

What parent does not want their children to be happy? And America is the land that promises in its very Declaration of Independence that "the pursuit of happiness," is a fundamental right.

Who doesn't want their children to be happy? It has become the battle cry of our generation: Make my child happy. We command the principals of our schools and the directors of our camps to make our children happy. We pay psychiatrists and psychologists a lot of money to make our children happy. Parents come to me all the time and are concerned that we should make our Religious School more, well fun. And that only makes sense for when we want our children to be happy then everything, even learning must be fun.

So we give our children wealth because we are convinced that wealth will make them happy. And we give our children power because we are convinced that power will make them happy. And we give them honors piled upon honors because we think that honor will make them happy. And then we see they are not happy and we do not understand. We gave them everything they need to be happy.

But, as I stood in the cramped tenement room on the Lower East Side and imagined life for our ancestors not so long ago when they came here as immigrants to a strange and difficult land, I could almost hear them respond to our dilemma. "Silly 21st century parent, Happiness is not something you are given, it is something you must pursue for yourself." They did not give their children wealth but they gave them a job and an education so they could pursue even better jobs. It was not fun, but it was, they understood, the path to true happiness. They did not give their children honor but they gave them community and Shabbat – a place and a position to pursue an honorable life. They did not give their children power but they said you are angry over your conditions so create unions and demand justice and equality. The power is there but it will not be fun. It will be hard work.

Our grandparents, and the parents of those terrorists all came to this land for the same reason. They left behind crushing oppression and came to a place they believed offered the hope of happiness.

But that is where the similarity ends. When these boy's parents did not find that happiness they became alienated and angry, they even went back to the land they came from. When our parents and grandparents did not find it, they rolled up their sleeves and went to work to create it – for their children, if not for themselves. They made this their home and our home in a way

those boy's parents never did.

You see I believe our parents and our grandparents understood something those boy's parents do not and it makes all the difference in the world, certainly the difference between the creation of a terrorist and a doctor: happiness is not something you find. It is something you create and it takes hard work.

Today's Torah portion dedicates three entire sections as *Parshat Moadim* - the description of the major holidays on which we are commanded: "You shall be happy in your festivals." But Judaism makes it clear that happiness is not found in life, it is something we bring to life.

2000 years ago, a sage of the Talmud, Ben Zoma, analyzed the qualities that comprise happiness. His definition speaks to us in 2013 with as much cogency as it did to our ancestors 2000 years ago, and this was the wisdom that guided our ancestors in those tenements. Interestingly, he actually agrees with many of our contemporary values about what is needed to be happy. Ben Zoma speaks of wealth, and power, wisdom and honor as the keys to a happy life.

He acknowledges that poverty and happiness are not faithful companions; that power – influence over other lives, is a realistic element of happiness. That honor and the way others treat us are also part of a fulfilled life. His inclusion of wisdom is, I believe, a uniquely Jewish contribution to the ingredients of the happy life but also well understood in our day. Yes, Ben Zoma acknowledges the fundamental conditions for a happy life. But Ben Zoma does one thing more. He gives us a formula by which we can acquire happiness, by which we can acquire wealth, power, wisdom and honor. This may be his most important insight. And good news – as the hour is late – he does so very succinctly:

Ben Zoma states: *Eyzehu Ashir* – "Who is wealthy?" *Hasameach b'chelko* - One who is content with their lot in life." Ben Zoma grasps the essential truth of the human heart. Our needs are few, our wants are limitless. Satisfaction rather than acquisition is the key to wealth.

And who is a person of great power? The rabbis knew of great conquerors: Pharaoh, Alexander and Antiochus. They knew the mighty emperors of Rome but these were not their models. They saw them as men of ruthless ambition and of consuming lust who were often self-destructive. So Ben Zoma defines power very differently: *eyzehu gibor*? "Who is the strong man?" *Hakoveysh et yitztro* The one who conquers himself. To be truly powerful you need not conquer the world - you need only master yourself. The art of self-control is the greatest and most enduring form of strength.

Ayzehu Chacham? "Who is wise?" One who mastered the law? One who reads all the books? One who studied it all? The answer of Ben Zoma is: *Halomeyd mikol adam*- "the person who learns from everyone is wise." The truly wise person is the one with an open mind, receptive to new ideas.

And the final element in Ben Zoma's formula - his guide to how to achieve honor? *Eyzehu mechubad* "Who is honored" - *Hamechabeyd et habriot* – "He how honors others" The possession of wealth, power and success is no guarantee that you will be honored. If you

merely treat others with honor they in turn will come to treat you that way as well.

Can you imagine how different history would be if those two boys had been taught this truth? Imagine how different these last two weeks would be if they understood that wealth is being satisfied with what you have, strength is being in control of yourself, honor is given to those who respect others and wisdom is achieved in having an open mind.

That is why I blame their parents.

And why I worry a bit about our own children and the things we are teaching them. It is too late for the brothers in Boston. Their fates are sealed, the damage is done. But there is still work to be done with our own children to make sure the teachings of our ancestors will not be lost to them.

We celebrate today a Bar Mitzvah and an *aufruf* – moments of such exquisite happiness. And we today acknowledge that we are truly blessed. We acknowledge that we already possess all that we need to be happy. There is no need for any pursuit. It is right here. All the elements for joy dwell with us today. Embrace it – you deserve it. Celebrate the blessings that are yours this day and every day in joy and happiness. Amen