

Shabbat Behukotai 5782 - First Responders Follow G-d's Ways
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shabbat Shalom.

Before I begin, I want to dedicate today's teaching to the memories of the victims in the Texas school shooting earlier this week:

Eva Mireles, teacher * Irma Garcia * co-teacher * Uziyah Garcia, 8 * Jose Flores, 10 * Amerie Jo Garza, 10 * Xavier Javier Lopez, 10 * Nevaeh Bravo, 10 * Alithia Ramirez, 10 * Tess Marie Mata, 10 * Alexandria Aniya Rubio, 10 * Layla Salazar, 10 * Makenna Lee Elrod, 10 * Jayce Luevanos, 10 * Jailah Nicole Silguero, 11 * Eliana "Ellie" Garcia, 9 * Eliahana Cruz Torres * Annabell Guadalupe Rodriguez, 10 * Jacklyn "Jackie" Cazares, 10 * Maite Yuleana Rodriguez, 10 * Rogelio Torres, 10 * Miranda Matthis, 11

May their memories be a blessing.

Not again, I thought. Not again. This was my thought when I heard the horrifying news of Tuesday's tragedy. So many of the details seemed to fit the awful pattern that has tortured far too many families for years. I am sad, angry, disappointed, tired, and sad again.

But reading one detail in the paper the next day caught my eye. The AP reported on Wednesday that a border patrol agent who was working near the elementary school rushed into the school when the shooting started - without waiting for backup - and killed the gunman. Everybody else was running away, as they should, while he was running *toward* the gunfire.

Since then, the news have not talked about this person, so this incident likely never occurred. Instead, the AP reports that parents and other onlookers were deeply distressed by the apparent delayed police response. In this case, the police made grave mistakes. Whatever truthfully occurred in Texas, the presence or absence of first responders is a key part of this story, just like first responders have been central and heroic at many other emergencies in our country. In many, many cases, security and medical first responders have displayed courage and bravery against impossible dangers. We have much to learn from them.

Rabbi Shai Held of Hadar in New York - who taught here a few years ago - wrote an essay in 2013 in response to another nightmare, the Boston Marathon bombing. Over

the years, I have turned back to this short Tablet Magazine essay for insight, and I wish to share much of it with you today, some in his own words, some in mine.

His essay is called, “Why First Responders Are Jewish Heroes.” He writes about the Boston first responders: “Just who *are* these people, doing the holiest thing a human being can do: running towards the injured and dead instead of running away from them? There is something about seeing first responders going about their work that restores our hope in humanity. Just as importantly, there is something about seeing them that can teach us a lesson in theology.”

We here today may not be emergency first responders, but we can emulate them.

Today's Torah reading begins:

אִם-בְּחֻקֹתַי תֵּלְכוּ וְאֶת-מִצְוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ וְעָשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם:

“If you follow My laws [G-d’s] and faithfully observe My commandments, I will grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit” (Lv. 26:3).

What does it mean to follow G-d's laws? *Lalechet*, literally “to walk after”? That's an easy one: to complete the Mitzvot, commandments.

But five times in Deuteronomy, we see the same verb appear to mean something else:

אֲחֲרָי ה' אֶ-לֵיכֶם תֵּלְכוּ

“You shall follow after Hashem your G-d” (Dt. 13:5). Here the verb is the same, *Telechu*, but here we follow *G-d*, not just the commandments. It appears to mean there is something to following G-d that goes beyond mere obedience to the Mitzvot, as important as they are.

Rabbi Held writes that modern Bible scholars tend to think that ‘walking in G-d’s ways’ is code for obeying G-d’s commandments, but the rabbis of the Talmud understood it differently. The Talmud teaches what it means to be godly: “Just as G-d clothes the naked, so should you; just as G-d visited the sick, so should you; just as G-d comforted the mourners, so should you; and just as G-d buried the dead, so should you” (Sotah 14a).

Rabbi Held continues: “To walk in G-d’s ways, in other words, is to act in the ways that the Torah describes G-d as acting. Just as G-d is present when people are vulnerable and suffering, so should we be. Yes, for religious people, study is important, prayer is important, and ritual, too. But what this text, and others like it, suggests is this: If you

want to really serve G-d, and not just go through the motions, then learn to care for people in moments of profound pain. In many ways, it is easier to study, or pray, or build a sukkah—or whatever. In telling us that offering care and comfort to people in pain is the very highest human ideal, Judaism alerts us to the fact that it can be intensely hard work. But it is also the heart of authentic religion and spirituality: To bring a little bit of G-d's love and compassion to the widow, the orphan, the Alzheimer's patient, and the bombing victim."

He then takes a closer look at the Talmud's list. "The naked are vulnerable, but their situation is reversible; the sick are vulnerable, but at least sometimes they can heal. Mourners have sustained an immense loss; nothing can bring back their loved ones. And the dead are... dead, and never coming back. Their situation is the very paradigm of irreversibility. Each situation the Talmud invokes is more irreversible than the one before, and hence, I think, also more frightening. Yes, the Talmud appears to be saying, these people's circumstances are scary. Stay with them instead of fleeing."

"Most of us want to flee. Here, then, is Judaism's message: You want to serve G-d? Run towards the very people and places you most want to run away from. You want to be religious? Learn to be present for other people when they are in pain. All the rest is commentary."

Very sadly, people all around us are in pain. It's so hard to be present for a grieving person, or for a person with a life-altering sickness, or for a multitude of other immense challenges. It's hard because we don't want to be there - for obvious reasons - and we don't know what to say. But our tradition teaches: Go, make the visit, make the phone call. Be present. Listen. That's hard too, but the impact is enormous. It will make the other person feel a little more alive.

I have my own interpretation as to why the Talmud places these four situations in this specific order. Rabbi Held correctly observes that the *victim's* situation is more and more irreversible. But I think there is something similar when we turn the camera, when we look at the *responder's* involvement.

Clothing the naked is simple - we hand out clothes to the person or to a collection drive. It's an easy fix.

More challenging is visiting the sick. It's harder to see somebody who is sick or injured. But when a recovery is expected, the conversation can be pleasant - "I hope you feel better."

Still more challenging is comforting mourners. This is a visit that means there was no recovery - "I'm so sorry for your loss."

But perhaps most challenging of all is burying the dead. Shoveling earth on top of somebody we may have known is really, really hard. So is confronting our own mortality in a very tactile way. Each of these categories increases the difficulty of the response.

Rabbi Held continues: "This is what first responders do. Without calling attention to themselves or congratulating themselves, they run towards human suffering instead of running away from it. To walk in G-d's ways is to walk in their ways, too—towards people in pain and not away from them."

We can't all be first responders on a medical or security team. But we *can* internalize their capacity for caring by responding bravely to the other vulnerable around us. By following the lead of first responders, we actually follow G-d.

Shabbat Shalom.