

Faith in a Summer of Hatred and Murder

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On June 12, Omar Mateen entered Pulse, a nightclub catering to Orlando's LGBT community and celebrating a Latin American night. Brandishing weapons and taking hostages, Mateen murdered 49 innocent partygoers, and injured even more, over several hours, ending only with a dramatic, heroic police rescue, ending a night of terror inspired by Islamist extremism and anti-LGBT hatred.

One month ago today, in Baton Rouge, police responded to a report of a threatening African American man, waving a gun, while selling CDs. Alton Sterling was subdued by police. Pinned to the ground, an officer sitting on him, hands behind his back, Sterling was killed by another officer who emptied several rounds into his back. Only afterwards did officers remove Sterling's gun. From his pocket.

The very next day, two officers in suburban St. Paul, Minnesota stopped an African American man, Philando Castille, for a broken taillight. After notifying the officer that he was licensed to carry a handgun, Castille reached for his wallet, whereupon the officer opened fire, shooting Castille to death.

Sterling and Castille were only the most recent African Americans to die at the hands of police, under circumstances that seem questionable at best.

The day after Castille was killed, protestors gathered in downtown Dallas. The Dallas Police Department and its Chief have nurtured excellent relations with local "Black Lives Matter" leaders, so the event was well coordinated. Police didn't wear riot gear, as the Dallas County Sheriff explained the next day, because outfitting police that way expresses an expectation that people will riot, likely a self-fulfilling prophecy. The protest was peaceful. A man who was probably psychologically unhinged and certainly enraged about police shootings of his people, opened fire with the racist intent to kill white officers. He murdered DPD Senior Cpl. Lorne Ahrens, DPD Officer Michael Krol, DPD Sgt. Michael Smith, DART Officer Brent Thompson, and DPD Officer Patrick Zamarripa. Nine additional officers and two civilians were injured, before police used a robot to deliver an explosive that killed the murderer.

An atmosphere of unrest had descended upon Baton Rouge after the killing of Alton Sterling. Some in Louisiana's capitol were deep in soul-searching over

race relations and police violence. Others were outraged, on one side of the divide or the other. An African American Baton Rouge police officer, Montrell Jackson, particularly expressed his dismay in a Facebook post: “I swear to God I love this city but I wonder if this city loves me. In uniform I get nasty hateful looks and out of uniform some consider me a threat.” Jackson was among three police officers murdered in Baton Rouge only five days after the Dallas attack. Gavin Eugene Long came from Kansas City, with the express intent to kill Baton Rouge police officers. Along with Officer Jackson, East Baton Rouge Parish Deputy Brad Garafola and Officer Matthew Gerald died at Long’s hand before the SWAT team killed the gunman.

All of these events took place in the space of just over a month, during a summer otherwise dominated by a troubling political season. Related or not, candidate rhetoric has featured racism, religious bigotry, and ethnic vulgarities that we thought had vanished from presidential politics with George Wallace. While presidential candidates have mostly steered clear of anti-LGBT bombast, one party’s platform and plenty of down-ballot races are filled with it. Much of America’s mind is in the toilet, literally and figuratively.

Tonight, we read about cities of refuge. American cities need refuge this summer. Refuge from the racist suspicion that fuels violence toward African Americans, particularly young men. Refuge from hatred directed indiscriminately at all police, the men and women who risk their lives to protect us, even in the departments with the very best reputations for cooperation and community building. Refuge from fear of the “other,” whether a man who wishes to marry another man, or a man who was born biologically female, and now wishes to use the restroom that conforms to the way he lives his life as a man. Refuge from the lies politicians tell, whether to cover their tracks or to whip up support with propaganda unencumbered by the truth. Refuge from a nativist impulse that despises the rich multicultural, diverse society of immigrants that makes this nation great.

The Book of Numbers’ cities of refuge were established at a time when our ancestors didn’t know what to do with a person who had accidentally killed another. Murder was punishable by death, meted out by the nearest relative of the victim. Seeing no appropriate penalty for the unintentional manslayer, Torah directs the people to set aside towns. There, the semi-guilty person could flee, and the victim’s family couldn’t pursue. At the same time, the person who had

committed unintentional homicide was stuck in that city of refuge, unable to leave without facing death.

Officer Montrell Jackson sought refuge in his Facebook friends. He hadn't killed anybody. He saw how he looked in other people's eyes. He was guilty because he wore the uniform. Out of uniform, he was guilty because he was black. He wasn't guilty of any crime. He bore a guilt not of his own making, but one that he could not escape.

Latino LGBT young adults, often rejected in their homes and churches and communities, sought refuge at a nightclub where they could be themselves. That sanctuary, so long a safe place, was invaded from the outside, strictly prohibited in Torah's cities of refuge.

Peaceful protestors in Dallas could feel safe with the Dallas police protecting them and their city. The Dallas police felt so safe around the protestors that they needed no riot gear. But Dallas and its police officers were not safe from an angry, unstable man with a powerful weapon.

As this summer draws nearer to its close – and, please God, let this summer's violence have ended with June and July – we seek refuge in our own sanctuary. Here, let us find community. Here, let us find God's presence. Here, let us find inspiration to repair the world, to stand up to the hatred and violence that threaten human life, portending doom even upon our nation if it will not change.

This week, in addition to Torah, we read prophetic words of warning, prophecies spoken to Israel as Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem, before destroying the First Temple. In the mouths of the prophets, the invaders from the outside are not the villains. Instead, the Israelites themselves have destroyed their society. The Israelites have been unfaithful to God. The Israelites have ignored the poor and defenseless. The Israelites have mistreated the other. The Babylonians are no more than God's weapons, come to take God's vengeance upon the city.

Let us heed the prophetic voice: We are the Israelites. We must bridge the divides which breed distrust, leading to fear, leading to death. We must stand up to purveyors of hatred, even as we must stand up to purveyors of assault rifles. We must heal our nation. For if we do not, we are all manslayers, unintentionally bringing death and destruction upon our society.

This week's prophetic reading is one of three that are read in each of the weeks that lead up to Tisha B'Av, when we recall the destruction of the First

Jerusalem Temple. Each time, after all the threats, the prophet ends with words of hope. Have faith! All is not yet lost. America remains a great nation, whatever its flaws. God has richly blessed our country. With God's help, we can heal our nation.

Tonight, we complete the Book of Numbers. Whenever we complete the reading of a Book of Torah, we affirm, *chazak chazak v'nitchazek*, "Be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen one another." If there was ever a time when America needs strength – strength of faith, strength of action, strength of love – the summer of 2016 is that time.

Say it with me, and then let's sing it with David and Richard: *Chazak, Chazak, v'nitchazek*. "Be Strong. Be Strong. And Let Us Strengthen One Another."

Amen.