

Terror in a Jerusalem Synagogue

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Rabbi Avraham Shmuel Goldberg. Aryeh Kupinsky. Rabbi Kalman Zeev Levine. Rabbi Moshe Twersky. Four Torah scholars gathered with their congregation for morning prayers in their Jerusalem neighborhood synagogue Tuesday. All were murdered by two Palestinian Terrorists.

They were not the first. On Yom Kippur afternoon, Jews throughout the world recall ten martyrs, Torah scholars in the land of Israel, brutally murdered by the Romans during the persecutions of the Emperor Hadrian. *Eleh ezkerah*, "These will I remember," our prayer book mournfully proclaims, "through all the years, ignorance like a monster has devoured our martyrs as in one long day of blood."

That prayer book also acknowledges: Jews, and the sages among us, are not the only victims. "The earth's crust is soaked with the tears of the innocent. The blood of every race cries out from the ground. Which is the people without its martyrs?"

Zidan Saif, an Israeli police officer of the Druze ethnic and religious sect, from the Galilee in northern Israel, was patrolling that Jerusalem neighborhood Tuesday morning. He, too, died at the terrorists' hands, succumbing later in the day to wounds sustained as he shot them.

The State of Israel is bereft. We join in the grief of our brothers and sisters, Jewish and Druze. We will say Kaddish for the dead. We have prayed for the healing of the wounded. Our thoughts turn to the widows, to the orphans, to the communities who have lost their loved ones, their dear friends, their teachers, their protectors.

Our sadness stretches well beyond Tuesday's events. These five are not the only deaths our people has sustained in Israel in recent weeks. Last month, a three year old baby, Chaya Zissel Braun, was murdered by a terrorist who plowed his car into a crowd at an East Jerusalem rail terminal. On November 10, Sgt. Almog Shilony, of the Israeli Air Force, was murdered, not in the line of duty, but stabbed at a Tel Aviv train station. The same day, miles to the east, a terrorist ran over Dalia Lemkus with his van, then got out and stabbed her to death. Funerals of Israeli victims of terror have become all too familiar in recent weeks.

We grieve all of these deaths, and that's not all. We mourn the loss of hope. Israelis and Palestinians alike increasingly despair of peace. Some thought peace a folly even in 1993, when many of us marveled at Yitzchak Rabin, of blessed memory, that grizzled veteran of countless wars, shaking hands and signing a peace treaty with his terrorist nemesis, Yassir Arafat. Rabin signed that accord with conviction, even if President Clinton had to steer him to the handshake. Even the idealistic surely realized that peace would be cold; friendships, like that handshake, would be forced and formal, not warm and embracing. But we would not, twenty-one years later, be grieving the murders of pious Jews at prayer. Or so we thought.

Despair is sad, but worse: Despair is ugly. Mahmoud Abbas, long regarded as moderate, the President of the Palestinian Authority, the only partner for peace if there is one, called for "days of rage" last week. No, the forces that committed Tuesday's murders weren't under Abbas's control. Yes, he condemned the murders, after being pressed hard by Secretary of State Kerry. His condolences were more forced and false than the handshake of his mentor, Yassir Arafat. Abbas, too, bears responsibility. He asked for "days of rage," and he got them.

Despair is ugly on the Israeli side, as well. In an earlier era, after a terrorist attack, Israeli forces would respond by demolishing the terrorist's home. A decade ago, Israel abandoned that tactic. Not only is such collective punishment an immoral violation of international law, it was also proven not to be a deterrent. Late this week, the Israel Defense Forces sustained a blight on their good name, at the hands of their own nation's leaders, who ordered the destruction of the home of the terrorist who had murdered baby Chaya with his car. Demolishing his home may cheer some Israelis, satisfying a lust for revenge. But if the past is prologue, and surely it is, that demolition will inspire yet more Palestinian terrorists to multiply murder. Sadly, Prime Minister Netanyahu promised that this home destruction would be but the first of many.

Yes, we have much to grieve. Still, we have more to understand.

Many people believe that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is essentially a religious war, and not without reason. Many Jews and Christians hold that God's promise deeds the entire historic Land of Israel to the Jewish people in perpetuity. Many Muslims believe that Allah would never permit them to relinquish territory that was ever under Islamic dominion, which includes all of modern Israel.

Still, religion has not historically been at the center of the fight. Israeli leaders have typically been most concerned about security for Israel and the Jewish people. Palestinians and their allies have portrayed Israel as European colonial usurpation of Arab land, displacing those who lived there previously. Israeli leaders have repeatedly stated that they would cede territory taken in the preemptive, defensive Six Day War of 1967, even land with holy biblical significance to Jews, in exchange for peace. Historically, Palestinian leaders have mostly been secular, and in recent decades have claimed support for a two-state solution. Neither side believes the other is sincere in its stated willingness to compromise, and both have reason to be skeptical. Still, the dispute has mostly not been about God's point of view.

The most recent violence, though, comes in the context of conflict raging around the Temple Mount. Known to Muslims as "the Noble Sanctuary," that holiest Jerusalem real estate is home to two iconic domes, one gold and the other silver, the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, among Islam's holiest places. That hill is also Judaism's holiest place on Earth, the mound where the ancient Jerusalem Temple once stood.

The first time I went to Israel, the summer I turned 13, we visited the Temple mount and its mosques. Touring on the Temple Mount did not seem controversial in 1976, except among Jews. Signs posted by Orthodox Jewish authorities, warned that a Jew might risk stepping on the site of the Holy of Holies, where only the High Priest is permitted. According to the Torah, terrible things might happen to an average Jew who treads on that sacred ground.

More recently, the Temple Mount has been a source of Jewish-Muslim tension. Jewish extremists have announced plans for the construction of a Third Temple on that holy mound. These preparations unnerve Orthodox authorities, who believe that no Temple may be built on that site until God sends a messianic redeemer. Worse, the "Temple Mount Faithful," as they call themselves, gleefully look forward to the day when those magnificent mosques are demolished like the homes of terrorists, replaced by Israel's holy Temple.

Israel has long enforced what it calls a "status quo" on the Temple Mount: Jews may visit, but may not pray there. Rather than being offended by the notion of a place where a Jew or anybody is forbidden to pray, we can understand the policy as one of respect. The hill is currently home to two mosques; in other words, it's a Muslim house of prayer. The Jewish place of worship today is nearby, at the western retaining wall of the Temple mount.

One Israeli Parliamentarian, Moshe Feiglin, a member of Prime Minister Netanyahu's Likud Party, has taken an extreme position regarding the Temple Mount. He says: "We must expel the Moslem *wakf* [or religious authority] from the Temple Mount and restore exclusive Israeli sovereignty over this most holy site." Israel's Sephardic Chief Rabbi has boldly spoken out against Feiglin and all Jewish visits to the Temple Mount, not only for religious reasons, but because he rightly sees such provocations as dangerous to the Jewish people.

At the same time, Palestinian politicians and terrorists alike have exploited Feiglin's minority view for their own purposes. Even though Feiglin's position has been repudiated by the Prime Minister, who has vowed to maintain the Temple Mount status quo, Palestinians claim that Israel plans an imminent takeover. As part of a campaign to refute the legitimate Jewish connection to the Holy Land, many Palestinians will even falsely assert that their Noble Sanctuary never was a Jewish holy place.

A conflict that has, for decades, been about the legitimate national rights of two peoples, their peace and security, now seems to center around a holy mountain. This week's photographs are of blood-stained *talleisim* and *tefillin*, prayer shawls and phylacteries, from Tuesday's synagogue murders. The extremists are sadly succeeding at turning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into a holy war after all.

This Shabbat, we come together as a community – to celebrate Shabbat, yes, and also to grieve with our people in the Land of Israel. We mourn the loss of life and of humanity. We are saddened by ideals unrealized. We are offended by the desecration of God's Name, perverted to incite conflict and justify murder.

Let us, let Israel, and let the Jewish people never give in to terrorists, not by giving up and not by giving in to ways that are like theirs. Let us, let Israel, and let the Jewish people reinvigorate efforts to build peace between Israel and the Palestinian people. Proclaiming proudly our continuing commitment to two-states, living side by side, at peace, is our best response to terrorism. Let us, let Israel, and let the Jewish people never be lured into a holy war, not by our own extremists or by those of another people.

On Tuesday, Rabbi Avraham Shmuel Goldberg, Aryeh Kupinsky, Rabbi Kalman Zeev Levine, and Rabbi Moshe Twersky sought to honor God with prayer. Let us honor their memories, and the memory of Zidan Saif, tonight, with this prayer, by Alden Solovy:

Mothers of Jerusalem,
Your wail echoes in the hills,
Your grief resounds in the valleys,
Your prayer rises up into the luminous sky.
More fathers and brothers,
More sisters and mothers,
More children and innocent,
Lost to the hand of violence,
Lost to the hand of hatred.

How long, oh my God,
How long before cruelty ends
And peace reigns within these borders,
Within these walls,
Within our hearts?
How long, oh my God,
Must we open graves for the lost?

God of generations,
God of millennia,
Spread Your tabernacle
Of safety and shelter
Over [the] holy city.
Guard our sons and our daughters.
Protect all who dwell within [its] gates.

Let courage and hope ease this fear.
Let compassion open the souls of the hard-hearted.
Let joy and gladness return,
In song and prayer,
To Your steppes of holiness.

Amen.