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### Tucson and the healing power of community (and spiritual practice)

A lot of people have asked me about Tucson. And, as hard as it still is for me to talk about all of this, I feel an obligation to do so. I've come to realize that what felt like a local, personal tragedy has come to be a national event. And I want to share with you some of how our city has been coping – I want you to stop thinking about Tucson as the place where a crazed gunman did something terrible. Instead, I want you to take back to your communities a different picture of Tucson – Tucson as an example of the healing power of community and of the importance of love and kindness. And I want to tell you how Judaism can – and did – play a part in some of the healing that's happening now.

People say that those who have been there and those who haven't have different things to say about serious illness. The same is true for this shooting. There is much to be said about politics, and rhetoric, mental health care and gun control, immigration and life on the border. And I have seen some very sophisticated national analyses on these issues. But in Tucson – we're not there yet. We can't talk about those things yet. I hope we will some day, and I hope we'll be able to be part of the national conversation on these issues that needs to happen. But not just yet.

What I do want to talk about, is healing. Three weeks ago, the quiet life of my city was shattered. As a friend of mine noted – in the time it takes for a child to blow out the candles on a birthday cake, our lives changed completely. Tucson is like Jerusalem – a big city that feels like a small town. In a metropolitan area with a population of nearly a million, everyone knew someone who was involved in the events of that Saturday. For me, and for everyone around me, this event was personal. A good friend of good friends, who happens to be a public figure, and is also a member of the same synagogue we go to, was shot in the head and miraculously survived, but we do not yet know how complete her recovery will be. Some of my friends lost a dear colleague, who died that day, while fulfilling the duties of his job. And a friend's father, the grandfather of my son's classmate and the brother-in-law of my son's teacher, was seriously injured while standing next to his boss. His life was saved by a passer-by, who crawled over to him and applied pressure to his wounds until the paramedics arrived.

My community was shocked, saddened, scared, confused, angry, uncertain. I find it hard to describe what we felt those first few days. It is hard to capture the sorrow, the grief, the tremendous sense of fragility and fear and confusion. I told Israeli friends, "it felt like when Rabin was killed" (I was living in Jerusalem at that time.) It was not the same, the two events are different in so many ways, but the feelings were the same - the deep, deep sense that something had gone horribly wrong in the world.

But what happened next was quite amazing. A great quiet descended on our town. We were subdued, pensive, moving in slow motion. Other than the media circus that also descended on us, the city turned inward. And then beautiful things began to happen.

A few days after the shootings, Rabbi Helen Cohn, who I study with, sent out an email. She asked: “How can spiritual practice help us cope with our swirl of feelings and thoughts? What *middah* (spiritual trait) will help soothe your soul? What *middah* will help bring healing and some sort of peace into our world? What will keep our hearts open?”

For me, personally, this question was transformative (and I do not use that word lightly). Instead of losing myself in fear and anger, as I had been for those first few days, I decided to work towards compassion and loving-kindness. This was not an easy thing to do. But Jewish teachings and Jewish spiritual practice gave me the tools to try. And it seemed like everyone around was doing the same (even if they weren’t doing so in a Jewish framework).

Our city was torn apart by tragedy, and then, in the midst of all of this grief and sorrow, there was an outpouring of love and kindness, compassion, generosity and community. People came together to support each other, to help, to grieve, to hug. From this broken, shattered place, a great love and a great healing came forth.

Rabbi Bill Cutter (and many others) says healing is in the stories. There are so many stories I could tell you from the last few weeks, but I want to tell you a Jewish story, one small story about how Jewish ritual and practice brought some of us a sense of healing.

One week after the shootings, three local Jewish musicians – Scott Zorn, Julie Zorn, and Lori Sumberg, decided to do *havdallah* (prayers to end the Sabbath) and healing prayers at the vigil site at University Medical Center. Tragically, the Jewish world had also lost Debbie Friedman that week, and they wanted to honor her, as well as the Tucson victims.

And so, a week after the shootings, six days after Debbie’s death, more than a hundred Jews gathered on the grassy lawn in front of the hospital that had been transformed into a spontaneous vigil site. People had been gathering there all week. They had left behind candles (most of them church candles with portraits of the Virgin of Guadalupe), letters, posters, balloons, stuffed animals, art work, blessings, memories, wishes and prayers. Someone had clearly been caring for the site, lighting the candles each night, replacing the dead flowers with fresh ones, moving things around to create paths that formed a walking labyrinth of sorrow and grief. (As an aside, everything that was brought to these sites is now being archived and saved by the university archivists, and will hopefully be somehow incorporated into a permanent memorial.)

When we arrived that Saturday evening, there were hundreds of people milling about. Some walked quietly, some cried, some stood and prayed. A mariachi musician stood alone and played a haunting version of the national anthem on his trumpet. Then, towards the back, away from the street and close to the hospital entrance, we found our group. Three Jewish musicians with guitars, surrounded by a large circle of people of all ages, scanning the sky looking for the three stars that would signify that Shabbat was over.

There were no words for what we were experiencing. No words that could capture the brokenness we all felt, the fragility of life, the confusion and despair. My friend Lori Sumberg, a cantorial soloist who was co-leading *havdallah* that night, said, "When there are no words, we let the music take us". And that night, it was Debbie's music that took us where we needed to go. There were no sermons, no talk, no readings. We stood in a circle and sang the *havdallah* prayers with the tunes that Debbie had composed. We lit the candle and blessed the wine. We passed the spices and I explained to a curious woman who had stopped to see what we were doing: "smell some sweetness for a sweet new week". She smiled quietly, and said: "ah, we need that now...." We sang "a good week, a week of peace, may gladness reign and joy increase". The English words, which I had never particularly liked, seemed so powerful, so appropriate, I thought, *hallevay* – may it be so. We sang, "*lechi lach*" (go forth) – for those who had passed, for the injured and their families, whose journeys of healing were just beginning, for our community whose path was so uncertain at that moment. And then, we sang Debbie's "*Mi Sheberach*", the prayer for healing. Not once, not twice, but three times. Once was not enough, we needed more healing than that. With each verse, our voices grew louder and more sure. We put our arms around each other, held on tight, and sang for ourselves, for the victims, for our community, and for Gabby, hoping that somewhere in that hospital behind us, she could hear the Hebrew words and know that it was for her. The song of a Jewish woman, who was now gone, sent up to support another Jewish woman, who was just starting to heal.

I have worked at the intersection of Judaism, health and healing for many years now. I have sung the *Mi Sheberach*, in all its different versions and tunes, in many different contexts. But only twice before have I been so moved by this prayer for healing. Only twice before have I felt, as I did that night, that the *shechinah* had come down to pray with us, and that the great healing energy that the music brought forth would really heal. Both of those other times, Debbie Friedman herself was leading the *Mi Shebarach*. I like to think that Debbie's spirit was with us that night in Tucson, but from what I've heard, her spirit was in many places that week.

As we finished singing, an older woman next to me – who I was sure had been singing the Hebrew words with me, and who I had reached out to and put my arm around as we sang – said "Thank you for being here. You all are welcome to come pray with us at St Elizabeth Ann Seton's any time". Instantly, I understood. Two funerals had been held at that church in the previous two days. I looked her in the eye – "did you know them?" "No", she said, "but my friend worked for the judge for 20 years. So we've been taking care of her – making sure she eats, getting her meals, getting her what she needs, you know how it is...." She smiled a little bit, but her eyes were sad. "Yes", I said. "I do know. My friend's father was injured. Our community's been doing the same...whatever they need to get them through this." We nodded in recognition, we had nothing and everything in common, and she walked away.

So this is what I want you to know about Tucson, this is what I can tell you about healing. Healing is Jews and Catholics, Jewish guitar-players and Mexican mariachis praying together in front of a hospital. Healing is the teachers at my son's preschool who, despite their own broken hearts, took loving care of our children and gave them normalcy and safety at a time when the world did not feel safe. Healing is the hugs that everyone in

Tucson gave to friends and strangers, every day for weeks. Healing is the meals that groups of friends all over the city prepared for the families of the dead and the injured, and the meals that, unsolicited, restaurants sent to the hospital, for the families and the doctors and the nurses. It is the clergy and counselors and massage therapists who showed up at the hospital, because they thought they might be needed, the workplaces who told the families – take as long as you need, we’ll cover for you, the healing services that every church and synagogue held that week. Healing is the hundreds dressed in white who lined the roads to the funerals to support the families and the thousands of Tucsonans who lined the streets as an ambulance passed, taking Gabby to rehab elsewhere. It is the 1500 ceramic bells that were hung all over our city to remind people to be kind, the more than \$100,000 of donations to the Community Food Bank, made in Gabby’s honor, \$10 at a time, the thousands of cards and letters and prayers left at the hospital and at the Giffords’ office, the high school students from the perpetrator’s high school who made bracelets that say “we remember” and are selling them to raise money for the families, the artists who produced dozens of new artwork this week for a special sale to support the victims. I could go on and on – I have just skimmed the surface here. It will surprise no one to know that healing in Tucson is coming from a powerful sense of caring and connection and community. In the end, it seems that Hillel was right. The most important thing is simple - *v’ahavta l’re’acha kamocho*, “love your neighbor as yourself”.

My friend Jenny Douglas, whose father Ron Barber, was injured, wrote a letter to our community describing her experience of the last few weeks. She said:

I'm not sure how the long-term impact of this tragic event will direct my life, but I can tell you this: It keeps coming back to this, **Building Authentic Relationships and Strong Community**. This community's support and the way Tucson has come together has been such an incredible resource to my family. We have received so many cards, emails, texts, facebook messages, lovingly prepared meals, songs and hugs that have filled each of us to the brim and allowed us the strength to get up each day and stay positive. I was trying to come up with a word that describes the emotions of the last 2 weeks. Is there a word for happy sad happy sad? As my father continues to heal from his physical wounds I know that the longer healing is the emotional. I also know that the supportive relationships we have in this small/big town will continue to provide a sense of comfort and strength as all of our hearts heal.

And I will end with an excerpt from the first interview that Ron Barber gave, about a week after the shooting:

He keeps hoping, thinking that this can turn into something good for Tucson, that the characteristics he sees in his boss - compassion, intelligence, reason and results orientation - will spread. "Those values, I think, are the ones that I want to continue to help promote, and I know she (Giffords) will be here to do it. That's what I hope our community will latch onto. I think in that there will be a lot of healing."

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