

Shabbat Sukkot
October 3, 2015

Another mass shooting. Another school community devastated. More pictures of vigils and people crying and police removing bodies. The president is right. I, at least, have become numb. And angry. And frustrated. Because whereas normally I would cry out for government action to help the situation, it appears that ship will never leave port, and I feel depressed and helpless. Oregon actually has stricter background check laws than many states, but this shooter (Christopher Harper-Mercer) came to Umpqua College armed with an assault rifle and 3 pistols. At home he had nine or so more, all apparently legally acquired.

I want to build today on what I taught about on the first day of Sukkot. The Zohar views the fall holidays as a grand mythic description of the ultimate battle between good and evil, darkness and exile vs. light and ingathering. In the process of the union between The Holy One and the Shechinah -- the male and female aspects of God -- which in an ideal world are completely unified, the Zohar focuses on the verse in Shir

Ha-shirim:

שְׂמאלוֹ תַחַת לְרֵאשִׁי וְיְמִינִי תַחְבֵּקֵנִי:

His left [arm] is under my head, while His right embraces me.

The Zohar says:

Come and see: The order of unifying all into one, how does it go?
 Rabbi Elazar began: We have learned, "Hashem has made bare His holy arm" (Isaiah 52:10). This is one arm on which are dependent salvation, vengeance, and redemption . Why? To raise up the [Shechinah] from the dust and to welcome Her with Him so as to unite as one . When that arm is raised up to Her, much fear engulfs the world, until He rests that arm under Her head to unite with Her, as it is said: "His left hand is under my head..." (Song of Songs 2:6). And then judgment rests and He atones for sins . Later the right arm comes to embrace Her. Then rejoicing engulfs the world, and all faces shine. Subsequently, She enters into bodily union

[with Him], and then everything is called 'one without schism'.

Then everything is perfection and everything is joy and they certainly unite, which is not the case at other times.

The Zohar links this process with the festivals of Tishrei. The Shechinah is first brought up from darkness and degradation -- the rift between the upper transcendent sefirot and the lower imminent sefirot on Rosh Hashanah, when God's left arm is extended. God's left arm is associated with the sefirah gevurah or din, might and judgment. The Holy One's arm begins to summon Shechinah out of the depths of exile on Rosh Hashanah, on Yom Ha-din. When God's arm of yeshuah, nekamah, and ge'ulah [salvation, vengeance, and redemption] is outstretched the world is in judgment and terrified. On Yom Kippur that arm begins to embrace Shechinah, and there is an acceptance of atonement and end to judgment. Then:

On the first day of Sukkot, the right arm awakens to embrace Her .

Then everyone rejoices and all faces shine; and there is the joy of pouring pure water on the altar [a joyous Sukkot ritual.] And people rejoice in all manners of happiness; for the right arm is in effect and everywhere that the right arm rests there is joy in all, and then there is great happiness and playfulness.

God's right arm represents hesed, kindness. After the terror and uncertainty of Rosh Hashanah and the hint of healing on Yom Kippur, on Sukkot zeman simhatenu [the season of our joy] the Holy One's right arm begins to embrace Shechinah.

It is amazing that when salvation, vengeance, and redemption -- powerful forces all -- touch Shechinah, they are not enough to effect complete healing and establish the unity of God. We do not begin to feel true joy and ease until hesed enters the picture. In fact, hesed is more powerful than all these other forces, for the Rabbis saw the right arm as dominant. It is only an injection of hesed, the Holy One's right

arm beginning to embrace Shechinah, that moves us forward.

And so will it be with the gun violence that seems to strike randomly every few months at this point. A loner armed to the teeth. A college, or a theatre, or an elementary school. And the federal government has proved itself powerless to do a thing. The Rabbinical Assembly said yesterday:

Gun violence has reached a point in our country where it affects communities of all size, race and creed, rendering even our safest spaces – schools, houses of worship – as targets. It is time for our leaders to enact sensible gun control, to support required background checks on all public and private gun sales, bans on military style assault weapons and high-capacity magazines and legislation making gun trafficking a federal crime with severe penalties. We cannot sit idly by while we have the means to prevent future tragedy.

The average person should not be able to buy assault rifles. A person --

especially one whose sanity people question -- should not be able to own twelve guns. I believe you do have the right to own a revolver for protection or a hunting rifle, but they should be at least as difficult to get as a bottle of pills. The NRA says that more guns are the answer. Some states now allow carrying weapons in movie theatres and universities. But we do not need more might, more vengeance, even though they sometimes can help bring redemption. We need hesed. It is only hesed, the way of love and gentleness, that will move things forward when it comes to gun violence in our society. It is only hesed that can affect a true healing of the cosmic rift in creation to which we are heir. How as a society can we not take some action to make these awful scenes less frequent? The NRA and politicians who back them, I believe, have blood on their hands.

Kabbalah teaches that without Hesed, Gevurah runs amok. We are living that world. Please join me in imagining a nation which achieves balance, that is not held hostage by its most extreme elements. As long as we as a nation regard guns as a symbol of freedom, instead of with a

wary eye, as long as our laws step outside the boundaries of all common sense, these shootings will continue. Please join me in continuing to talk to the wall, to yell and scream at it if you like, until the wall moves.

May God bless the victims of Christopher Mercer, and of our own shameful inaction.