

**Facing One Another and Shouldering the Burden
Parkland and Parashat Terumah, 5778**

(START WITH TRIGGER WARNING)

Stop me if you have heard this story before. I heard it from my teacher, Rabbi Ed Feinstein. There was once a great land called Paradise. It wasn't any more beautiful than any other land, but was called Paradise because it was ruled by a wise king and everyone helped those around them. After a while, the king passed on and his son, who was not as wise or caring as his father, took over.

One day, the new king's royal ministers came to him and said, "Sire we have a terrible problem! There is a famine in the land and people are going hungry. We must do something!"

The king was impatient and asked, "Are they starving?"

"Yes, many have nothing at all to eat!" they replied.

"But," said the king, "I have plenty of food. I feel sorry that they are hungry, but it is not my problem."

The ministers were stunned and scrambled to plead further when a messenger ran into the throne room, interrupting them. "Sire," they cried, "we have a terrible problem! The river has become poisoned so that all who live along it have no water to drink. We must help them!"

The king frowned and said, "But I have plenty of water. I feel sorry that they are thirsty, but it is not my problem." His subjects tried and tried to sway the king, but unless the crises impacted him directly, he always replied that every dire situation was not his problem. Soon, everyone in the kingdom began to act like the king. No one even remembered they lived in Paradise.

No one except a Fisherman, who hatched a plan. He owned the most beautiful boat in the harbor and he decided to invite all of the nobles for a grand cruise, including the king. On the appointed day, everyone came aboard and they rode through the open ocean, taking in the breath-taking views. After a few hours, one of the passengers asked, "Can we please return home?"

"Absolutely," replied the Fisherman. "I just have one thing to do first."

With that, he removed a small drill from his pack and began to drill a hole in the bottom of the boat. People turned to him to ask him what he was doing. "I'm drilling a hole," he answered.

"But why?!" they all asked. "If you drill a hole, water will rush in and sink the boat!"

"Because," the Fisherman replied curtly, "it is a good day for drilling holes. It's my boat, my drill, and I'm going to finish drilling this hole."

Everyone was afraid and came to the king, begging him to do something. He approached the Fisherman boldly and shouted, "Fisherman, I command you to stop this at once!"

The Fisherman looked up and explained slowly, "It's my boat. It's my drill. And I am going to make a hole. Now please, move aside; you're blocking my light."

Now the king began crying and pleading: "Stop, please stop! If you keep going the boat will fill with water and we will all drown!"

The Fisherman paused. "You don't want the boat to sink? You don't want to drown? I am very sorry, but that is not my problem!"

The prince cried desperately, "What do you mean it's not your problem?! Anyone can see that if I have a problem, you have a problem. And if you have a problem, I have a problem. If anyone has a problem, then everyone has a problem because we're all in the same boat."

And then, the king stopped. Like a man who has just figured out a great riddle he repeated the words slowly: "If I have a problem, you have a problem. And if you have a problem, I have a problem. If anyone has a problem, then everyone has a problem because we're all in the same boat. Anyone can see that!"

And the Fisherman replied, "Now we can all go home."

This week we have a project to do. We just read God's words to Moshe, telling him at the beginning of Parashat Terumah (Exodus 25:8) – “ וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ ”: וְשִׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכְכֶם:” *All of you, build me a sacred space that I might dwell among you all.* And as we read on, God lays out the specifics of how this holy place is to be built step-by-step. What is interesting is that almost immediately when we launch into the specifics of how to build this *Mishkan*, God's holy place, God stops talking to all of us collectively, and speaks directly YOU, and YOU, and each of us individually. It is as if, by changing the wording slightly, our Torah means to instill in us the understanding that creating and maintain God's holiness in our community is not only our collective task, but can only be accomplished, truly and fully, if every single person steps in to help.

But creating a holy place for God is not a one-time task. The Jewish People are still wandering, and must have a way to carry the *Mishkan* with them from place to place. So God instructs us to create poles to transport it, saying:

וַעֲשִׂיתָ בְּדֵי עֵצֵי שִׁטִּים וְצִפִּיתָ אֹתָם זָהָב: וְהִבַּאתָ אֶת-הַבַּדִּים בְּטַבַּעַת עַל צִלְעוֹת הָאָרֶן לְשֵׂאת אֶת-הָאָרֶן בָּהֶם: בְּטַבַּעַת הָאָרֶן יִהְיוּ הַבַּדִּים לֹא יִסְרוּ מִמֶּנּוּ:

*Make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold; then insert the poles into the rings on the side walls of the ark, for carrying the ark. **The poles shall remain in the rings of the ark: they shall not be removed from it.***

Giving a more colorful description, Rambam, in his code of Jewish law, the Mishneh Torah (Klei Ha-Mikdash 2, 12-13), explains how these poles were to actually be used:

When the ark is moved from place to place it is not moved on a beast or a wagon but it must be carried on the shoulder... This duty of carrying it on the shoulder is distinctly stated: “for the services of the holy things belonged to them: they bore them upon their shoulders (Num. 7:9).” The porters carried it facing each other, their backs to the outside, their faces inwards, taking care that the poles should not slip out of the rings...

This is how we are to carry holiness into the world: bearing the weight of the Divine on each of our shoulders and looking one another in the eye. The only way to move through the world with this sacred space is to advance ahead one step at a time, moving together with those who share the burden.

I wanted share with you some the amazing experiences I’ve been having as a part of the Rabbis Without Borders Fellowship, whose final retreat was this past week. I wanted to share with you some of the wisdom I’ve gained from friends and mentors and some of the incredibly important work that is on the horizon for us, for the Jewish community, and for a world striving to always be better.

But I can’t do that today. I refuse to look toward a brighter tomorrow when the present moment is cast under such a dark pall. Instead, I have to share that I was in the airport, on my way back from one of the most transformative weeks of

my career, when a nineteen-year-old gunman, armed with the same AR-15 semi-automatic rifle that has taken thousands of lives in this country, walked into Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School – one of the largest schools in Broward County, Florida – and opened fire, killing children and teachers.

Immediately, the world began to fill up with numbers:

- That 17 people had died, 14 more had been wounded.
- That this was the 18th case of gun violence in American schools in the first 44 days of this year (2018)
- That 3 of the largest mass shootings in our history have happened in the past 5 months
- That there have been 239 school shootings, in which 438 people were shot and 138 killed, in the past 6 years since the horrifying massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School
- That citizens in the United States own 48% of the world's civilian-owned firearms, or about 310,000,000 total guns
- That the US makes up 5% of the world's population but is home to 31% of the mass shooters

But I'm not here to talk about numbers. I'm here to talk about people. I need to talk about teachers who sacrificed themselves to protect the students in

their charge, and about young people whose light was extinguished far too soon. I need to talk about the public figures wringing their hands while the most vulnerable suffer. And I need to talk about you and me and how we face each other and move forward together in a world where madness becomes mundane and casualties become common.

PEOPLE, not numbers, were killed on Wednesday.

Alyssa Alhadeff was 14. Her mother said Alyssa was a talented soccer player and creative writer and had an amazing personality. She spent her summers at Camp Coleman – a Jewish overnight camp in Georgia.

Scott Beigel was 35 years old. Scott was a geography teacher and the school's cross-country coach. He was killed after he unlocked a door to allow students in so they could hide from the shooter.

Martin Duque Anguiano was 14, a freshman at the school, and his brother, Miguel, said, “Words cannot describe my pain [at losing him].”

Nicholas Dworet was 17, was a senior at the school. Nicholas had just earned an academic scholarship to the University of Indianapolis and had committed to its swim team in the fall.

Aaron Feis was 37, and had graduated from Douglas High School in 1999. He had been an assistant football coach at the school since 2002, and had worked

as a security guard at the school for at least eight years. Aaron died from wounds he sustained while shielding students from bullets.

Jamie Guttenberg was 14. Her parents, Fred and Jennifer's first message to the world was simply to ask every parent to hold their children close.

Chris Hixon was the wrestling coach, as well as last year's athletic director of the year in Broward County. He was fatally injured after he raced to the scene of the shooting to try to help students.

Luke Hoyer was 15, played basketball and was an NBA fan — and he was quiet but happy, "a kid with a huge heart."

Cara Loughran was 14 and loved the beach.

Gina Montalto was 14 and a member of the school marching band's winter guard.

Joaquin Oliver was 17. He moved with his family to the U.S. from Venezuela when he was 3. Joaquin played basketball in a city rec league and loved to write poetry.

Alaina Petty was 14. She was in the JROTC and had helped with a Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints cleanup of the Florida Keys after Hurricane Irma.

Meadow Pollack was 18, a senior who planned to attend Lynn University in Boca Raton, Fla., in the fall. Her father describes her as "a very strong-willed young girl who had everything going for her."

Helena Ramsay was 17, a junior who loved her friends.

Alex Schachter was 14 and played trombone in the marching band. He was described as "a sweetheart of a kid" who "just wanted to do well and make his parents happy." His older brother, also a student at Douglas, survived the shooting.

Carmen Schentrup was 16, and a standout student. In September, she was named a National Merit Scholarship semifinalist.

Peter Wang was 15, a member of the [J]ROTC program. Peter was in study hall when the shooting began and he had been holding a door so others could escape.

As soon as I heard the story break on Wednesday, I called my friend and hevruta (study partner) Rabbi Rachel Greengrass, who has served the community at Temple Beth Am in Miami for 10 years. We talked, but there were no good words. Who can say anything real at a time like this?! And then the next day she posted something that hit my heart. She said, "I am also sick and frustrated. Facebook posts are not enough...Let your heartbreak go to your feet. Go and visit

our representative's offices and ask for these assault rifles to stay with the military where they were intended to be. Ask for mental health support for our teens and that mental health be taken as seriously as other diseases. We cannot be free if we are too afraid to send our kids to school in the morning.”

She said we. We build the house in which God is supposed to dwell. We were meant to carry the Divine into the world around us everywhere we went. We were ordered to shoulder the burden of truly realizing that holy spark that animates each one of us can be found in every other person and we do that by truly seeing each other, by looking right at the faces of the other and never, not for a minute, turning away from this pain. Not even when it angers us. Not even when it breaks our hearts. Not even when it feels too heavy to bear. Do something, anything, everything within your power to protect the children we love. Mine are called Amitai and Nadav, but they could just as easily have been Miguel or Alex or Meadow or Peter.

Please, don't let this moment pass. I am asking each and every person here, regardless of how old you are, what you believe, how you vote or when we disagree, don't allow yourself to sit back and be stunned by this latest tragedy. Call all of our representatives. Write letters. Show up at their offices. Think creatively of anything that could do anything. Talk to the people you know. Make

it known, in every place and at every level, that keeping our children safe is our sacred duty and that there is no excuse good enough to justify this heartbreak.

Maimonides reminded us that carrying the *Mishkan* was not a practical task, relegated to our shared past of tribal wandering, but a model of how our community can become holy only when we take in the honest humanity of every person. We are called to stand fast with one another, shoulder to shoulder, and hold a sacred burden. I call on each of you to look at the faces of those who have died and to stare into the sacredness of one another's souls, and take small, sacred steps forward together. And remember: if I have a problem, you have a problem. And if you have a problem, I have a problem. If anyone has a problem, then everyone has a problem because we're all in the same boat. Anyone can see that.

Shabbat Shalom.