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**The Newtown Effect**

**The Former Newtown Rabbi’s testimony of the Sandy Hook Shooting**

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Rabbi Dr. Shaul Marshall Praver, was the former congregational rabbi in Newtown, Connecticut who served as a first responder at the shooting at the Sandy Hook Elementary School. Newsweek recognized him as one of the 50 most influential Rabbis in America that year.

Rabbi Praver was ordained by the Jerusalem Rabbinate in 1989, earned his Doctor of Ministry from Hartford Seminary in 2019 and was recently appointed senior fellow at the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Institute in Washington D.C. He is a clinically trained chaplain spiritual care provider with Norwalk Hospital and works for the Connecticut Department of Correction at facilities in Cheshire and Newtown. Rabbi Praver recently published The Love Zap and has several other manuscripts following. Rabbi Praver was awarded Letter Writer of the Year by C.A.M.A.R.A in 2005 and received the prestigious Yuval award from the Cantors Assembly and the Samaritan Medal of Peace and Humanitarian Accomplishments in 2013.

Rabbi Praver is determined that Newtown be remembered as a bridge to a new and kinder world. He believes humanity can birth a culture of peace and that we all have a lot more to learn about Love. He insists that Love is a real power like thunder and lightning and that humanity will eventually learn to harness it to favorably transform our world.

**The Newtown Effect**

By Rabbi Dr. Shaul Marshall Praver

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*The Newtown Rabbi’s testimony of the Sandy Hook Shooting*

Though we are as a delicate flower of the field, we shall endure forever in the spirit of God. Comfort our people, for their hearts have been broken. Bind up their wounds, for they have been severely wounded.

**Foreword**

If you are interested first and foremost in reading about gory details of the Sandy Hook shooting, you should stop right here. This book is not for you. My testimony of the event starts just prior to the initial call I received requesting that I comfort the families after the shooting had already occurred. If you are interested in the process of healing, rectification, and the soul-searching that took place in the weeks, months and years after the shooting, read on because you will be deeply satisfied. This is my sacred testimony and my prescription for bringing to life a culture of peace and civility in America.

This book is about how people change in the face of tragedy and how their transformations make an impact on the culture and consciousness of society. Alas, we are a society engrossed in graphic violence, even though our bodies are physical and subject to the same natural laws of the universe. We all bleed red. We all take our last breath, and we all eventually succumb to death. However, where we differ and where profound meaning is found is in the way we live.

In accordance with professional standards set forth in chaplaincy, I have changed the names of all individuals in this book who received my spiritual care during this trying time. However, some of the testimonies that these same individuals put into the public record on their own accord, have been recited in this work as well. Regarding the main individuals who became known nationally, Veronique and Lenny Pozner, it was impossible to hide their identity entirely. As such, I told the story but shared nothing that occurred in our private conversations. Only my direct experiences and reflections of the events are included. There are however, a few statements Lenny and Veronique made that I included with their permission. I made no attempt to obscure the identity of public figures, as there is no requirement to do so.

**Acknowledgement**

I wish to thank the Newtown Interfaith Clergy Association, with whom I stood shoulder-to-shoulder as one of the first to respond at the firehouse in Sandy Hook. I wish to thank my wife, Beth Lebenson Praver, and my children, Noah, Shane and Charlotte, who were there for me and continue to be there for me as I heal from post-traumatic stress. They helped me make lifestyle changes necessary to prepare an appropriate response to the shooting and to spend my valuable time with receptive, loving people. I couldn’t do what I do without them.

**Dedication**

**I dedicate this book in sacred memory of the victims:**

**Charlotte Bacon**

**Daniel Barden**

**Rachel Davino**

**Olivia Engel**

**Josephine Gay**

**Ana M. Marquez-Green**

**Dylan Hockley**

**Dawn Hochsprung**

**Madeleine F. Hsu**

**Catherine V. Hubbard**

**Chase Kowalski**

**Jesse Lewis**

**James Mattioli**

**Grace MacDonnell**

**Anne Marie Murphy**

**Emilie Parker**

**Jack Pinto**

**Noah Pozner**

**Caroline Previdi**

**Jessica Rekos**

**Avielle Richman**

**Lauren Rousseau**

**Mary Sherlach**

**Victoria Soto**

**Benjamin Wheeler**

**Allison N. Wyatt**

**Nancy Lanza**

**Adam Lanza**

**Genesis 4:10: “The Bloods of your brother cry out.” Why “bloods” in the plural? Because not only was Abel murdered but his entire future progeny were murdered.**

**[Based on Talmud Sanhedrin, Perek 4 Mishneh 5]**

**Introduction**

I wrote this book because I firmly believe in preventing tragedies before they occur.  God doesn’t always shield us from harm. Indeed, God has granted mankind free will and, therefore, God rarely intervenes. The work is upon us to do. God doesn’t always save us. He didn’t save the victims of the Sandy Hook school shooting. We must do everything we can to save ourselves. We must, ourselves, learn to become protectors of people and good stewards of the earth. We must live our lives in a manner that bespeaks our deep love and respect for life and its tender preciousness and take full responsibility to shield and safeguard people and the planet.

The tragedy of Sandy Hook released a powerful surge of energy into the world. Newtown became more than an effect, but a cause. The shooting, as tragic and horrific as it was, also engendered in many people a firm resolve to bring about a culture of peace.

I personally invite you to walk on this sacred journey among kindred spirits. Let us galvanize our efforts into an unstoppable Global Coalition for Peace and Civility.

**Credits**

**I feel tremendous gratitude toward Marci Elliot who edited this book**

**as well as my wife Beth Lebenson Praver. I also wish to thank the people who are mentioned by their actual names herein for their permission to share the story we endured. It is a hard story to tell but a story the world needs to hear.**

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**PART 1**

**Chapter 1**

**WHAT HAPPENED?**

*“Oh ... Oh ... the damage done.”*

(Neil Young)

Nobody can know the horror of having his or her beloved child brutally murdered in school by a crazed intruder firing assault rifles. Things like this generally do not occur, although they have been happening more and more. Parents lamented, why did this befall our sweet baby? What did we do wrong? It was sunny out. It was a perfectly fine Friday morning. Why my child? What have I done to deserve it? This is the news we hear about, not the news we’re in.

The tragedy places victim families, survivors and first responders into a “variant” category of humans. It’s not an experience they and we can ever disown. It is a permanent trauma that we only can hope to cope with through the balance of our lives. We will never heal or completely adjust to a mass spree shooting in a first-grade classroom, where our friends’ children were so cruelly executed. It doesn’t work that way. It happened, it is deeply troubling, it has changed us, and there is no point in resisting these emotional truths.

All bridges have been scorched, burned, and torn asunder. The only thing that will ever be for us is what we create anew from this point onward. We can bring meaning to yesterday by the things we create today and tomorrow. We carry on with our lives. We go through the valleys and climb to new mountaintops.

Once you see so many parents and family members receive the final verdict that their precious and most adored babies have been confirmed dead, there is nothing anyone can do to erase the trauma. The experience pours in like a toxic river – it overtakes and brings people to their knees. It is cruel and relentless. It is final and noxious. It cuts without mercy and throws good people down into the abyss of hell. It makes people who were just moments earlier comfortable and filled with joy cry out from the depths of their souls in utter anguish.

"No! What are we going to do now? We worked so hard to bring her into this world and now she is snatched away from us in an instant!" one mother lamented in the embrace of her husband. And another cried, “How can this be? Why our little girl? Why our baby? She was filled with just love! Who would dare do this to her?” And then she wept wordlessly, defeated, and exhausted. Nothing in life prepares anyone for this.

My heart cried a river, my mind churning out thoughts like never-ending waves of the sea, one vanishing while a new one instantly was forming. For these parents and family members, my heart shattered alongside them. It shattered for every person in that firehouse. All our hearts were shattered.

How did one deranged young man ever gain so much power to inflict such colossal lethal harm upon these families? A demon struck an unspeakable blow to innocence itself and sent Newtown into the abyss of helplessness and despair. How can this be? How are we so powerless, and how was the assailant so powerful? And why did he do this?

So much time, love and effort were invested in those slain. How can it be that one young man could just slaughter all these people in less than six minutes? Are we really so vulnerable?  Is it really so easy to kill so many people? Couldn't it happen again? And I, too, lamented, why did this happen in the town where I am the rabbi? Didn’t I pray hard enough?

*Master of the Universe, I beseech you – have mercy on us in our humbled state, especially these families that have suffered loss of their loved ones today. Have mercy on us and bathe us in your healing light. Oh, heaven, come down from yonder hills so we may dwell with you for a while as you lift up these precious souls. Their blood so recently spilled upon this earth, let us at least see the glorious place you have prepared for our loved ones so that we may send them off to you with confidence in your providence and safekeeping. Let us feel the warmth of your heavenly embrace so that we can overcome.*

*Let us see the truth of your existence long enough so that we may smell the scent of your garden and be refreshed by the dew of heaven. For only with these spiritual gifts and privileged rights of access can we endure in our grief. Master of the Universe, please have mercy on us, for we are but dust of the earth. Fill us with your eternal spirit so we shall not despair.*

**Chapter 2**

**Newtown and the Synagogue**

Newtown is a beautiful settlement with an excellent public school system, farms and horse stables, hills and valleys, apple orchards, lakes, and waterfalls, plenty of hiking trails and a strong civic infrastructure. It is also home to Connecticut’s Labor Day parade — the largest parade in the state. The governor’s second horse guard cavalry is in Newtown, and at Edmond Town Hall, citizens can enjoy a movie and a bag of popcorn for five dollars; sometimes the movie is even free. All residents who lack health insurance or are under-insured can receive comprehensive free health care at Kevin’s Community Center, founded by Dr. Michael Tawah, a Lebanese American who organized the clinic in memory of his son, Kevin, who died in a tragic accident.

Once a month, the Newtown Arts Council puts on the Flagpole Radio Show. The performance has a Garrison Keillor feel and the bluegrass house band is red hot. The Newtown clergy group enjoys a camaraderie that exudes friendship and respect. High school musicals are performed in conjunction with Broadway professionals, and *The Newtowner* is a glossy, high-caliber quarterly literary magazine that fashions itself as the local *New Yorker*. The Youth Center is described by the kids as “epic.”

“Sandy Hook” is the name given to a section based on a geographic formation, according to town officials. Sandy Hook is nestled along the Pootatuck river where there were once gristmills that produced the timber to build the town. Newtown was founded in 1708. As for the Jewish history of Newtown, what is significant is that southern Newtown sits literally a stone’s throw from the Monroe borderline and was nicknamed “Jewtown” back in the day, simply because that is where the Jews lived and worked. Jews were primarily the dairy farmers and were heavily involved in the beef industry. Several prominent members of Congregation Adath Israel, Newtown’s only synagogue, were the ones who mortgaged their own homes to build the local firehouse near Meadowbrook and Main Street. This was prompted by a house fire in which a child died.

Adath Israel was founded in the early 1900s by a small group of Jews who fled poverty and persecution in Eastern Europe. They arrived with little more than their skill as farmers and a desire to worship freely. After settling in Newtown, they worshiped for several years without a synagogue building or a rabbi. They erected Congregation Adath Israel in 1919, and the first rabbi arrived in 1923.

The oldest native resident founding families of Adath Israel will know names like Tommy Goosman, Sam Nezvesky and Burton Block. These were a few of the movers and shakers of Newtown from the founding days of the synagogue in 1919. Real characters, these men were. Simple, pious Jews filled with an abundance of wit and humor. I could write a whole book about old Jewish Newtown stories, but I will resist and provide you just a little taste. I met Tommy, Sam and Burt when I first began working as the rabbi of the congregation in 2002. I knew Sam the best. He would often come barreling down the road in his green pickup truck, come to a screeching halt, jump out and demand of me as if it were a stick-up: “Rabbi, what’s it all about?” he’d loudly grumble like a central casting, salty old man. He’d repeat the question numerous times, and just lift up his hand, waving it in the air in an incredulous gesture. Then he’d get back in his truck and barrel farther down the road. It was his personal rhetorical query that could never be satisfactorily answered, intended as some sort of Socratic thought-provoking technique. Sam’s next favorite emblematic utterance was, “Rabbi, it’s all about the children, now. We’ve got to do it for the children.” I guess he answered his own question.

The congregation prospered and grew until the 1940s. After World War II, many younger congregants left what was still a rural Newtown for jobs in larger cities like Bridgeport and Waterbury. By 1970, the congregation consisted of fewer than 20 families. As it became clear that Adath Israel would not survive as an Orthodox institution, the congregation changed to a conservative doctrine, which included egalitarianism and welcoming interfaith families. In the following years, the congregation continued to grow with Jews from many kinds of backgrounds. Ritual practices currently follow Conservative Judaism and social values follow Reform Judaism. Since 2007, Adath Israel has been in a new, larger building two doors up the street on the same parcel of land that Israel Nezvesky, Sam’s father, gave the synagogue all those years ago.

My students were primarily ages 12 and 13. According to Jewish tradition, this is the age a girl and a boy cross the threshold into young adulthood. A girl becomes a Bat Mitzvah and a boy becomes a Bar Mitzvah, referred to collectively as B’nai Mitzvah. Literally it means they are “children of the Commandments” and responsible for their own thoughts, speech, and actions. The parental blessing bestowed on this day of B’nai Mitzvah, “Blessed are you God, our God, Ruler of the Universe, that has released me from the punishment of this one," expresses it succinctly. The young man and young woman have entered the age of reason and are now fully responsible for his or her own sins and merits.

I had a Bat Mitzvah rehearsal scheduled for Friday, December 14th, at 10 a.m. at the synagogue. My student, Rachel, had taken the morning f off from school for the final family rehearsal with her parents, Sarah and Avi, in tow. Avi grew up on Long Island not far from my hometown, and we clicked and connected on a personal level immediately. We even knew some of the same people from the sports we had played back in high school.

Avi, now a volunteer fireman, still well built, was a bald, bright hazel-eyed, adoring Jewish father. His idea of formal wear at family celebrations consisted of tight bleached blue jeans, a black silky formal shirt and shiny cowboy boots.  Yet at the same time, he was the kind of guy who got teary-eyed when he saw his kids chanting prayers and delivering a speech in the sanctuary. In short, Avi was a truly delightful combination of brute strength and mush, an extremely easy man to like.

Avi and I had had spiritual conversations on several occasions, ever since he and his wife had separated several years prior. Sarah had remarried while Avi was still searching. I had presided over the B’nai Mitzvah of their son, Jacob, and daughter, Rebecca, several years prior to Rachel. All three kids had chosen the Havdalah service, which takes place on Saturday night.   Fortunately, Avi and Sarah were able to come together in a harmonious and loving fashion for Rachel’s special day.

**Chapter 3**

**Joy Interrupted by Sorrow**

I arrived for the rehearsal at 10 a.m., a few minutes before the Bat Mitzvah family, and immediately noticed that Avi looked very agitated, not his blissful and carefree self. He was nervously fidgeting with his smartphone when his brow wrinkled, and a slight tear swelled from the outer edges of his eyes. He started talking softly, his voice sounding as if it were bound tightly in threads. This brawny man struggled to confide in a hushed tone that he'd probably be called away from his daughter’s rehearsal because “there was a shooting down at the school."

It was the first I heard of the shooting spree. “What? A shooting? Where?” I asked. I had not heard anything thus far. “Down at Sandy Hook Elementary,” Avi said, pursing his lips tightly as if holding back a river. As a firefighter, he had been contacted to be on standby. “A shooting? Huh? Are you sure?” I pondered out loud.  Maybe it is just somebody that showed up with a gun and they’ve got it under control already, I thought. Avi remained frozen with pursed lips and eyes fixated on his phone, and then suddenly he exclaimed, “That’s it! I’m being called! I’ve got to bolt!” He moved quickly toward the front door as I walked briskly after him, calling to him from across the parking lot. “OK, do what you’ve got to do,” I said. “We’ll be here. Keep us posted.” He gestured yes, got in his car and barreled up Huntingtown Road.

I went back inside to join Sarah and Rachel in the administrative office to start our rehearsal. But it didn’t begin right away. Rachel was agitated, worried about her father’s sudden departure.  I found her sitting in the sanctuary in the front row staring at the *ner tamid* — the eternal light that remains illuminated in synagogues at all times.  I walked over to her.

“Rachel, I know you’re worried about your dad, but I’m sure he’s OK, and I’m sure he’ll be back soon. Your dad’s a firefighter and is going to help whoever needs him,” I said. The firefighter’s daughter thought otherwise. “Rabbi, how do you know? You’re just speculating.” I was stumped, but she was right. What did I know?

“Well, of course I am just speculating,” I admitted, but I was still on rehearsal time and wanted to do her final preparations for her Bat Mitzvah the next day. At this point, there was no reason for us to think that such a horrific spree shooting had occurred in our own little school in the country. The initial event I imagined was a kid stopped for bringing a gun onto school grounds, and perhaps even the arrest was done on school property as well.

Eventually I realized I was getting nowhere with Rachel, and I suspected that Avi had told her about the preliminary announcement on his firefighter’s pager. He may have even texted it to Rachel. Whatever the case may have been, Rachel could not focus.

“Excuse me, Rabbi, I have to use the ladies’ room,” she said. Rachel somehow sensed that this situation was different, whereas I was pretending everything was fine until I couldn’t pretend anymore.

I returned to the administrative office where Rachel’s mom, Sarah, was sitting fixated on her notes. I could tell that she wasn’t actually reading, though, because her eyes weren’t moving. I engaged her in the activity of preparing sticky notes with the names of their relatives that would receive various honors during the service. This was our final rehearsal, and my usual practice was to hold the last practice the Friday morning just prior to the event so everything would be fresh in the family’s mind. These rehearsals generally last for two hours and are as important for me as they are for the B’nai Mitzvah and their parents. So, we proceeded. We carried on making sure family members and friends had parts that included them in the service. We assigned English and Hebrew readings, and various honors such as opening the ark, lifting and wrapping the Torah, presenting the prayer shawl. We even chose which very young children would distribute candy to throw towards the end of the service.

But it didn’t take long before Avi’s text arrived.

"Oh my God, it is the worst thing I've ever seen, worse than I could ever have imagined,” he texted. “There are dead bodies and blood all over the place.”

“What?!” Sarah and I were stunned, perplexed and numb. Those words sounded like some kind of snorting, grotesque sound in a foreign language we didn’t speak or understand.  We began talking in hushed tones, out of earshot from Rachel.

“Rabbi, my friend who lives in Sandy Hook just texted me that the principal and the school psychologist were shot and are confirmed to be dead,” Sarah said. “And another teacher was shot in the foot, but I don’t know which teacher.”

I shuddered. “Oh, God, this can’t be happening!” Sarah shrieked. “I’ve known Dawn Lafferty Hochsprung forever,” she said, referring to the school principal. “She’s loved by everyone. Rabbi, you know her, too. She was at Jacob’s Bar Mitzvah. You were talking with her at the Kiddush[[1]](#footnote-1) luncheon.” “Oh, my God, this doesn’t feel real," I whispered, and Sarah whispered back. "Rabbi, what should we do? Should we tell Rachel?” Her daughter was still hiding out in the ladies’ room. I pondered but was emotionally paralyzed. “I don’t know. I don’t know what to do,” Sarah said. And I did not know, either. I was stunned and shocked.

Rachel returned from the bathroom and immediately asked if her dad had texted anything. Sarah denied it, but Rachel looked at her mom with the same skeptical gaze she glared at me before excusing herself. She knew her mom was lying. Habituated to the importance of these rehearsals and clinging to routine, I attempted to carry on for another few seconds when Rachel interrupted. “Mom, I want to see Dad’s text!” she demanded. She instinctively knew that only the most horrific event could pull her father away from such an important family moment. Sarah and I exchanged split-second, horrified glances across the table. How could she show it to Rachel? How could we not? Sarah and I froze. Rachel continued. “Mom! I am a young adult about to be a Bat Mitzvah. Show me Dad’s text!” It was checkmate. Rachel would momentarily see the words her dad had written. Her innocent 12-year-old eyes would see the stinging words: “This is the worst thing I’ve ever seen, and there are dead bodies all over the place.” This poor child, on the eve of her Bat Mitzvah, had to go through this nightmare. God Almighty, have mercy on her, I thought. Be with Rachel. Hold her up.

In retrospect, I now know that Sarah and I were in a deep state of shock and denial. Whereas Rachel would have no part of our denial. She was actually the fastest to realize the magnitude of the slaughter. She knew something horrible had occurred from what her father had told her initially from the announcement on his firefighter’s pager.

I, however, desperately wanted to believe that Avi was exaggerating and that it wasn't true, and so I held on to that wish. My desperate reasoning went like this: Avi wore pastel sports coats at his kids’ B’nai Mitzvah celebrations, for crying out loud. How can I take his story at face value? It must not be quite as he’s describing it. Even if the principal and psychologist were killed, I reasoned, that must have been some private vendetta against the principal from a past student. The psychologist must just have happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. It could not be "dead bodies all over the place.” Those were satanic verses that did not register in my mind. That was the kind of hiss that played in horror movies, not in real life here in blissful Newtown, Connecticut.

My irrational thought was that we all know that when we get cut, sometimes it bleeds a lot, making the injury look much worse. After the blood is washed away, often what originally looked like a gash proves to be just a scratch. It is important not to jump to conclusions. Within this context, I imagined a student who was angry with the principal and was allowed to enter her office, and this student carried a concealed handgun. For whatever reason, I hypothesized, this student shot her and the psychologist with whom she was meeting at the time. I somehow also imagined another teacher injured by a stray bullet that hit her on the foot. This of course would have been bad enough. And so, my imagination spun until Jodi handed the telephone to Rachel. Her eyes welled up in tears as her gaze froze on the telephone screen for a few long moments. And then she commanded, “Come on, Mom. We’ve got to call Dad!” Just at that moment, the synagogue phone rang as well. I answered it. A resolute female voice on the other end of the line responded. “Rabbi Praver, I’m calling from St. Mary’s. Monsignor Robert Weiss is calling for all clergy to go down to the firehouse immediately and help the families there.” I am a member of the Newtown Interfaith Clergy Association along with Monsignor Weiss – Father Bob to anyone who knew him well – and his office was playing its part in getting the word out. His church was very close to Sandy Hook. “Wait!” I interrupted. “What’s going on down there? Do you have any information for us?” “Please, just get down there as soon as you can,” said the church secretary. “You’re needed!”

And so, we all left the synagogue – me to the firehouse, Rachel and Sarah to call Avi. No one mentioned Rachel’s Bat Mitzvah, scheduled for the following day. I still did not know why I was going to the firehouse, but I had the voice of Father Bob’s secretary echoing in my head – and he had never called me in this fashion before. I drove ten minutes across town, until I was within about a mile of the firehouse. That is when I saw the fire trucks with sirens blaring and police cars and ambulances scattered across the fields. Multiple helicopters flew overhead. A police officer directed traffic, diverting cars around the areas of the school and the firehouse. I drove as far as I could, the junction of Churchill and Route 34, when I called to the officer directing traffic. “I just got this call from Monsignor Robert Weiss’s office calling for all clergy to come to the firehouse. I am Rabbi Praver. May I please pass?” The officer didn’t say a word. He rushed the blockade, pulled it back and allowed my car to squeeze through the opening. I continued up the hill until traffic was at a standstill. I parked the car in someone’s driveway and ran the rest of the way to the firehouse; the adrenalin was starting to kick in. I noticed some of the helicopters were from news outlets, and many white media trucks were parked on the edges of the road. Clearly something was drastically wrong.  The side door of the firehouse was entry to a thin stream of people quietly entering – and what I would witness inside hurt me so deeply that it changed my life forever.

There were at least 100 people in the firehouse, which had essentially three activities taking place. First, about two dozen people were seated around six picnic-style tables. They were busy filling out forms. To me it looked like essay questions requesting their eyewitness accounts. Then, there was a long table tightly filled to maximum capacity with women, mothers and teachers. A little farther up to the right was another circle of mostly women, mostly teachers, listening to instructions from a blond-haired, thirty-something woman wearing a navy-blue FBI windbreaker. The first person with whom I spoke in the firehouse was Esther Cohen, a beloved veteran teacher at Sandy Hook Elementary and a member of the synagogue, one of my congregants. I had taught both of her sons in the Hebrew school and presided over their B’nai Mitzvahs. I went over to her immediately. “Esther?” She jumped to her feet. "Rabbi, I’m so glad that you're here,” she said, her voice cracking with the onset of tears.  She immediately launched into her lament in a voice that was like a child’s. “Rabbi, it was terrible," she said, and threw her arms around me and hugged me very tightly. Usually, we would greet one another with a wave or a peck on the cheek, air-kisses. This time, she clung to me as if I were a life-preserver. Her lips quivered as she repeated at least half a dozen times in a childlike voice, “Rabbi, it was terrible. It was the worst thing I’ve ever seen in my entire life.” What’s striking was how earnestly Esther wanted me to understand her. She spoke as if she almost wanted to bequeath something to me. She wanted me to listen to her completely, wanted me to keep her in my gaze. She would not allow me to look away for a split second.  In essence, Esther was palpably magnetic. It was hard to understand how just showing up and listening intently could touch a person so deeply.

“Rabbi, it was terrible. I’m so glad you are here,” she kept repeating. I responded to each of her laments with variations of, “I know, but you’re safe now. You are safe now. Nobody can hurt you now; It’s over.” When she had finished lamenting, she rested in my embrace. A voice in my head advised, “Hold her and don’t let go until she lets go,” which is what I did. “We’ll get through this together, I promise,” I told Esther. “I’ll stay with you for as long as it takes to get through this.” But she was finished. She then looked me straight in the eyes and cleared her tears away. In an authoritative grown woman’s voice, she announced, “Thank you, Rabbi. I am so glad you came,” and she dismissed me. That was it. Whatever it was I was supposed to do for her, I had done. I was off to see other people.

I made my way over to the circle listening to the FBI agent, who was addressing the teachers.“Please take your class rosters and put an ‘X’ by the name of every student who was absent today,” she instructed them. “Put a check by the name of every student who was present, but you personally know left the building with you, and place an ‘0’ next to the name of a student who was present, but you did not see leaving the building with the other students, a teacher, a parent or any other responsible adult.”

I was standing outside the circle and recognized another beloved teacher, also a congregant from the synagogue, Aviva Kramer. Later, I would learn that not only did Aviva save her class by following lockdown procedure precisely, but she also pulled into her classroom two other students en route to give the principal the attendance lists. These kids were walking right into trouble. I tapped Aviva on her shoulder and simply held my arms open to embrace her. “Aviva … are you okay?” I asked. She threw her arms around me and embraced me very firmly without any reservation whatsoever. I held her. Aviva started in with a litany of lamentation. “Rabbi, I can’t believe this happened,” she said through her sobbing. When she seemed to have regained her composure, she suddenly blurted out in a new wave of softly modulated hysteria, “Rabbi, he killed the children and the teachers!” It was said in a muted primal scream.She remained in my embrace for several more minutes and we talked without looking at each other. “Aviva, I am so sorry. Did you just say he killed the children, too?” I asked, still hugging her. Despite the torrent of emotions, I still had not been officially told what had occurred and started to slip into numbing shock myself. I did not want to accept what Aviva had said. “I don’t know that to be true,” I continued. “I heard that the principal and the school psychologist were killed, and that another teacher was shot in the foot. But I didn’t hear of any child who was shot.” Aviva held her silence. She did not correct me. “It was the most horrible thing I ever experienced,” she said. I returned to my empathetic stance and stopped contesting her facts. “This never should have happened,” I said. “I’m so sorry, Aviva. I’ll stay with you as long as you need me to.” She hugged me one more time and let go. I strolled around the room uncomfortably for a few more minutes, attempting to reach out to a few strangers, but they seemed more intent on speaking with their fellow teachers, so I did not push. Suddenly without warning, the room was filled with a singular blood-curdling scream. “No! No! No! Not Vickie!!” Other teachers near the woman shook in anguish and started gasping for air, holding their heads, and sobbing bitterly. A few sank to the floor. This is when they learned that their young, adorable colleague, a teacher named Vickie Soto, bubbling with life and a bright future, had been killed. I would learn later that she was found shielding one of her students, Ben Hockley. The 20 children and Ms. Soto were found gunned down in their classroom bathroom, where they were hiding. Theirs was the first classroom closest to the principal’s office.

Helplessly, I watched as the teachers held and comforted one another. It was heart-wrenching. Young Vickie Soto had been killed, and there was nothing allegorical or metaphoric about what was going on in the room. There was only one interpretation, and it was obnoxiously final and uncompromising. Absolutely infuriating.

I wondered if Aviva was right. For the first time in what felt like hours, I reached for my phone and Googled “Newtown.” ABC News was the first link, and I opened it.  “27 killed in Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting. 20 children, 7 adults. “ My vision blurred and a sort of miniature seizure overtook me for a microsecond, like an engine going on the blink momentarily and starting up again. And then the pressure. It welled up inside me followed by powerful feelings of discomfort, as if the only way to feel better was to jump out of my own skin. I suddenly felt trapped in the firehouse. I knew my life was forever changed, but at the same time it did not feel real. In an uncanny way, I was able to feel all these emotions, but there was another view within me – as if I were viewing myself, and the situation, from the outside looking in. It wasn’t as if I was toggling between these two; it was an uncanny *stereophonic* experience. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I walked around the room. I wiped them away quickly. I had to be strong for the people. I am the rabbi. I must contain myself, I told myself.

I strolled around the room a bit more and saw Aviva seated alone. With my phone still open, I approached and handed it to her and said, “Aviva, you were right,” We were silence as the FBI agent neared. She was the one who appeared to be most in charge. As she drew close, I said to Aviva, “I am going to talk to this lady. Aviva handed me back my phone as I sprang to my feet and very forthrightly handed it to the agent. “Excuse me, I just saw this,” I showed her the ABC headline. “I’m Rabbi Praver. How can I help?” “Good, we need your help,” the agent replied. “Come with me.” I followed her. We walked through one corridor and as we approached the next, there were people overflowing from a yet-unseen back room. The agent whisked me through the people and escorted me into the middle of the space. A very familiar-looking man was standing up in the middle of the group speaking to them. “I don’t have any more information at this time,” he said. “I know that many of the children and teachers were taken to nearby hospitals. I am leaving now to try and gather further information at the hospital. I promise you I will return at 3 p.m. to update you. I wish I could provide you more information at this very moment, but I simply do not know anything more at this time.”

Then I put the name with the face: Governor Dannel Malloy, former mayor of Stamford.  The FBI agent who had led me to the room put me into the care of other FBI agents, who advised me to minister to members of the community whom I recognized – and to anybody else who might wish to speak with me. “Just see who you recognize,” she said. This was the room filled with parents and family of the children and educators who were unaccounted for – the ones who had an “0” next to their names. These were the people waiting to hear if their loved ones had survived or died.

An Asian father held his head in his hands, anchored to his chair with his chest on his knees. He groaned in staccato, “Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah” like a mantra. He was rocking up and down ever so slightly in what appeared to be tremors. Caucasian and Asian family members on both sides of him were lovingly embracing his sides and stroking his back from adjacent chairs. They moved with him at times, and then just let him rock alone while loosely maintaining physical contact. His wife sat near him in shock, her eyes distant, glassy — almost catatonic. Most parents sat silently in the same state of shock, surrounded by family and friends. A few were not so still, visibly distraught. Siblings, friends, clergy, and neighbors were there accompanying them.

A young woman whom I later learned was the sister of one of the educators paced feverishly up and down the parking lot just outside the room, sobbing, weeping, protesting in hot anger. She was flustered, like a tormented hurricane. At times she paused but was constantly on the phone. Every 15 minutes or so, she broke into uncontrollable, hysterical, angry weeping. A couple of police officers and a few others in civilian clothing were standing nearby, not trying to silence her, but just being there for her.

It did not take long before I spotted Veronique and Lenny Pozner, recent members of the synagogue. I interacted with Veronique over the years regarding the baby naming ceremony for her and Lenny’s twins and her eldest son Michael’s Bar Mitzvah. Michael’s sister Danielle also attended our Hebrew school for a while. Even though I had not seen Veronique or Lenny for about two years, we immediately recognized one another.

 Veronique’s lament is confidential, as is all things shared in spiritual care sessions, unless it is anonymous or explicit permission was granted to share. What I can share though is that Veronique’s lament for her precious son Noah, cut so deeply and so indelibly into my soul, that I shall never forget him. To this day, I visit Noah’s gravesite from time to time to pray.

As I sat with the Pozners in the fire house secretly weeping, an inner voice advised, *be a comforter.* I wondered; how could I be a comforter? I began to inquire of Veronique’s spiritual beliefs and source of strength. In that conversation I shared that I believe in the eternity of the soul. I asked Veronique if she shared that belief, and her answer is the only thing I am authorized to share and I will never forget it, “Rabbi, there better be a heaven because this is hell!”

For a time, Veronique become known nationally for her powerful advocacy for common sense gun laws, and Lenny went on to play a powerful role debunking conspiracy theorists who insisted that the shooting never occurred.

**Chapter 4**

**The Governor**

Governor Malloy returned, his face pale and stony. He strode to the center of the room and forthrightly began sharing. “I visited the hospitals where 26 victims were brought, and I am so sorry to say that all of them succumbed to their injuries and you will not be reunited with them today.” A pounding silence filled the room for a few moments. Then one of the mothers protested, “what does this mean Governor? Are our children dead?” “I am so sorry that you will not be reuniting with them this evening,” Governor Malloy reiterated euphemistically. The governor meant to communicate that all the children were dead, but could not get himself to say those exact, dreadful words. It was a devastating moment that had the potential to stop hearts.

After it sunk in, the room was seething. People fell to the floor like rag dolls, collectively weeping and protesting. “No! No God!  This can’t be. This can’t be happening. What are we going to do now? Where did she go? I worked so hard to bring her into this world and now this? What are we going to do?” Husbands and wives embraced each other wailing these anguished words in tones and tropes that could make the stones of the field weep. It continued you for a long time. “Why did this happen to my sweet baby? What did she do to deserve this? I should have been there to protect her. She was wearing her new red winter coat, the one she always wanted. It was so sunny out. I just dropped him off and wished him a good day. Oh no! Oh no! Not my sweet baby. Why would anybody want to hurt her? I am so sorry, Momma didn’t protect you sweetie. Please forgive me my sweet baby.” A father hearing this protested, “I refuse to believe this, this is bullshit. He probably got scared and ran out into the woods or something,” and he went out looking for his son.

Despite the protests, it was final. The bodies of the children and the educators were in the Danbury morgue. The governor had been briefed by the medical examiner.   The clergy from nearly every house of worship were present, and we began praying rapidly, one after the other. Each faith leader began praying, one after the next straight down the line. After the prayers, the families began to disperse throughout the building, holding one another, praying, protesting, and weeping. I milled about and absorbed it. Police officers remained silent and so did I. Then I returned to sit with Veronique. I was a shattered rock that miraculously held together. It was then that a soft defiant voice began to speak within.

*We will build a new earth where peace and civility rule.*

*We will draw the radiance of heaven down to earth to banish all hatred.*

*We will do all these things in the name of the Most High.*

It continued speaking repetitively inside me. Words rolled out like a spool of yarn endlessly unfurling itself and leaving behind words like waves depositing shells on the shore. The words were coming from that place that lives between sleep and wakefulness. But I was wide awake.

*We will build a new earth where peace and civility rule.*

*We will draw the radiance of heaven down to earth to banish all hatred.*

*We will do all these things in the name of the Most High.*

It was time to go. Veronique and Lenny left together, and Michael got a ride with his friend. For me, there was no time to go home. The sun was setting, and Shabbat was rapidly approaching. I had already been in touch with my wife, Beth, and of course, our usual family Shabbat dinner was off. Beth arranged for a friend to watch the kids so she could meet me at the synagogue a few hours later. I stayed in Newtown that night working.

**Chapter 5**

**Rising to the Occasion**

When I arrived at Adath Israel that evening, about 30 people were assembled. New faces, Jews and non-Jews. Everybody was in shock. We just kept repeating “I can’t believe this happened, it doesn’t feel real.”  The synagogue president at the time, Ken Boxer, had the good sense to announce to the community that the synagogue would be open from 4:30 p.m. on for folks to come in, pray, and meet up for support and fellowship. The consul general of Israel in New York, Ido Aharoni, had already been at the synagogue speaking to the community in the sanctuary while I was over at the firehouse.

My first order of business was to look at our membership and school list to decipher which of our kids had been in the school that day based on their home addresses and ages. I already knew from the firehouse that there were no more fatalities among our family members other than Noah Pozner, but our children who survived the shooting needed to hear from me. I knew that the president’s twin boys had been in the building because Ken stopped by the firehouse and we spoke. The only children victims were first graders. We had a few children who were there and saw the carnage. Ken knew all our families who went there and was able to quickly provide me the information I needed. I made my calls.

 Adath Israel is a welcoming congregation of just 100 families. The congregation has great pride in our unique Jewish identity while being completely integrated in the community. David and Francine Wheeler, for example, were members of Trinity Church and lost their son Benjamin, that morning. The Wheelers had celebrated with us at our annual Hanukah parties for several years. Benjamin was a friend of many of our children and had danced on our wooden dance floor with great enthusiasm. The shooting occurred not only on the eve of Shabbat but on the eve of Hanukah. David and Francine are both incredibly talented people in the arts, David an actor and Francine a singer-songwriter. Many have seen them perform monthly at the Flagpole Radio Café for nearly five consecutive years at Edmond Town Hall.

This announcement was posted on the town website shortly after the shooting.

**In Memory of Benjamin Andrew Wheeler**

*The Flagpole Radio Cafe is produced and performed in Newtown, Connecticut. As you must know, a terrible tragedy took place in Newtown on Friday, December 14, when a lone gunman stormed into the Sandy Hook Elementary School and slayed 20 children and six adult staff members before killing himself.*

*Francine and David Wheeler have been performing in this show since the first season. It is with great sadness that we tell you that their son, Benjamin, was one of the children murdered. We extend our deepest sympathies to our friends Francine and David, as well as to all the families who were affected by this most terrible event.*

*This tragedy occurred as we were about to begin our already delayed fifth season. At this juncture we do not know when we will resume, but please check our website for updates as they will be forthcoming. We will also send out announcements through the press when the time is right.*

*If you wish, you may make donations to:*

*The Benjamin Wheeler Fund*

*c/o Trinity Episcopal Church*

*36 Main St*

*Newtown, CT 06470*

*We wish a Merry Christmas to those who celebrate, and peace for all in the New Year.*

*Sincerely,*

*Your Friends from The Flagpole Radio Cafe*

I saw David at the firehouse when the governor was speaking the second time, but only briefly enough to ask him if all his kids were accounted for. He said Ben was missing and ran out the door. I later learned that Benjamin Wheeler and Noah Pozner were found embracing one another. One survivor, the girl who had played dead, said that a third little boy, Jesse Lewis, distracted the shooter and yelled “Run!” and his classmates ran to safety. Jesse then took one fatal bullet to his forehead. His classmates ran out of the building and gathered, completely traumatized on the front lawn of the nearest neighbor. That neighbor happened to be Dr. Gene Rosen, a retired psychologist, who noticed the children and went out and asked them what was going on. They explained, “Our teacher and all our friends were killed, and we didn’t know where to go, so we’re just sitting here.” Dr. Rosen cared for them until their parents arrived.

By 9:30 the next morning, the Adath Israel sanctuary was filled. Governor Malloy, Senator Richard Blumenthal, Congresswoman Elizabeth Esty, Newtown First Selectman Patricia Llodra and several other state leaders were already in attendance. I decided to make an impassioned speech followed by a town hall meeting where people could come up or speak out from their seats, one by one to express their thoughts and feelings. I offered the following opening message:

*Friends, we live in a culture of violence. From a young tender age, we are inculcated with shooting games and movies wherein people are killing each other through guns, bows and arrows, and other explosives. In these games and movies, we make it acceptable to expend the lives of others by making them the "bad guy" or the "other" whose life is not accorded the same value as our own. Eventually unstable members of our society act out for real what he or she saw and rehearsed. That is what happened yesterday: An assailant grew so numb to the value and the sanctity of human life that he forced his way into Sandy Hook Elementary School and unleashed unspeakable carnage upon our tender children and beloved educators.*

*We are shocked and crushed by yesterday’s killings and we keep saying to one another that we just can’t quite believe this actually happened. And so we have gathered in this house of prayer and fellowship as a community united to hold each other steady. We need each other more than ever. It is time to leave aside all differences and come together in an unbreakable bond of friendship. May we all dig deep into our reservoirs of loving kindness and compassion in these difficult hours, days, weeks, months and years ahead. I know we will because we must.*

*Because we are gathered and are profoundly grieved, I thought that it would be a good idea to give everyone a chance to express themselves in a town hall-styled format. I envision this being a safe and nurturing environment where there is no right or wrong answers, where we will not judge one another and where we will make room for one another emotionally and spiritually. Please simply raise your hand if you would like to speak, and I will bring the microphone to you.*

Thus, began our Shabbat Town Hall meeting. Everybody was kind and patient and the sharing went on for about an hour and a half. Many people spoke. The elected officials expressed their sorrow and commitment to stand by the people of Newtown, and Governor Malloy announced that as the entire world was weeping for Newtown, President Obama would be coming to Newtown the next day to show his support. My dear friend, Pastor Matthew Crebbin from Newtown Congregational Church, announced that our Interfaith Clergy Association was organizing the ecumenical memorial service the very next day, Sunday, December 16th, at the Newtown High School and that President Barack Obama was expected to participate. Pastor Crebbin shared that President Obama planned to meet privately beforehand with the families that lost loved ones to try and bring them a measure of comfort.

Meanwhile, a local pediatrician who was also a synagogue member explained that a news outlet had equated the assailant’s Asperger’s Syndrome with his proclivity to act out violently. This, the pediatrician said, was simply wrong. In fact, she went on, “There is nothing indicated in any research that shows any link whatsoever between the condition of Asperger’s Syndrome and acting out violently.”

Many others spoke out for gun regulations and increased mental health services, while others circled back to the issue of our violent culture, the need for better education, and more spirituality in our daily lives. Many offered their condolences and promises of help.

 I closed with these words:

I thank you all for gathering here this morning and for expressing all your worthy thoughts, feelings, and concerns. This sanctuary is a house of prayer and fellowship for everyone. I wish now to conclude with a brief prayer.

 Almighty Eternal God, who has planted the seeds of eternity in the hearts of mankind, I call out to you from a deep place this morning. You knew of the great worries in our hearts before we even began to speak; yet we have emptied our hearts before you because we carry a burden too heavy to bear. God Almighty – Hear our cry! Heal us! Help us! And let us say Amen!

**Chapter 8**

**The Interfaith Memorial Service with President Barack Obama**

I drove up to the high school through thick traffic with Beth. The rest of the clergy group had been in the building for hours already. Because of my meeting with the Pozners at Green’s Funeral Home earlier that morning, combined with other circumstances, we arrived just 45 minutes before the service began. Initially, I thought it was going to be a private, untelevised gathering. To my shock, I discovered that every major television network was set up in the back of the auditorium, on a makeshift platform in front of the thick glass window of the audio booth.

With the incredibly fast pace of things, I had not sufficiently processed that I would soon be co-officiating a memorial service with the president of the United States. I was having a minor anxiety attack triggered by a feeling that I was missing something I desperately needed. Just at that moment, to my surprise, and from behind, I was greeted by my prayer partner, Pastor Mel Kawakami from the Methodist Church, “Hey Shaul, glad you could make it. We were beginning to worry about you.” I turned around. Mel’s face was so soft and comforting, and his embrace put me at ease. We were a close interfaith group before the shooting, and even closer afterward.

I had my prayer book, I knew my part, and all I had to do was do it. The words, “If I perish, I shall perish”[[2]](#footnote-2) came to mind. These were the words Queen Esther spoke before presenting herself before King Achashverosh. If I choke up and cannot sing or speak or if I faint on national television before tens of millions of viewers, so be it. It is what it is. There is nothing I can do about it. I am on the ship and the ship has left the shore. I am expected to do this spiritual work for the community. My colleagues were depending on me to join them in bringing comfort to the mourners. I am also representing the Jewish faith and the Jewish people, and most important, the slain children and educators for whom we gathered to memorialize. There is no way out of it, only a way through it. That way is surrendering to God and trusting that God’s spirit will direct and shine through me.

I wanted to warm my voice up in an adjacent room, but security guards told me I could not leave the auditorium. I knew this building well because I had recently produced two community concerts, *The Little House that Roared*, featuring Tom Chapin and Newtown’s youth musicians. The reason I was prohibited from walking into the hallway was because President Obama was walking that hallway. He was going in and out of the classrooms to comfort the families. There was, however, a little antechamber to the right of one of the entrances where I could softly warm up my voice.  I decided my chanting would be more like a lament and not an operatic performance. I would sing from my heart while bearing the heart of the people in a collective lament before God. In Hebrew that is called a *Tzliach Tzibor*, a prayer messenger of the people.

I prayed for divine help.  I reminded myself that the voice is a vessel through which I can express my spiritual intention. I must stand out of the way and let God take over. I will be the conduit through which the spirit flows. When I do that, hearts will open, hairs will stand on end, and chills will rush up spines. I planned to focus on the work and not allow President Obama’s presence make me nervous. All I had to do was stay focused on singing the memorial prayer. I would speak clearly and succinctly. I would simply tell the people that my heart wept with theirs and that I hoped my prayer would comfort them. I would begin by asking the assemblage to rise for the Hebrew memorial prayer.

My wife, Beth, advised me. “Keep it simple without equivocation. Don’t be nervous about asking the president to rise. He offered to come and take part in the service with the community, and he will rise in respect to God and the community. Respect President Obama but do not get transfixed on him. Be yourself and play your part.

I understood Beth’s message. In times like these, leaders must be clear and resolute. Everything must be authentic, from the heart, without extra verbiage. Just tell the people what you are going to do and do it. And that’s what I did.

I was at the beginning of the program, soon after Pastor Crebbin’s introductory remarks. Each member of our clergy group was paired up with another member and we ascended the podium together. Our idea was to promote fellowship between the faiths and to show that we were united in our humanity and spirituality even though we had different methods. My prayer partner was Pastor Mel Kawakami, a Japanese American Methodist pastor who always spoke from his heart.

Another problem I had was external. I had to make do with my brown sports coat and non-matching slacks. I wore my *tallit*, prayer shawl, which I hoped would cover it up. It is all I had for formal clothing at that time. The tragedy caught me by surprise. I knew I needed new suits, but my brown coat would have to do.  As I closed my eyes, scenes of the firehouse flashed into my mind. I took a deep breath, paused a moment, and began to chant in a still small voice, *“Al Malei Rachamim,* God full of Mercy*,”* in the modulation of a question, as if I was asking God, “Are you really filled with mercy?” I felt a crackling energy in the room ignite as soon as I uttered those three words. President Obama was now just one of the mortals in the room. A strange thing occurred at that moment. I knew at that moment this world is but a thin corridor to the spiritual realm of eternity.  I saw a flash of what was about to happen as I poured out my lament and I knew it was entering every heart. I continued chanting. “*Shochan Bam’romeem, Hamtzei menucha Nechona tachat Kanfei Hash’cheena. Be’maalot Kedosheem u’te’hareem, ke’zohar harakiyah maz’heereem.”*  Who dwell in the heaven’s heights, bestowing spiritual repose beneath the wings of your Divine presence, amongst holy and pure souls, illuminating like the brilliance of the heavens...” Why have you forsaken these children and educators, I wondered. And when I got to the words “bestowing spiritual repose,” the attitude that exuded out of me was “Since you have not mercifully protected these innocent people, will you at least now bestow upon them spiritual repose in heaven?”

It reminded me of a traditional Jewish legal hearing, called a *beit din* and how Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev had summoned God to court as a defendant, after the Holocaust. Then came the part I would have to improvise. How would I refer to the victims? What would I say? I could not call out all the names, there were far too many. I made a split decision to refer to them as, “All the souls that fell and were murdered in Newtown, our city.”  It felt awkward, saying “Newtown” in the context of this Hebrew prayer but I knew I had to intone it with equal conviction as all the other words. I remember wondering at that moment, how did a whole town suddenly assume the identity of a victim?

I finished, descended from the stage, and walked back to my seat. As I passed by the president, I bowed slightly while maintaining my stride, as the sign of respect I was accustomed to give my Rabbis in Yeshivah. When I picked up my head, Barack Obama’s eyes were looking intensely into my eyes. With pursed lips that appeared to be holding back tears, the president nodded at me in a gesture that felt like approval and kinship.

**Chapter 9**

**Post-Traumatic Stress Tempered by Love**

All sense of security is lost. Suddenly the world feels extremely dangerous, like violence is continually lurking nearby. It feels as if people can do cruel, unspeakable things at any unpredictable moment. Violence that happens “in that city” all at once is no longer about others. We feel the pain on a personal level and can’t walk away from it. I felt an instant alliance with victims of violence, amid the realization that I and everyone around me were forever changed. Our ordeal was an unwanted intrusion that had gotten underneath our collective skin.

Mass shootings are a unique form of domestic terrorism. It is the ultimate stripping away of a sense of control, authority, and respect. It is a violation, a trespass of everything we know to be decent and acceptable. And because it is such a senseless waste of innocent life, it is infuriating. Whatever was the assailant thinking?  Did he not see these people as worthy of life?  What force empowered him to extinguish the lives of others? Perhaps he was revisiting the location of a childhood trauma and made the people there the surrogate perpetrators, enabling him to take revenge upon those who had wronged him. What about the assailant’s admiration for the Columbine assailants, and his wish to commit even more carnage – as if it were contest? Adam Lanza also played killing games on the computer all day, I later learned.

How does one ever adopt such a satanic position in the first place? I almost don’t want to know the answer to that. I almost don’t want to tolerate knowing what the real mind-talk of the Sandy Hook assailant was. His mind was a dark and haunted place. A troubled and troubling place. A person pursued by demons, completely out of touch with reality. No thought to morality. No thought to the right of another person to live. No regard for children’s innocence. The haunt of darkness.

I was not prepared for this. I was only the community’s rabbi at Newtown’s only synagogue and was called to assist families. I see, tell it and experience it as a rabbi would. I communicate about such things best through the lens of my faith. *Though we are as a delicate flower of the field, we shall endure forever in the spirit of God. Comfort our people, for their hearts have been broken. Bind up their wounds, for they have been severely wounded.*

Without drinking from the wellspring of faith, I would not have been able to deliver even the smallest measure of comfort to parents whose children were suddenly and without warning brutally murdered in their first-grade classroom. That the shooter, a deranged 20-year-old who himself had grown up in the Newtown neighborhood of Sandy Hook, makes the horror all the more surreal. Without faith, most of us would be lost. But through extraordinary acts of faith, a spiritual light clung to us, protecting us from that which we could not otherwise endure.  And so I resolved it in my heart that one day, Newtown would no longer be remembered as the town of the tragedy, but as the bridge to a new and kinder world.

The gifts that arrived from around the world for months helped us feel loved and cared for. Prayers, letters, cards, sculptures, banners, personalized knitted quilts and blankets, and monetary gifts helped us carry on. So many people bore their very souls in private messages, some typed, some handwritten, and several meticulously designed. It was more than we could process at the time. It took months to write thank-you notes. Please know that this loving kindness brought healing tears to our eyes while shielding our hearts from crumbling. Such love continues to propel the town forward. I dare say it is what propels the senders forward as well. The entire town was extremely grateful. Although our hearts were shattered, these humble acts of compassion enabled us to miraculously hold together. People need to understand the power of their love!  It was real and palpable. It lifted us up and enabled us to ride above our horrific nightmares. The soft silent voice inside is the voice of love and is saying,

*Love is the fuel that lights the heart.*

*Love is the warmth that makes us feel deeply satisfied.*

*Love is the key that opens all great and wonderful things.*

1. **Kiddush** (/ˈkɪdɪʃ/; Hebrew: קידוש‎ [ki'duʃ], [qid'duːʃ]), literally, "sanctification," is a blessing recited over wine or grape juice to sanctify the Shabbat and Jewish holidays. Additionally, the word refers to a small repast held on Shabbat or festival mornings after the prayer services and before the meal. [Wikipeida] [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Megillat Esther 4:16 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)