

# A Meditation on Mumbai: Creating Angels in the Face of Hate

Parshat Vayetze 5769

By Rabbi Mark Greenspan

This morning I find myself at a loss for words, something that doesn't happen too often. Like many of you I've been thinking about the acts of violence that took place last week in Mumbai, the brutal murder of almost 200 people and, in particular, the tragic deaths of Rabbi *Gavriel and Rivka Holtzberg*, the *Chabad* representatives whose lives were cut short by an act of hatred and violence.

And I've been thinking a lot about little Moshe, their son, who will never know his parents, who I'm sure will be raised in a loving and warm family but will live out his life in the shadow of this terrible event. With time his memory of them will fade but I couldn't help but imagine this innocent child asking for his mother and father this past week and not understanding what had happened to them...

And like many of you, I've been asking, "Why?" Why do such events take place? Why do we live in such a violent world? And how is it that religion, which can be such a force for good, can also become a source of such blind hatred? If there is a case to be made against religion it doesn't have to do with the existence or non-existence of God, but rather how we abuse the ideals of religion and faith to make the world into a living hell for others. God is not guilty but we are....

This morning I'd like to focus for a few minutes on the Holtzbergs and Chabad...they are, in a sense the line at which we as Jews have encountered this tragedy.

Over the years I've spoken often critically about Chabad and its tactics in reaching out to gain new members. We certainly have had our share of issues here in Oceanside with our Chabad neighbors. But this week we are all Chabad. The things that unite us are much greater than the things that divide us. The work that Chabad does, sometimes under the most difficult and inhospitable circumstances, deserves recognition and praise. The events in Mumbai were a reminder that it is no small thing when Chabad goes out to the far reaches of the world and opens a house for Jews of all backgrounds and interests.

Besides, the terrorists who killed the Holtzbergs and the other people in Mumbai did not stop to ask what the people they killed believed: it was enough that they were Americans or British, or Israeli. If you or I had been in Mumbai last week, people would be mourning for us right now. And it's also no accident that the only religious institution that was targeted by these murderers was Jewish.

I'm reluctant to call the men who committed these acts terrorists. They were murderers, plain and simple. Terrorism presumes that there is an ideology underlying the acts of violence and destruction that are committed. One man's terrorism is another man's patriotism. To call these men terrorists confers upon them element of idealism and even dignity. But what can we say about people who target hospitals, or to go around a hotel for the purpose of murdering tourists who have little or no knowledge of whatever issues these murderers claimed to represent. Better yet, maybe we should call them cowards...

And I've been thinking about our forefather, Jacob, this week as well. As we heard a little while ago, this morning's Torah portion contains the story of Jacob's journey to the land of Haran. This theme underlies much of the Torah: it seems that our ancestors were constantly moving from place to place in search of their destiny. Their journeys were journeys of danger and discovery, not so different from the Chabad emissary who leaves his home to set out for new and unfamiliar place.

Stopping to rest, Jacob has a dream, a vision. *V'henay sulam mutzav artzah v'roshe magia hashamyma*. "He saw a stairway that was set on the earth whose top reached up to the heavens. *V'henay malachai Elohim olim v'yordim bo*. And behold, God's angels were going up and coming down the stairs.

Commentators on our *parshah* point out that this seems odd: if these angels were in fact representatives of God, shouldn't they have been coming down the stairway and then going up? Rashi and others, however, point out that the angels were going up first and then coming down because the angels that had accompanied Jacob in Canaan were now taking leave of him while a new set of angels were being sent to accompany him on his journey outside the land of Canaan.

Why was it necessary for Jacob to have a different set of angels as he left the Promised Land? Possibly because his concerns and priorities had changed as he looked forward to the next chapter in his life. When Jacob prays to God, he asks for some simple, fundamental gifts: food, clothing, and most of all, safety. For the first time in his life, Jacob felt vulnerable. Until this moment he had lived in the protective embrace of his parents' home. He dreamed of carrying on his father's legacy and his grandfather's covenant. Now he worried about surviving, plain and simple; he worried about returning home safely, and not losing his way.

This morning I want to speak in praise of Chabad: they're willing to do something that most of us cannot even imagine. They put their lives on the line in the interest of teaching people Torah and encouraging others to do mitzvot. Like Jacob, they're willing to leave home and bring Torah to people wherever they are and on their own terms. We can complain all we want but Chabad has succeeded in a way others have not. I quote from a recent editorial in the Wall Street Journal: "I would venture that's one of the secrets behind the Chabad movement's extraordinary growth -- that they build little sanctuaries for lost Jews, alienated Jews, secular Jews, Jews who have no interest in traditional religion. Chabad has redefined religion in part by getting away from the notion of large, formal temples to establishing places of worship that are small, intimate and, above all, deeply comforting; they have made religion personal."

What's extraordinary about Gavriel and Rivka Holtzberg is that this couple was not really so extraordinary; they were simply living out the values and ideals in which they believed. How many of us are willing to do that?

As Jews it's natural that we should tell their story this Shabbat. They represent a unique phenomenon in the Jewish world these days – one which we both admire but question. But the truth is there were two hundred more stories to be told in Mumbai this week: stories of people who were devoted husbands and wives, darling sons and daughters, dear friends and colleagues. The ripples from this one tragedy go forth into the world so that no one is unaffected. We mourn every life cut short and tragically ended. Each one was a precious soul created in the image of God.

So what can we do? How can we respond to such a horrific atrocity? Let me suggest that we can answer the perpetrators of these crimes by setting aside our differences and coming closer together, by

celebrating the values and ideals we have in common. And I would suggest that we can respond by taking the advice of a video clip sent out by *Aish HaTorah* this week. Maybe you saw it... It suggested that the only true response to violence and terror is to refrain from becoming hateful and angry ourselves. The only response to terror is to perform more mitzvot, by becoming more compassionate and caring, reaching out to others and performing kind acts.

There is a tradition that every time a person performs a mitzvah, an angel is created. We need more angels and we need to become angels – by not allowing such acts to inspire the worst in us and by finding the best in ourselves.

So where were Gabi's and Rivki's angels this week? They were there to the very last moment giving this couple the courage to live out their lives by their highest ideals and aspirations. Their angels were with them, helping them to do what they most wanted to do in this world. Angels, after all don't really protect us but they do give us strength!

SAJES staff member, Reuben Posner, put it well in a letter he wrote this week about his friends the Holtzbergs: "Gabi and Rivki created a *Bayit*, a home built on things much stronger and more permanent than metal or concrete. They built their home on the values of love and respect for others that comes from the knowledge one gains when they see people as being made in the image of God and on the strength and shoulders of a faith in *Klal Yisrael*, the community of Israel, that they were instrumental in fortifying. Many newly married Jewish couples are given the blessing that they should merit the ability to create a *Bayit Ne'eman B'Yisrael*, an everlasting home in Israel. Gabi and Rivki built that everlasting home in a place very far from their own, so that others could have a piece of home when they were far from theirs. The building they built may have been destroyed, but the home they built will live on in the hearts and souls of so many of the people who had the privilege of being welcomed into their home."

May their memory be a blessing. May the memories of all those whose lives were cut short give strength to their loved ones. And may we live in a way which will create new angels in the world so that the shared values of people like the Holtzbergs live on and eclipse the darkness of those who hate and destroy...Amen

Shabbat Shalom