An All Too Familiar World

I have become jaded in my old age. Now a wise and seasoned man of thirty years few things faze me anymore. Earthquakes where hundreds of people are killed, left homeless in an instant, pictures of hillsides washing away villages like the biblical flood of Noah's day barely register. I've seen them all before, I compare them to Northridge, to the World Series quake, trying to glean from my now cluttered memory if the images on the screen are more or less graphic than those I have seen so many times before.

In my old age, my 10 years or so as an adult, I've seen countless car accidents and high speed chases that end in flames and some times mortal injury. I sit and watch the black and whites race down the freeway and I calculate with some precision when they will shoot out the tires, how they will approach the car and make the driver come out hands raised. I can tell you if the police are doing it correctly or not, by their body language I know if they have found a gun, if they think there is more than just the driver in the car.

I've seen or heard about more school shootings in the 9 years between my twenty-first and thirtieth birthdays than both my parents saw before they turned 60, and I am not the only one, so has every teenager in our country. When I asked one of our teens this afternoon what the reaction was at his school to the shooting in San Diego this week, he said that the teachers were thankful that it was only a handgun, and a 22 gauge for that matter. The teacher

explained to his class that it makes smaller holes and takes longer to reload than weapons that have been used in previous shootings. The students agreed they actually thought the students in San Diego were lucky that it was only a handgun! And we all know that to some extent they are right, it could have been a lot worse, we've seen a lot worse.

I resent the fact that I know the difference between the destructive force of a handgun, a shotgun and an assault rifle. I resent the fact that high speed chases that crash through neighborhoods and families are covered like sporting events, with ticking clocks, play by play commentary and digital pens that circle the weapons and the injured for the viewer on our TV screens. I resent the fact that the president's latest blunder, the most resent dirt on the former this or the current that, makes the cover of Time and Newsweek while buried deep within the pages, behind the cartoons and the stories of the latest celebrity to face charges for this or that, is the story and the pictures of lives and homes buried deep beneath the rubble of a massive quake or disaster. I resent the fact that people who want to be a millionaire, or who survive living with each other on an island or in the outback, are showered with gifts and attention while an entire continent is dying of AIDS and no one seems to notice, or really care.

Our familiarity with inhumanity has made us inhuman. Our complacency with the tragedies both avoidable and unavoidable that cascade across the evening news has turned us into escape artists. We tune it out, instead of in, we are so saturated with death and destruction that we measure our empathy in

news cycles, and headline, when it slips from the pages it slips from our minds as well, or maybe before.

The great Rabbi Hillel, of the Passover Haggadah fame was once asked by his students how one should behave when all around you people are acting with inhumanity. He responded, *b'makom she ain anashim, l'hyot ish*. In a place where people are acting in human, strive to be human. Friends tonight I offer the most simple of prayers for our congregation and our community, I pray that we begin to feel again, that we find our humanity and our emotions that have been buried beneath a thick skin of having seen it all before. I pray that in a world where people are acting inhuman, we more than ever respond with human feelings and emotions. That we drop the stoic, unfrazzled exterior and we let the outrage that we have buried deep within rise up to the surface, channeling that pain and concern into action and resolution.

We must move beyond the rubber necking that we do as we drive through life, glancing quickly mostly out of curiosity at the accidents and tragedies that we pass along the way, and stop, pull over and get out and help.

As Jews we are commanded to carry two blessings on scrapes of paper in out pockets. One reads, "I am but dust and ashes" the other, "The world in its beauty was created for me." What is the challenge represented by this mitzvah, this contrast in theology? The challenge is to see ourselves and our existence as the most significant act of creation, while at the same time always remembering that our lives are finite, that we must make the most of them before we run out of

time to make anything of them at all. We must resist the desire to look the other way, to notice and then keep on going as if nothing happened. We must let life changing events be life changing, to be shocked, outraged, saddened, alarmed and then to respond with all the passion for resolution that the pain we feel demands.

Rabbi Hillel said something else as well, *"Im ain ani mi, mi li, oo-keh-she ani l'atzmi mah ani, v'im lo achshav eimatai.* Hillel used to remind his students, "If I am not for myself who will be for me and if I am only for myself what am I and if not now when." We are partner's with God in the ongoing work of creation. Everyday that the world continues to revolve around the sun, everyday that human kind manages not to destroy itself or this precious globe is a miracle equal to the miracle of creation. We have do not have the powers of God to cause the earth to shake or stop it from shaking, we can't stop a bullet in mid air; we can't say a word and bring healing to a dying people. But we have God given powers surely equal to those of the divine, we have the power to stop man's inhumanity to man, the power to comfort the sick and the bereaved in ways God cannot.

Let us be reminded that God created the world a pretty great and wonderful place, with beauty and with abundant resources, but it is up to us to make the world work, it is up to us to care for each other, to respect each other,

and to help each other as we face life's' challenges and tragedies. In a world that is acting inhuman, our divine imperative, our most precious gift to the world and each other is to act first and most of all with humanity.