Bombing in Jerusalem
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There is a terrible truth about the Jewish people: the truth is that we are most united when we are being persecuted, endangered or are under attack. Our community has the global ability to set aside our differences, our disputes, and come together as an am echad, as a united people, when we perceive our very existence to be threatened. I say that this is a terrible truth, because it often takes bloodshed to bring about such feelings of harmony and unity. This reality was dramatized for me last week while I was away from this pulpit, serving a congregation of Jewish teens at a camp in central Canada.

The BBYO program that I was staffing is a leadership training program for the organization's most dedicated and talented young leaders. As part of the program curriculum the staff push these young people to confront the issues most pressing on the Jewish world. One afternoon about a week ago we gathered our 50 participants into a room, formed them into groups and initiated a role play of an Israeli K'nesset meeting. Our mock K'nesset was charged with trying to resolve the very real issue of religious pluralism and freedom of Jewish practice in Israel. The young people were assaigned political parties, each read up on their party's position on the matter and proceeded to have an intelligent and heated debate over what was acceptable Jewish religious practice in Israel. As often happens with such role plays, the teens who come from a plurality of religious background themselves, became personally passionate about the issue, many siding in one degree or another with the arguments of the religious right. For the rest of the day there existed in our camp the very real religious tensions of our larger Jewish community. Some of the boys did not want to davin or pray with the girls. Our Israeli staff members were angered that north American program would involve themselves with an issue which they believed to be an internal Israeli matter. For a program that was supposed to unite these youth in a shared sense of Jewish social responsibility we seemed to have only created division and animosity toward one another.

That evening, we received word of the terrorist bombing in Machane Yehudah, the outdoor market in Jerusalem. Our participants, many with family and friends living or visiting in Israel this time of year, quickly came together in the shared grief and outrage that swept across the Jewish world. The teens huddled around my laptop computer, arms around one another, tears rolling down many faces, as we scanned the internet for more information and a list of names of those killed. That evening and the next morning we joined together in a true congregation at prayer. The youth led the services, reading poems and singing songs. Their care and concern for the victims and for each other was evident in the intensity of their prayers and in the deep silence that hung heavy over our group during the silent meditation. We concluded the service with the singing of Hatikvah, the Israeli national anthem, and our voices rose together as one united Jewish people.

It was soon learned that one of the victims of the blast was a young Jewish teenage boy, Grigory Pesahovic. This fact hit our teenagers pretty hard. None of them knew the young man personally, but they all rightfully sensed that they knew him on a more universal level. Teenagers are pretty much the same no matter where you are and our own youth felt a commonality and fellowship with this young man which served to only unite them further in shared grief and horror at what had taken place.

In the period of just a few minutes, our group – and I will venture to say the whole of the Jewish community – had gone from a divided people, who could not agree on "Who is a Jew?", "Who is a Rabbi?," and "What is acceptable Jewish practice?", to a people who felt they could only truly rely on each other. Our global Jewish community was once again united. The prayers we offered for the victims were not Reform, Conservative or Orthodox. They were Jewish, and that is all that mattered to the victims. And for the moment at least, we could all agree that offering those prayers was all that mattered to God as well. Our teens added Grigory's name to our kaddish list, and took up a collection for his family. Finding in the death of this young Jewish boy the commonality and bond that had eluded them as a Jewish people in their mock K'nesset session, our group never again experienced division over Jewish issues. For the remaining week we prayed together and supported each other's expression of sorrow and grief.

Yesterday I returned from camp and related the experience to my wife on the drive home from the airport. She recognized the young man's name from a story in Tueday's Los Angeles Times, and proceeded to tell me what she had read about Grigory and how his trauma did not end with the blast that took his life. Grigory is the child of Russian immigrants who moved to Israel two years ago to escape religious persecution and live as Jews in the Jewish homeland. Both of his parents lived as Jews in Israel and raised Grigory as a Jew as well. Following Jewish law, they sought to bury their son within twenty-four hours of his death in a Jewish cemetery, but they were turned away by religious authorities when it was learned that Grigory's maternal grandmother was not Jewish. The religious authorities, following a strict interpretation of Jewish law, do not view Grigory's mother Olga as a Jewish woman, and thus in their view Grigory himself is also not a Jew. The family took Grigory's body to a Christian cemetery under the impression that they would permit a non-religious burial. But the priest at the cemetery insisted on reciting Christian prayers over

the grave, which the family would not permit. At this indignity Olga, Grigory's mother, stated for the Israeli press, "He lived as a Jew in the land of Israel. My son Grigory was not a Christian. I am not ready to let him be buried as a Christian." Soon it was the Sabbath, and Grigory's parents, unable to find a suitable place of rest for their son, had to return him to the morgue until Sunday, when according to Jewish law funerals are once again permitted. Their struggle brought to light an often neglected aspect of the current religious authority in Israel: The Ministry of Religious Affairs which has authority over such matters was ordered by the Israeli Supreme Court five years ago to establish sections in Jewish cemeteries for Jews of non-traditional Jewish lineage. Last year, the Israeli K'nesset, passed a law permitting – for the first time in Israel – th establishment of non-religious cemeteries. In both cases such action must be taken by the ultra-Orthodox controlled Ministry of Religious Affairs which has juristdiction over the cemeteries and their related budgets. No plans or time-tabels have ever been set for either the pluralistic sections of Jewish cemeteries or the establishment of non-religious cemeteries. The Ministry of Religious Affairs claims they don't have the money, but it more clearly seems like a case of political feet draging, the true victims of which are unable to complain.

Grigory was finally laid to rest Sunday in a section of Jerusalem's municipal cemetery reserved for members of the Bahai faith, a section that does not require a religious burial. The death of this young boy and the other victims of the terrorist attack united our community. For what was apparently a very brief moment we were once again Am Yisrael, joined by our immeasurable commonality and shared faith. For that brief moment, being a Jew did not rest upon the blood that courses through our veins, whether it is from your mother or father, but rather the blood that flowed in the streets of Jerusalem. In his death Grigory united us, but when we attempted to bury him as God commanded us, we were once again a divided people, unable to see the vast wealth of Jewish tradition and belief which we have in common, but rather only able to focus on those subtle aspects that make us different.

If it is outrage and shock that unites us as a people, then let us be outraged – shocked at the treatment of this young boy and his family. Let us join together in condemnation not only of the terrorists who ended his life, but the religious institutions and philosophies that would not permit his life to end as a Jew, buried alongside the other heroes and martyrs of Judaism. For the terrorists, any Jewish life was life enough to take. The Nazis and the Russians too, never spared Grigory's family from their anti-Jewish brutality and racism. But we, the Jewish people, we make the distinctions. Some in our community stand like Eichman, Himmler, or Mengele and say, "This one goes to the left and this one to the right." No! if it is horror that unites us, then let us be united at the horror of this image, and the eradication of such distinctions in our faith. We have been persecuted far too long for us now to be doing it to ourselves. May it be God's will that we finally learn to love and accept each other with the same passion that some would have to destroy us, and may that passion of a united community finally bring an end to the bombs and violence, the blood shed by all people of peace.