WE NEED MORE THAN YOUR THOUGHTS AND PRAYERS
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When my dad taught me how to drive a car in the empty parking lot of our neighborhood supermarket he began the lesson as I imagine many a parent has instructed their children.

As I sat behind the wheel key in the ignition, hands at 2 and 10 o'clock on the steering wheel he admonished me, "Do as I say not as I do." Focus on my words not my actions.

It was a pointless note of caution, as of course I was going to model my driving after how I had seen him do it, actions as they say – speak louder than words.

There were periods in Rabbinical school – while I was studying to be a rabbi that we would spend weeks analyzing one sentence, one passage in the Torah or Talmud. We would question and argue over the meaning of every word trying to get at the essence of what the rabbis meant in their own commentaries and analysis of the very same passage through the ages.

I'm not a literalist – so on one level I found the whole exercise frustrating. But then I was reminded of my father's instructions, "do as I say not as I do"; words have meaning. In the context of sacred texts and prayers they are chosen with precision to best express the intent of the author. We say *Kal vHomer*, so much the more so when that authorship is attributed to God.

And so it struck me as hollow and meaningless when in the shadow of the recent massacre in Orlando politicians, community leaders and ordinary everyday people would offer the consolatory phrase, "My thoughts and prayers are with you." Or change their Facebook profile picture to the rainbow flag or some version of "We are all Orlando".

Words matter and a picture is worth a 1,000 words – and that was just utter **Bullshit** if you'll permit me to use the words I really want to use to express how I feel.

People are being gunned down in the streets for being gay, or Israeli, or African American, or of this or that political persuasion.

We don't need your 'thoughts and prayers' or your Facebook status updates that took all of 10 seconds to create and were copied from someone else's page anyway – it's not even your thoughts and prayers, it was there's and you've plagiarized them. We need you to do what you say, not just say what you say.

I realize that saying "my prayers are with you" is another way of saying: "I care about you, sympathize with your predicament, wish you comfort." As a sentiment, this is unobjectionable and as one who finds himself daily at bedsides and gravesides searching for the words to

express comfort I know they are illusive. But as a palliative, in the wake of a societal tragedy they are empty and meaningless.

What can it mean to a person who's loved one has been killed that a news anchor or public official says "of course our prayers are with the victims and their families"? The intentions are admirable, but after the phrase is repeated enough, it begins to seem more rote than real.

We have a similarly nearly empty phrase in Jewish tradition. When a friend or loved one dies, we console the bereaved by saying, "*zicron l'vracha*, may their memory be a blessing."

What does "may" mean? How does "may" happen?

Rabbi Rick Jacobs observed that just as it is not enough to pray to be fast, to be healthy, or to be wise, neither can we merely pray for the lives of those massacred to be a blessing. If we aspire to speed, we must train. If we aspire to wellness, we must take care of ourselves. If we aspire to intelligence, we must study. And, if we aspire that the memory of those massacred in Orlando to be blessings, we must make it so.

In tractate Berachot of the Babylonian Talmud, God tells Moses, "*Lech rayd* - Go down from the mountain" because the people have lost their way, going so far as to threaten their destruction. Moses prays, he meditates on what he should do and only then in the midst of his prayers for guidance – his thoughts move from personal relief that he will be spared – to the realization "*Davar zeh talui bi* - This thing depends on me." He immediately stands up, challenging God to withhold the threatened punishment. Yes, he prayed, but his thoughts and prayers lead him to action not absolution from responsibility.

Moses hears God's threat as a call to action, understanding that something hangs in the balance and that one person stepping forward can shape the course of the future. These four words change his world: "*Davar zeh talui bi* - This thing depends on me."

Don't get me wrong I believe in thoughts and prayers, what we say is important, words matter, but they need to matter most to us. We must not think they are the beginning and the end of the sentence, they are only the beginning, the very beginning.

If we believe that prayer is a way of changing the world, it is too late; the disaster has struck, and those affected are reeling in the aftermath. What good can prayers do them now? Prayer is not to change the past, prayer is to change the future, prayer is to change us.

17th-century rabbi, Leon Modena taught his students to imagine standing on a shore and watching a man out on a boat grab a rope and pull his boat to shore. Now if you were confused about weights and motion, you might think that he was really pulling the shore to his boat. People have much the same confusion about spiritual weight and motion: in prayer, some believe that you are pulling God closer to you. But in fact the heartfelt prayer pulls you closer to God. Prayer doesn't move God, prayer moves you.

Rabbi David Wolpe writes, “We offer prayers to elevate ourselves along with the one who has suffered. If our prayers are truly with them, we are committing ourselves to work toward a world in which such tragedies—whether mass shootings or diseases or natural disasters—can be mitigated or ended. A prayer changes the world through changing us. It moves us to action. Praying pulls us closer to God and therefore toward what might be—what should be.”

Seen in this light, a prayer is a sturdy rope of solidarity thrown to the sufferer, one that acknowledges that we are in this together, and they are hurting because we—all of us—have not yet done enough to help. To pray is to pull on that rope and draw us nearer to action.

In a free society when something terrible occurs, as Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, few are guilty, but all are responsible. A prayer offered with such consciousness says: “I am with you. I might have done more. Your pain is not separate from my deeds and my life. I pray that you will have comfort, and that I, along with others who know of your suffering, will work to make a world in which such pain is banished.

Davar zeh talui bi - This thing depends on me; it depends on us. Offer all the thoughts and prayers you want; we need them but they are not enough they are only the beginning. We must do as we say we will do in our prayers and thoughts, we must be moved to action beyond status updates and forwarding emails of solidarity.

Marching in Selma, Alabama for civil right Abraham Joshua Heschel was challenged by members of his congregation, “You don’t belong on that bridge you belong on your bema in your synagogue praying”. Heschel responded, “when I am marching for justice, my feet are praying.”

Davar zeh talui bi - This thing depends on me; it depends on us. We must start praying with our feet, every one of us. Actions speak louder than words and we need to cause a great awakening, because the evil is winning while good people, people of good character and values slumber and update Facebook with thoughts and prayers.