

**Know Justice and Know Peace**  
**Rosh Hashanah 5781**

*Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple*  
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While I am from Brooklyn, I did something in the summer of 2000 which, unknown to me, was probably my first act of becoming a true New Jerseyan and that was that a friend of mine and I went to a Bruce Springsteen concert. But it wasn't just any concert, it was his final concert on the band's 1999-2000 reunion tour, and he was playing a Madison Square Garden. Anyone remember those days when you could safely fit 20,000 people in a venue for a concert where everyone could sing along and not have to worry about microparticles?

Anyway, this was a true quintessential Bruce Springsteen concert. And in true "Bruce fashion," the concert started a little late because he wanted to make sure everybody got there and the rumor was that they were even giving out tickets on the sidewalk; he wanted every single of those 20,780 seats to be full for his last night in New York City. And this wasn't just any night either. While he had already performed this song live in other cities, this was going to be the night where he debuted his song *41 Shots*, in front of a New York City crowd. For those of you who don't remember, *41 Shots* had quite a bit of controversy.

This song is about Amadou Diallo, a Guinean immigrant who was killed in his New York City doorway when New York City police shot at him 41 times after mistaking his wallet for a gun. Springsteen felt the shooting was an egregious over-reaction by the police, who killed an innocent man. The performance led to some controversy in New York City, where the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association called for a boycott of Springsteen's shows.

For those of you who don't remember the incident, in the early hours of February 4, 1999 Amadou Diallo was shot and killed by four New York City Police Department plain-clothed officers.

This is how one of the officers claimed the incident occurred:

Diallo ran up the outside steps toward his apartment house doorway at their approach, ignoring their orders to stop and ‘show his hands’. The porch lightbulb was out and Diallo was backlit by the inside vestibule light, showing only a silhouette. Diallo then reached into his jacket and withdrew his wallet. Seeing the man holding a small square object, [one officer] yelled ‘Gun!’ to alert his colleagues. The officers opened fire on Diallo, claiming that they believed he was holding a gun. During the shooting, the lead officer tripped backward off the front stairs, causing the other officers to believe he had been shot.

Malcolm Gladwell actually dedicated a chapter of his book *Blink; The Power of Instant Thinking* to what occurred and asked the question of how we make judgments. He points out that we make judgments about people every waking minute of the day. “Every waking minute that we are in the presence of someone, we come up with a constant stream of predictions and inferences about what that person is thinking and feeling....In the early hours of February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1999, however, the four officers cruising down Wheeler Ave failed at this most fundamental task. They did not read Diallo’s mind.

Gladwell continues...

These kinds of mistakes were not anomalous events. Mind-reading failures happen to all of us. They lie at the root of countless arguments, disagreements, misunderstandings, and hurt feelings. And yet, because these failures are so instantaneous and so mysterious, we don’t really know how to understand them. In the weeks and months that followed the Diallo shooting, for example, as the case made headlines around the world, the argument over what happened that night veered back and forth between two extremes. There were those who said that it was just a horrible accident, an inevitable by-product of the fact that police officers sometimes have to make life-or-death decisions in conditions of uncertainty. That’s what the jury in the Diallo trial concluded...On the other side were those who saw what happened as an open-and-shut case of racism.... Neither of these explanations, however is particularly satisfying. There was no evidence that the four officers in the Diallo case were bad people, or racists, or out to get Diallo. On the other hand, it seems wrong to call the shooting a simple accident, since this wasn’t exactly exemplary police work. The officers made a series of critical misjudgments, beginning with the assumption that a man getting a breath of fresh air outside his own home was a potential criminal.

The Diallo shooting,” according to Gladwell, “falls into a kind of grey area, the middle ground between deliberate and accidental. Mind-reading failures are sometimes like that. They aren’t always as obvious and spectacular as other breakdowns in rapid cognition. They are subtle and complex and surprisingly common, and what happened on Wheeler Ave is a powerful example of how mind reading works – and how it sometimes goes horribly wrong.”<sup>1</sup> The four officers fired 41 shots with semi-automatic pistols, striking Diallo 19 times. And those 41 shots all happened in about 2 and a half seconds.

I think the death of George Floyd affected us as a society not because it was yet another black death by a police officer. Diallo happened a little over 20 years ago and there have been countless scenarios of police getting it wrong since then. No, I think what disturbed many of us to our core, affecting even police officers with anger over this man’s death, was that we watched it. We watched it for 8 minutes and 46 seconds. Not 2 and half seconds. He was not resisting arrest. He was handcuffed. He was laying there with a knee against the throat for 8 minutes and 46 seconds. 16 times he said “I can’t breath” and cried for help. Even when the paramedics came, Officer Chauvin continued to apply pressure. After 8 minutes and 46 seconds he gets off of Floyd and they move a limp George Floyd onto a stretcher.

These are two very different cases of a black man dying at the hands of a police officer. I bring this up not because I’m condemning the police, I’m not. I’m condemning a society that allows it. Racism is in every part of our society and many of us try to avoid talking about it as much as possible. We try to deny the validity of its presence or attempt to believe that there are other factors that allowed some action to occur. In the Diallo case we acknowledge the profound sadness of what a tragedy it was, and we tried to understand how something like this could happen. Gladwell expounded greatly on how the event simply broke down, not as a way of excusing it, but as a way of understanding it. And then we went on with our lives. Shame on us.

When looking at the Floyd case I have heard many use the “well what about argument.” “Well, what about the fact that he was trying to buy a pack of cigarettes with a counterfeit twenty?” That doesn’t work for me. The same is true for countless others like that of the late Eric Gardner, “Well if he wasn’t selling loose cigarettes then this wouldn’t have happened.” For me, this then brings

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<sup>1</sup> Gladwell, Malcolm. *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking*. New York, Little, Brown and Company. pgs.194-197

up the counter argument entitled, “even if” Even if that’s true, neither of these cases merit death. But bringing up these excuses, the “what abouts?” let’s us not talk about racism. Why is it that we’re still wrestling with one of the oldest sins of America? Because even while we condemn it, even while we acknowledge that racism still exists, we are not willing to have substantive conversations about it. We are not willing to take a good hard look at ourselves in our society.

I have attended many marches and rallies over the years, not only as a rabbi, but for as long as I can remember. Since my first march I’ve always heard the chant “No justice / No peace.” Meaning if there isn’t any justice, there will never be peace. However, this last spring during a car caravan protest around the death of George Floyd, there was a child in the backseat of a car who was holding up a sign that said “Know justice / Know peace,” but it was spelt out “K-N-O-W Justice / K-N-O-W Peace.” How absolutely profound of that child. And in all my years of protests it never occurred to me that it could be K-N-O-W that we were shouting.

It reminded me of a quote from Pirkei Avot:<sup>2</sup> Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: On three things the world stands: on judgment, and on truth, and on peace, as it is said (Zechariah 38:16): “These are the things that you are to do: Speak the truth to one another, and render true and perfect justice in your gates.” In other words, “K-n-o-w justice, k-n-o-w peace.” Peace and justice are inextricably linked. The book of Makkot from the Babylonian Talmud tells us that Isaiah establishes for us that all the 613 commandments are based solely upon two of them: “Observe justice and perform righteous acts towards one another.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, “know justice, know peace.” And how often do we quote Deuteronomy 16:19 and 20? “You shall not judge unfairly: you shall show no partiality; You shall not take bribes for bribes blind the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the innocent. Justice, justice shall you pursue that you may thrive and occupy the land that Adonai your God is giving you.” Know justice, know peace.

These commandments of seeking justice in order to obtain peace have no conditions of personhood. It’s not: seek justice for Jews. It’s not: seek justice just for whites. We as Jews are commanded to seek justice for everyone. That we all have a right to live in an equitable society

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<sup>2</sup> Pirkei Avot 1:18

<sup>3</sup> BT Makkot 24a:27

and that, as Jews, it is incumbent upon us to foster that equitable society for all. I can think of no more important prayer this High Holy Day season than that of the communal *Vidui*.

Our *Vidui* or confessional prayer, is not in the singular. The *Ashamnu* prayer is written in the plural tense signifying that we as a community have done something wrong. The tense ends with “nu” *Ashamnu, Bagadnu*, We have sinned: we have betrayed. Then there are the *Al Cheit* prayers: *Al cheit shecatanu* for the sin we have sinned before you. It’s not *al cheit shechatati*, for the sin I have committed before you.

We also don’t read the prayer book in a way where we omit the sins we didn’t commit. “‘We have oppressed.’ Nope not me, skip. ‘We have been violent.’ Nope again. ‘We have scoffed,’ okay, maybe that one.” These prayers are meant to remind us that we, as Jews, are responsible for the well-being of our society. That all must know justice so that all may know peace. Because as a society, we have been violent, we have oppressed, we have been racist and xenophobic, and we have absconded responsibility for it. This is not a police issue, this is not a government issue, this is an “us” issue. We have sinned, we have wronged, and we need to change.

In *Parashat Shelach- Lecha* we are reminded of the spirituality behind the *tzitzit* of the *tallis*. The line about wearing *tzitzit* on our garments found in the portion is also found within the longer version of the *Shema* and *V’ahavta* prayers. In the extended passage, these sacred strings - these sacred knots - are linked to the performing of *mitzvot*, and the hope to make the world a better place.

There is a Chasidic interpretation of the *tzitzit* that says that that when a Jew looks at them, they should remember their sacred purpose in the world. The *tzitzit* are supposed to strengthen our hearts to embrace the sacred dimension of life. These knots bind us to our sacred obligations.

I must admit, my heart is knotted with what is happening with our world. There are numerous knots found in our American society: the knots of pain and sadness we feel as we look out and see innocent loss of life; the knots of pain as we look out and see chaos in the streets; the knots of uncertainty as we ask the question of when will this all get better; the knots of division and strife that plague too many homes and neighborhoods; the knots of bureaucracy which prevent the evolution of progress. These knots seem as though they will never come undone. At times they

feel insurmountable. However, we must always remember that the strongest knots are the ones that bind us together. The knots that keep us firmly attached to a world of hope. The knots that keep us firmly bound to our tradition and our heritage and a scripture that calls us to not be swayed in our pursuit of righteousness and not to separate ourselves off from the rest of society. The knots that we must never untie are the ones that bind us to our sacred calling. A calling that tells us to know justice and to know peace. In the coming year, may we all know what it feels like to live in a society filled with justice and peace. Amen v'amen.