

Spiritual Survival in Crisis

A Sermon for the High Holy Days by Senior Cantor Michael A. Shochet

Temple Rodef Shalom

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It's been 20 years, yet I still remember it vividly, as if it were yesterday. I remember the sounds, the sights, the people...every detail. On that day, July 23, 1987, as a Baltimore City Police Officer, I encountered probably the most challenging and, perhaps, terrifying event I had ever experienced: a traumatic event on the streets of Baltimore, that for me became a crisis of spirit, which I'll tell you more about in a few moments. This crisis changed my life. But, it also brought me to a place where I am today, a place of spiritual growth, wholeness and peace. A place where my spirituality has allowed me to, not only help myself, but offer help to others as well.

The High Holy Days is a time to examine the crises in our lives. It's a time for renewing our spirits as we take account of who we are and what we've done. It is a time for looking inward and searching for the answers to our unanswered questions, for repairing our souls from the turmoil's we've faced this year, and trying to find ways to mitigate the current hardships we face, whatever they might be. We look to God for help, but where do we find God? We turn to prayer, and to the Psalms. But the Psalmist had a different relationship with God than we have. How do we find God in those ancient words of our texts? Do we understand their meaning on a good day, let alone in the confusion of chaos? Can the first time we call out God's name for comfort and strength be in the midst of a crisis? If we want God to help us in tough times, we need to let God in, in the good times too. That way, when the crisis comes, we are comforted by God's familiar presence.

Rabbi Batsheva Meiri of Baltimore, recently wrote in her Temple's bulletin about the word crisis. She said that in Chinese, where symbols are used for words, the word crisis is made up of two symbols: one for danger and one for opportunity. Most often, in our world, we understand crisis to represent only the danger. Perhaps if we looked through the lens of the Chinese, we would see that crisis provides us with an opportunity too. It can provide us with an opportunity to move forward, fortified and strengthened by what we've overcome in moving beyond the danger.

My hope this Rosh Hashanah, is to share with you part of my personal story and give you insight into how we can use our spirituality, our souls, and our beliefs in God to fortify us in times of turmoil. As one of your clergy, I am with you in those moments, and want to help you find God's message of comfort and strength to turn darkness into light. There will always be a crisis around the next corner: whether it is of global proportions, such as the events 6 years ago on Sept 11; in our community, such as the rampage at Virginia Tech; or a personal crisis that we struggle with at home.

What we all understand, no matter whether it effects a community or one person, is that a crisis can shake our deepest beliefs, rattle our spirituality, and ultimately send us into a deep depression that could have lasting, and in the worst cases, tragic results.

And so, I want to share with you my perspectives on this because this is what I do, not only as your clergy, but as a police chaplain for both the Fairfax County Police Department, and the FBI. I want to help you understand how I respond to help people in need, be it a law enforcement officer, or a citizen, or one of our congregants.

Let me begin back in 1987 on that fateful Baltimore summer morning when I was sitting in my police car, ready to be called in after a pretty uneventful midnight shift.

Instead of hearing the call to return to the station, the two emergency tones rang out, alerting everyone of a "Signal 13," an officer needs help. An off duty officer was chasing someone who had taken a shot at him. My adrenaline began pumping. The location was less than 5 minutes away, in one of the worst neighborhoods in Baltimore: my patrol area. I put the car in gear and took off, siren wailing, trying to listen to the police radio, steering around rush hour traffic, trying to get there as fast as possible to help my fellow officer in need.

You might even ask, "What was this nice Jewish kid doing in a place like this in the first place?" That's for another sermon. I wanted to be a police officer and was getting a real taste of it. Maybe even too real. My beat was in the Eastern District of Baltimore City, just north of Johns Hopkins Hospital, if you know the area. Poverty and high crime were the order of the day. Handling calls for shootings, stabbings, drugs, domestics were the norm in this district. Yes, this kid from the posh Baltimore Jewish suburbs was experiencing a different reality as an inner-city police officer.

At this moment though, my attention was on helping to stop this man with a gun from causing any more problems. One of my squad partners, Officer Tom Martini and I found the officer who had called for help, Sgt. Sharpe. He had tracked the suspect to a nearby row of homes in an inner-city project. Tom, Sgt. Sharpe and myself went door to door, to find the suspect, while other officers took positions in front of, and behind, the row of homes.

In the middle of the block an elderly man opened his screen door part way, poked his head out, and wanted to know what all the excitement was about. He claimed he didn't know about anyone with a gun. At that same time, another officer learned from a witness that, in fact, the suspect we were looking for, had gone into this man's home. Confronted with this information, the man began to change his story. When Tom and Sgt. Sharpe said they needed to check his house, the man said, "Let me handle it. I don't want anyone to get hurt. I don't want anyone to be killed." While Tom and the Sgt. were engaged in this conversation on the

front step, I was standing a few yards away -- shotgun at the ready -- covering them.

Tom Martini was not the kind of officer who would take no for an answer. He was on a mission to find the suspect, his way. He told the man at the door to step aside, he was coming in. And at that moment, as Tom pulled open the screen door and tried to push the man out of the way, the man's son, our suspect, who had been hiding behind the front door, stepped from behind it and fired his 357 magnum. When Tom saw the suspect and the gun, he attempted to turn away, but the bullet caught him in the upper shoulder. One other officer fired his gun and I turned the shotgun towards where I thought the suspect was, but having no target, since the suspect shot from inside the house, I had no one to shoot, and instead ran to help Tom.

Those moments went into slow motion. The sound of the shot reverberated in my ears. Tom was running away from the door, screaming for help, shouting, "I've been shot! I've been shot!" and more Signal 13's jammed the radio as pandemonium ensued. I grabbed Tom and we ran to the end of the row of homes, where he was safely out of the line of fire, and I could get him medical attention. The other officers took cover and dealt with talking the suspect out.

Watching Tom get shot was horrible, but now watching him lie on the sidewalk bleeding, perhaps to death, waiting for the paramedics to find us, was even worse. It was just Tom and me, and we were both doing a lot of praying at that moment. God entered our conversation, as we both tried to invoke a power higher than ourselves for help.

While I was trying my best to stop the bleeding and keep Tom from going into shock, my mind was racing, adrenaline pumping, trying to fathom what just happened. We were just shot at! How could someone shoot a gun at another person, for no reason? Its one thing to respond to a call after a shooting has taken place, or arrest someone holding a gun. But it's a whole different reality to see a shooting take place or to have someone shoot at you. It was beyond belief; beyond what I had grown up thinking. Welcome to the real world where the idea of "humanity created in God's image" flies right out the window. At that moment, beyond getting through the turmoil at the scene, I wanted to pray, to find comfort from my God, who had been a part of my life in good times and bad. I needed God now.

I can't tell you if there was any Divine intervention amid all that praying, but I can tell you that Tom eventually recovered and went back out on the street fighting more crime.

I, on the other hand, wasn't so successful. I never processed the event with a police psychologist, police chaplain, my rabbi or anyone else. Our department, at that time, didn't understand post traumatic stress associated with critical incidents. It was understood that one had to just: "suck it up, and get back out there, you're a police officer, for goodness sake."

But the sleepless nights, the recurring sound of the shots and the screaming continued to replay in slow motion for months on end. It took its toll on me. While I did a lot of praying at

the scene, and searched for answers, I had depleted my spirit that day, and it took a long time to replenish. The pressure from family and friends to leave the department was too great, and I had lost the motivation for why I wanted to be a police officer in the first place.

Three months later, I turned in my badge and gun, and left the department. Inner city police work was too real for me. My spirit had been torn by what I faced, and what I saw every day on those tough, inner-city streets. The critical incident itself was over, but the crisis of my spirit remained, unsettled by losing faith and hope in humanity that the world was full of people who didn't care about human life as I did.

I often think back, had there been someone to help me understand this from a spiritual perspective, I would have rebuilt the motivation to stay in the department.

Instead, I went in a different direction, a direction in which I found the greatest meaning: through the music of prayer, and the traditions of our Judaism. The music gave me comfort, the prayers a sense of belonging and connection to a world of peace and wholeness. But as police work is forever in ones blood, shortly after I graduated from the cantorial seminary, and had some training in pastoral counseling, I made it my mission to become a police chaplain and be able to help other police officers and their families get through a crisis, as well as help them keep their spirits healthy and whole.

What I do as a volunteer police chaplain, which is the same as what I do as one of your clergy, is to bring the message of God's nearness into the chaos.

Take for example the shootings in May, 2006 at our police station in Centerville. Two police officers were gunned down in the parking lot of that quiet neighborhood station, just down the street from the Westfields Marriott where we used to have our High Holy Day services. A crazed gunman wanted to kill police officers that day, and tragically, he succeeded. It was a crisis of enormous proportions for our department. No one had ever been shot in the line of duty before, especially in the safety of the police station itself, where police officers feel secure and at home. It tore officers apart. Their spirits, like mine in Baltimore, were depleted.

That day, and for months after, myself and other police chaplains, mental health professionals and peer counselors helped officers and their families try to find answers, to this unexplainable tragedy, and mostly to find strength and comfort in getting through the crisis. We lost two fine police officers on May 8th; we didn't want to lose anymore due to resignations or even suicide.

So now, at the Police Academy, I teach a course called Spiritual Survival. It's designed to help new recruits and officers on the street make sure they take care of their spirits. It's pretty common to learn how to take care of yourself physically and mentally in police academies, but not many departments are asking officers to make sure they are spiritually fit too.

What does it mean to be spiritually fit? It's not a religion course that I teach. That wouldn't be kosher, according to laws of church and state. Religion is only a subset of spirituality. That is, people use religion and its rituals and practice to help them develop and maintain their spirituality. One can have a full spiritual life and not be religious, just as one can be very religious and not be fulfilled spiritually.

Rather, my course teaches how having a healthy spirit will allow you to have a healthy career, and a fulfilling life. My class begins with understanding what is spirituality. While some may believe in God, attend a synagogue, church or mosque to feed their spirituality, others may experience spiritual wholeness through learning something new, helping others, listening to music, admiring nature, being on the water, or being with people.

Spirituality refers to our value system: our character, the ethics and morals that we uphold. It includes our search for meaning, understanding and purpose in life. Spirituality is the heart and soul of our whole being. It's also connecting us with something larger than ourselves. People who are religious think of it in terms of having a personal relationship with God. All of these can be powerful spiritual encounters.

Spirituality is one of the four dimensions of human life: physical, emotional, social and spiritual. We need all four to survive, and they are all connected with one another. Take, for example, a walk with a friend. Walking for exercise will improve your physical well-being. But you build your spiritual well-being by the self-discipline and self-pride you gain by sticking to a walking routine. The discussions that you have with your walking partner may not only improve your emotional and social well-being, but as you show kindness to your friend, plan celebrations together, or help each other solve problems, you find meaning, which adds to your sense of wholeness, or spirituality.

What does this have to do with police work, or even to us? Like police officers, we all deal with crises that may leave us spiritually bereft. Difficult events we see or deal with on a regular basis can make us question our beliefs.

For police officers, this may be dealing with people who have no sense of right and wrong: the domestic abusers, child abusers, people who rob and steal, who destroy individuals and communities. For us, it might be dealing with a death in the family, or some tragedy that was unexpected: perhaps an ill parent. These difficult events or situations can be thought of as **toxins** which can eat away at our values, values which give our life meaning. And when you take away meaning, your spirit can dry up, leading to a loss of hope, compassion, love: all those values that are intrinsic to your humanity. And when you're spirit is dried up, you can experience physical, emotional or social dysfunction as well.

What I tell police officers in the Academy is that police work is a spiritual calling. Officers may not express their profession that way, but I believe it to be true. Those people who get in to law enforcement because they want to speed through red lights, carry a badge and gun, or lock people up, are in it for the wrong reasons and will probably not have long law enforcement careers, or very happy ones. But the people who are in it because of their spiritual makeup are people who have an incredible motivation to pursue goodness and justice in our world. If, however, they are exposed to so much violence, hatred and injustice, they can easily become dispirited, and lose their motivation, as I did.

Let me explain it in Jewish terms. God created us to be partners in holiness, working together with God to perfect the world. Being created in God's image means we share common values, values such as goodness, righteousness, kindness, justice, truth, mercy and peace. But God also gave us free will. That is, the ability to make our own decisions – right or wrong. On Yom Kippur, in the Torah portion, God tells us, "I have set before you today life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life." In other words, choose the holy road, the values that we share together, don't choose evil.

Most people choose life. They choose to do the right thing; to behave in a positive way, or at least try. Police officers are among those who choose life. They are role models in our community for goodness. When they put on that badge of authority, they are saying, "I am actively choosing to uphold God's commandments of justice and peace, and trying to make this world a better place. I am God's partner in the pursuit of good over evil."

But the flipside of God giving us free will, is that there are people who choose not to follow a life of holiness. These are the people who embrace evil, misuse power, exploit others and take advantage of their fellow neighbor. Good people are motivated to pursue justice precisely because there is injustice in society.

I teach these officers, and I want you to understand too, that our motivation that we carry with us is based on how full are our spirits. You see, each of us has inside a spiritual reservoir, or spiritual bank account. When we are highly motivated, our spiritual holding tank is full, overflowing with faith and hope. We feel good about ourselves and our lives are filled with meaning. This is exactly as the young police recruit feels as he or she graduates from the police academy, ready to fight crime, and make the world a better place.

But when we come face to face with the evil toxins: the people who don't share the same values as us, or tragedies in our lives, withdrawals are made from our spiritual bank accounts.

Constant exposure to tragedy can cause you to ask the question, "Why is God allowing this?" And then you begin to lose faith in God. That is a big withdrawal from your spiritual account. Constant exposure to people who don't share our values causes us to question whether there

are, in fact, other good people in our world like us, and we begin to lose faith in humanity. This is another big withdrawal from your spiritual account.

Our spiritual bank accounts can be depleted as we move through life and experience not only the evil toxins in the world, like the 9-11's or the VA tech shootings, but the personal crises as well. We don't physically make the withdrawals, the world, and the events we face, take them from our accounts.

For the police, if they don't replenish these accounts of faith and hope, they can become spiritually bankrupt; losing the motivation that once ignited the spark to fight crime. Losing the motivation equates to losing the meaning or the drive to continue. When their spiritual bank accounts are depleted, we start to see symptoms of cynicism, depression, physical ailments like high blood pressure, weight gain, sleep loss, abuse: chemical, domestic, and drug. Their spiritual deficit has caused the other dimensions of their life: physical, emotional and social to fall out of whack.

I only need point you to the statistics that show police officers lose their lives more often because of suicide rather than at the hands of a criminal. Or, they have crossed the line of right and wrong, and no longer cherish the values they hold dear. These are the people like a former police partner whom I had looked to as a mentor when I was a police officer, and after having been on the street for 15 years, was arrested and sent to jail for bank robbery -- while on duty -- to cover for his gambling habit, that he developed as a cop.

And so I teach police officers, and I say to you, that you need to replenish your spiritual bank accounts and practice spiritual wellness on a regular basis. In this way, whether it's evil or chaos in our world, or a personal tragedy, you can use your spiritual tools to mitigate the crisis, finding the opportunity to get through it strengthened and whole. But remember, preparation is the key. If you wait for the crisis to come to find God in your life, it may be too late. Who has time to discover one's spirituality in the midst of chaos? You need to begin that relationship with God before the crisis. Why only invoke God when times are bad? How about bringing God to your wedding, the birth of your child, or Bar Mitzvah? How about every Shabbat?

While I give police officers a whole list of tips to practice spiritual wellness, here are a few for you. These are some ways to replenish the withdrawals made from your spiritual bank accounts.

The first one is developing a relationship with God, or a presence beyond yourself, right here at Temple. Can the rituals, practices or prayers of our own tradition be a source of inspiration to you? Do you allow yourselves to ask questions when you are here? Questioning God is just as important as listening to the teachings of our tradition. Express your frustration or perhaps

confusion in God's presence in your life. It's okay to be angry at God. After all, our name Israel, means one who wrestles with God.

Who do you look up to? Is there a mentor in your life that inspires you? Perhaps engaging in supportive friendships, sharing similar goals and aspirations with others, and having meaningful conversations can provide significant moments of transcendence.

If you want to see how others, like you, are trying to make the world a better place and using their values towards holiness, volunteer somewhere, or begin a tzedakah project. Why should this only be for our 13 year olds? Visit a soup kitchen, a hospice, an animal shelter, a library, a hospital. Get involved in recycling or improving the environment. See other people around you that are interested, like you, in making the world a better place. Focus on the goodness of others, and you'll see that you are not alone in the pursuit of goodness and peace.

Read books, take a course, attend a seminar, an adult education class, and find a support group or network of people who share your interests or concerns.

When there is a crisis, be a role model for others, especially our children. They need to learn at a young age how to find opportunity in the crisis.

Allow yourself to confront the pain when it hurts, and know also when to let go; when there is nothing more you can do; when it's time to trust in something higher than yourself.

As part of the human experience, we are continually challenged in our lives, facing ethical and moral decisions all through our lifetimes. But being concerned with our spiritual well being helps us find joy, love, inner strength, and peace to help us cope with those nasty curves that life throws at us along our journeys.

It's not about just getting through a crisis, it's being in a mindset that allows you to seek out the opportunity. We need to create a life for ourselves so that no matter what comes down the pike, we never lose hope. We never lose faith that tomorrow will be a brighter day. We stay in control because we have developed our spirituality, or relationship with God, and we want to nourish it. This allows us to see that there is light at the end of the tunnel; opportunity amid the turmoil. In that way, when we turn to our prayers and our psalms in chaos, they have meaning because we have developed that relationship with God; with our spirituality.

When we read the words of the psalmist who said, "Esa Enai el he-harim, meiyin yavo ezri?" "I looked to the mountains, from where does my help come?" We can feel the hope and faith of the psalmist who sought God in trouble, and we can truly find God. In pain and fear, the psalmist turned his eyes to the mountains and looked up with confidence and hope, when life could have caused him to look down in despair. "What is the source of my help," he asked? He knew the answer because it was in him the whole time. He had a relationship with his

Creator, and he carried that in his spirit. "My help comes from God, maker of heaven and earth," he said. And, like the psalmist in the grandeur and majestic presence of God's beautiful earth, we find trust in the notion that God will protect us. God will give us strength, and not let our feet stumble. When we realize that God is there for us, we can say as the psalmist did, at the end of the prayer: "Adonai yishmor tzeitinu uvoeinu, mei-atah v'ad olam," "God will watch over us, guard us from harm, and protect us in all of our journeys through life."

Kein y'hi ratzon, May this be God's will.