

## A Letter from Paris

January 16, 2015

Dear Friends,

Please forgive me for this rather impersonal group letter, rather than a personal note to each one of you. Do know that given the time, I'd prefer otherwise!

That being said, it is truly amazing the tremendous number of phone calls, SMS, email messages, linkedin messages and facebook messages I have received since last Wednesday. How so very true is the Talmudic statement in Shevuot (39a) declaring, "*Kol yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*", meaning 'all of Israel are responsible for each other'.

A week ago, all of Paris –myself included– was going about their normal business. In my case, I was taking one of my children to a medical visit, and considering whether I needed to take advantage of the official "sales period" that had just begun that morning. (For my American friends, France has a much more regulated commercial economy that dictates when and for how long stores may have sales – and what constitutes a sale). Turning on the radio in the autolib (an electric Zip car of sorts), came the first waves of information: an "attack" has taken place at the redaction office of the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo. In reality a massacre had just taken place, but details were still sketchy.

My first reaction is probably a familiar automatic response known by all of our Israeli friends: I sent off a quick SMS to my family to find out if everyone was alright! Everyone was fine. Then details started to come out: the staff was gunned down in cold blood by Islamist terrorists at an address that was vaguely familiar. Suddenly, I realized, that the Charlie Hebdo office was no longer at an address in the North of Paris (after having been firebombed by radicals in 2011 for its drawings of the prophet Mohammed, they probably had decided to move for security to another site). Instead, they were literally right around the corner from my wife's synagogue, Centre Maayan-CJL.

As in any dramatic moment that centers on issues of life and death, we often consider the "what ifs."

Among them, which I had thought about, was the realization that the directors of the Talmud Torah religious schools of the Liberal synagogues of Paris and some rabbis were suppose to be meeting at her synagogue center at about the same time that the premeditated slaughter was perpetrated. The meetings' location had only been changed at the last minute to another synagogue to accommodate one of the directors. Otherwise, they would have been walking out of the metro stop and into the killing spree.

By the time I got back home –I live in the historic old Jewish neighborhood of the Marais– police and riot control forces (CRS) were already present. Turning on the news (switching back and forth between TF1, I-Télé, BFM news, CNN and I24) we learned more of the story of the grime outcome of the editorial staff and security personnel. How the terrorists forced a young mother, who was simply getting her child from nursery

school, to punch in the door codes that allowed them into the building. And how a wounded local policeman (a Muslim, himself, moreover) coming to their aid was literally murdered before our eyes; his death recorded on a video, played over and over again around the world.

My own phone started ringing non-stop as shock, horror, anger and trepidation started to settle in amongst Parisians. Everyone realized that armed terrorists were literally running loose on our streets.

I contacted my Talmud Torah director to consult together, since we had a class scheduled at the synagogue for that same early afternoon. We needed to figure out whether or not to maintain the class – and whether we would be able to contact all the students, parents and teacher in time, if the decision was to cancel the class. Because of the class would be held very shortly and that kids often come on their own directly to the synagogue, class in the end was held. I asked our teacher to use the backroom (farthest room from the street and next to an emergency exit) and keep me updated.

By Thursday, when there was a young policewoman, dealing with a traffic accident in the South of Paris, was assassinated by a heavily armed individual, emotions ran towards fear and fright.

Emergency meetings over security and encounters with Jewish community leaders all ensued. There were also calls of support from the arrondissement mayor and local police chief... and, as you might expect, many, many members calling to express the rollercoaster of emotions we were all feeling as ideological monsters were freely roaming the streets.

By the next day when the two sets of terrorists were holed up in two locations, one being a Jewish supermarket not too far from one of my daughter's High School, sheer panic had hit us all.

France's national security alert system (*Le plan Vigipirate*) was at its highest levels. Calls were coming forth to cancel that evening's Shabbat services. In consultation with my congregation's President and Talmud Torah director, we decided that given the situation... with present location's flimsy physical set up, we would cancel Sunday school classes as a precaution for the children (however we did send homework home to the families by email, explaining to them that learning was also a way to resist). Nonetheless, I felt that it was very important for us to maintain our Shabbat services – even if other congregations might decide otherwise. We hired private guards, and heavily armed police in bullet proof vests were making the rounds between Kehilat Gesher and a neighboring Orthodox shule on the next street.

Just before the service started, I received a SMS from my daughter, who had been locked down in her High School, telling me that the authorities were evacuating her and other students from the rear of the school. The National Gendarmerie Intervention Group (*GIGN*: anti-terrorist forces) was about to intervene. By the time we were about to sing

*Lekha Dodi*, a member whispered into my ear that the terrorists in both locations had been killed, hostages had been freed (many in the grocery store owe their lives to another Muslim who worked there, Lassana Bathily, a real *mensch* and hero!), but unfortunately 4 Jews were murdered by the terrorists (one, the son of a Tunisian rabbi, while trying to take the gun from the hand of the Jihadist).

My little *shteibl* was brimming with people. The atmosphere at Kehilat Geshher was at once spiritual and electric. Fear and pride intermingle in our prayers.

In our collective minds, we were not only thinking about the current attacks, but also thinking about the killing of Ilan Halimi *z"l* in 2006, the murders of the French soldiers and Jewish children and teachers in Toulouse in 2012, and the massacre at the Brussels Jewish Museum last year in which one of our very own members of Kehilat Geshher, Dominique *z"l* was murdered... and for whom with a heavy-heart, I presided over her funeral.

Everyone there felt to the depths of their Jewish soul that the simple act of praying together was an act of defiance – it was an act of resistance and resilience.

The next morning services, one congregant even commented that “it was almost a normal Shabbat at Kehilat Geshher” in these atypical times. Yet walking out into the streets (and asking members to disperse quickly and avoid leaving in groups) reminded us just how much our reality had changed in only a couple of days. A healthy dose of fear reigns as everyone wonders when and where the next attack might occur.

On my way home, I noticed that shops were nearly empty and that there was a deafening loud quietness all around the city – highly unusual for a Parisian Saturday afternoon.

That evening I cancelled our ciné-club activity set for Sunday, in order to permit everyone to participate in the rally of unity, and I passed the rest of Saturday evening glued to the TV, internet or radio, like most of the population around me.

Sunday morning, I participated in an inter-religious ceremony that preceded a Protestant religious service. I, an Imam, a Priest and the Temple's Pastor spoke of tolerance and unity. It was a ceremony, for which I am very happy that it had taken place, but I was also troubled by it.

I know well my clerical colleagues and am confident of their hopes, desires and good intentions. That being said, I was profoundly disturbed that the original idea for the ceremony was to start off by lighting 21 candles – 17 for the victims, 3 for the terrorists killed and one large general candle for victims of terrorism everywhere. I let it be known that while I realize this might be a part of their theological imperative, I couldn't countenance a ceremony that put the executioner on the same moral level as the victim. As a result, 3 candles were placed apart from the others.

Furthermore, I was also bothered by the words of the Imam –a wonderful person–

nonetheless he simply could not see that his (and my preferred) interpretation of Islam is in reality not the only interpretation acceptable among Moslems. He basically stated that the terrorists could not be Moslem because, I assume, they did not fit his more open and tolerant understanding. I would accept that Radical Islam may be an extreme version of the Muslim religion, but it certainly is not a stranger to it. And that is a problem that not only liberal Muslims –but also all of us in the West– must have the courage to look in the face one day, if we really want to vanquish the demon.

Finally, I was bothered and anxious by the ceremony because... well here was a crowd of people simply coming to their house of worship, Protestants in the occurrence, with the front doors wide open and with no police or security standing on the outside!

What might be standard for the non-Jewish Christian population in France becomes frightening from a Jewish viewpoint. I realized no one there was as sensitive to these standard concerns as almost any Jew in French today. And knowing that I have been formatted by circumstance (read ‘warped’) into thinking it “right and normal” to have to worry about safety measures, before gathering people together in a Jewish context, is one of the surer signs of the illness of our times.

Yet in spite of these complexities, I am still pleased that the ceremony occurred. And even if it was not all what I could hope for, a truism of life is: if one wants to make change, we must start from where others are, in order to get them to where we think they ought to be!

Sunday afternoon, the coming together of millions of people in the streets of Paris was an incredible experience. Yes, a good number of the signs held high said “Je suis Charlie” (I’m Charlie). But numerous, as well, were the signs that said “Je suis Juif” (I’m Jewish), even in the hands of people with obvious North African descent.

A meeting point had been given to Kehilat Geshar members who had wanted to walk together as friends, not as a community; I felt that it was not quite right to have a “rally for unity,” but then walk behind a partisan banner. In any case, it was a mute point as that the sheer numbers of people who surged through the boulevards of Paris prevented anyone from moving in any direction for hours. What was amazing in the circumstance was the general feelings of unity, respect and concern for others. It was clearly palpable!

Seeing everyone clapping for and cheering on the police (unusual in France), spontaneous singing of the national anthem, *la Marseillaise* (even more unusual in France), and strangers talking to each other with warmth and tenderness in a friendly atmosphere (what can I say, highly unusual ☺) was some solace of hope in these somber times.

Coming home late, as it took more than 4 hours to walk just a couple of kilometers, my wife and I both felt that the real test would be in the days and weeks to come. Will the society as a whole start to wake up to the real dangers that face us all – and sadly, in particular us in the Jewish community?

Here we are now a week later. What can I tell you?

That kosher restaurants near my synagogue were filled as they normally are at lunch hour. And eating a hamburger and fries (sorry my vegetarian friends and family) has taken on a new color – an act of civil protest, in addition to simply being an expression of Jewish values.

Students are still showing up for classes, and parents are still having me perform life cycle events (we welcomed a baby girl into the community yesterday!

True, *aliya* (immigration) is up. Yet it is difficult to know how much is really an *Aliya* based upon fear of anti-Semitism previous to these attacks, and how much is an *Aliya* based upon economic interests and what the French call *defiscalisation*: “tax refugees”.

Many commentators pointed out how Netanyahu was so warmly welcomed at the Rothschild synagogue, especially when compared to the “polite” applause accorded to President Hollande (who until recently has had the “honor” of being the least liked President in the history of the 5<sup>th</sup> republic). Those journalists were saying that this was a sign that the Jews of France are preparing to leave.

For me, a telling moment was Netanyahu’s appeal to French Jewry that they “should” come home... with the diplomatic response of the Prime Minister Manuel Valls saying that “France without its Jews will no longer be France”.

Yet at the end of that evening ceremony where Netanyahu was so warmly welcomed, those same attendees spontaneously started singing *la Marseillaise* (next thing you know, the French will be waving flags as patriotically and as often as Americans. ☺)

So how did we get here?

Too many years have gone by in which politicians (of both major parties) willfully overlooked creeping extremism in certain neighborhoods in France for expediency purposes, economic benefits and simply votes. They abandoned prisons to Islamists, creating a festering breeding ground for Jihadists. They became wobbly and cowed when confronted by violence and racism in the schools.

Journalists have also played a role over the years, substituting weaker images for direct terms: a massacre or a slaughter becomes simply an “attack”. Extremists and their followers become the “youth from the suburbs”.

Intellects tried to pin the blame on others in the face of creeping radical Islamization: in their eyes racism can only come from the traditional source, the far right. Another game is to blame the victim. They are somehow responsible because they support Israel, or they are rich or they are poor, or they are exclusive... just fill in the box.

The social atmosphere had degraded over the years, and the inability to name the problems has made things worse.

It is not my intention to go through a geopolitical analysis of how things have slowly spun out of control. But the internationalization of these groups through Internet has taken an isolated ideology and exported the philosophy to these fanatics and their supporters with whom we must deal with today.

These horrific murders are a wakeup call that has aroused many to finally start realizing that Islamist fascist groups' intimidation is real and its reach is widespread.

These murders also underlined once again the reality that some people are being killed for the right to express themselves freely, like the journalists at Charlie Hebdo; others, the Jews, simply for being who they are.

Hopefully the reaction to the violence will lead people to recognize that Islamist jihadist terrorists pose a serious threat to values our democracies cherish and hold dear: liberty, equality and fraternity.

So even if *Aliya* rates double in the coming year, a cold-eye analysis is that the vast majority of Jews in France are still staying for a whole host of reasons that are legitimate. They want to see changes, and their hoping that the politicians follow up their words with facts on the grounds.

As of today I can say that in every speech pronounced by and legislation proposed by the Prime Minister since the carnage began last Wednesday, I feel a real determinism on his part to do the right thing.

Mongers of hate on the Internet and through Tweeter have in the past couple of days been arrested and sentenced to jail time; even Dieudonné was taken into custody. Also thousands of soldiers and police have been mobilized to protect sensitive sites (e.g. synagogues and schools). France is sending its aircraft carrier into range to strike the Islamic state and Al Qaeda operatives in the Middle East.

It doesn't completely lessen the nagging fear, but it is a start. And there is much more to do!

So to answer a question a few people asked: No, I'm not packing my bags yet. I still have way too much work to do here.

Kehilat Geshar needs to work even harder at reaching out to others and being a "bridge" (the meaning of the word "Geshar), a small example being our inviting Imams and Moslems to join our upcoming Shabbat service as a show of solidarity with their Jewish neighbors.

As I type this note, I remark from our window on the street side of our apartment that there are now three soldiers in front of a synagogue just down the street, and that I have

received a new message from the Mayor of the 17<sup>th</sup> wanting to arrange a meeting of community leaders with a new Police Chief who was just appointed by Vall's government to deal with security issues around Jewish sites.

I know this letter has been (too) long.

But I have had numerous demands asking what people can do to help from overseas. Just beyond the amazing spiritual and psychological support, concern and prayers which we have received, there are some concrete actions that could be very helpful right now.

Firstly, the little things... like that Talmud Torah class in Chicago sending a picture of their kids in support of us is extremely uplifting. You can always contact our Talmud Torah director (he speaks Spanish, English, Hebrew and French) at [talmudtorah@kehilatgesher.org](mailto:talmudtorah@kehilatgesher.org) for actions in support of our religious school.

Secondly, come and visit. The *hizzuk* (strength) we get from your presence is important. We had a couple from New York this last Shabbat who came to Friday night services. Their presence on a night when the rest of us were still in shock was priceless!

Thirdly, the reality is that even if the country starts to turn things around, there is so much to do that it will take awhile. We will not be able to let down our defense anytime soon... something our Israeli brothers and sisters have learned to live with so much longer than us! So this implies that we will need to keep on our hired private guards on a much longer term than our current budget can absorb. For those who want to help out in this regard, I urge you to partner with us by donating to KG USA, our 501c3 "friends of Kehilat Gesher in France" organization in the USA. We will be creating a specific category for donations to help with security needs in our current place. That is until we can find a more suitable location for our congregation that is better secured than our current one.

In the same vein, we will be promoting more Jewish-Moslem relations programs to which you might want to help. If you are interested in helping in these ways, you can send a check (made out to *Kehilat Gesher USA*; please note on the check that your donation is for KG France) to our friend and Treasurer of KG USA, *Rabbi Peter Grumbacher, Vice President, Finance, of Kehilat Gesher USA, 300 Woodland Drive, Wilmington, DE 19809.*

And finally, realize that what has happened in Paris can happen anywhere in the civilized world. The only real way to fight it is by sticking together. Giving up is not going to solve the problem, only perhaps compound it.

May we all soon find healing and the possibility to live freely and safely everywhere where we might live.

Tom

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