

“Eternal God, Open up my lips that my mouth may declare your glory”

(Leviticus 19:1-18; Isaiah 2:1-5)

“Wild Geese” by Mary Oliver

“An Appendix to the Vision of Peace” by Yehuda Amichai

“Eternal God, open up my lips that my mouth may declare your glory.”

When I came up with this title a month ago, I was planning to reflect on the three forms of Jewish prayer: Praise, Supplication and Thanksgiving.

The prelude to the central prayer in the liturgy, “the Amidah,” known simply as the Standing Prayer, is a *kavannah*, an intentional prayer, readying the worshipper to stand before the Holy One. “*Adonai sefatai tiftach, u’phi yagid tehillatecha*”—Eternal God, open up my lips that my mouth may declare your glory.”

But, as the Yiddish proverb teaches, “Man plans and God laughs.” So as I sat down to reflect, I couldn’t ignore the experience of a group of pious people in Charleston, South Carolina, doing just that. They were uttering words of praise, thanksgiving and supplication to their Creator on the evening of Wednesday, June 17, as they were gunned down in their sanctuary, their mouths, which had been declaring God’s glory, suddenly silent, their lips, swiftly stilled.

I couldn’t drive out from my mind’s eye the image of the gunman, barely out of adolescence, fueled by an ideology far older than he, pledging allegiance to a confederate flag that symbolizes for so many of this country’s citizens, hate, racism and fear. And playing in my mind was another visual—that of the body of the pastor at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, State Senator, Rev. Clementa Pinckney, lying in repose in the rotunda of the State Capitol as the confederate flag fluttered at full staff above that very dome.

I couldn’t turn a blind eye to the spate of Southern black churches burning in the past two weeks, perhaps a last gasp of rage by white supremacists living in the margins of public opinion, or their impending convocation—a Ku Klux

Klan rally in the South Carolina capitol, to proudly uphold the banner of the confederacy.

And I can't help but be aware that yesterday we celebrated Independence Day, affirming anew the country we want to be, the vision our founders imagined, even as we recognize that in 2015, two hundred thirty nine years after declaring that "All men are created equal," our nation is still riddled with inequality, shackled by racism, rage and recalcitrance. And despite this recent massacre, and those that preceded it—in a Sikh Temple in Wisconsin, in a movie theatre in Colorado, in an elementary school in Connecticut, our society is still awash with guns.

Indeed, a few months before he entered Emanuel AME Church in Charleston with his .45 caliber handgun—apparently a gift from his father on his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday—the shooter had been stopped by police who found parts of an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle and six 40 round magazines of ammunition in the trunk of his car. This civilian version of the military M-16 is the same weapon used to kill 20 children and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School.<sup>i</sup>

When the sacred precincts of our public lives—our schools and our places of worship—are violated, what can be our supplication? What prayers should be declared through our open lips? There are some things "*lo bashamayim hi*," "not in heaven," but rather in our control. Can our mouths speak the religious truth that in our gun-flooded society, we have turned weapons into idols? "The worship of idols must be recognized for what it is — blasphemy. The only appropriate response to idolatry is sustained moral outrage,"<sup>iii</sup> writes Rabbi Eric Yoffie.

For those who regard Scripture as sacred, the source of that moral outrage is clear. The holiness code, which we just heard, teaches us how to live a life of holiness. The Ten Commandments are unequivocal. "Thou shalt not murder." Throughout recorded history, there has been great imagination brought to bear in the means of murder: drowning, beheading—the gas chamber. In our time, the ubiquity of guns makes murder as convenient and as mindless as the flick of a finger. But do not let the ease of that motion deceive—the sole intention of that subtle hand movement is to snuff out a life. The Talmud warns, "He who takes one life it is as though he has destroyed the universe and he who saves one life it is as though he has saved the universe."

In contrast to the universe seen from behind a gun barrel, the prophet Isaiah evokes a universe of harmony, of sharing, of disarming, a universe where, "The

wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid; the calf, the beast of prey and the fatling together ... they shall not hurt and destroy in all my holy mountain...And they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks.”(Is 11: 6,9; Is. 2:4)

Isaiah’s vision is dramatic, inspiring, yet poet Yehuda Amichai challenges us even further, in his poem,

*An Appendix to the Vision of Peace*

Don’t stop after beating the swords

Into ploughshares, don’t stop! Go on beating

And make musical instruments out of them.

Whoever wants to make war again

Will have to turn them into ploughshares first.<sup>iii</sup>

In Mother Emanuel Church at a weekly Bible study, men and women of faith who likely had their fair share of axes to grind, enough justification to gird themselves with swords, were nevertheless trying to live out Isaiah’s vision. Grounded in devotion and scripture, the universe they were trying to bring into being—by their hospitality to a white stranger, by their steady presence in that historic sanctuary, by their joyful singing of songs of faith—was akin to Amichai’s challenge. Their beat carried the cadence of joy, the percussion of praise. They imagined the world differently than it was. They were building a hedge against the violence and dehumanization outside those church walls. Their mouths were opened in thanksgiving.

But when those nine were silenced, when our nation struggled to make sense of racial hatred that led once more to slaughter, what came out of many of our mouths was a different kind of supplication, an invitation to engage in what for many were painful and honest confrontations with rage, with fear, and with despair. One friend, who had been a preacher from an historically black college in the south told me, “I’m angry at the slaughter and the violation of sacred ground, and I’m also angry about the lost leadership. Good leadership is

more valuable than gold in the black community and I'm struck by the contrast between what the killer had done with his life and what those he killed were doing with theirs.”

Another friend, a layperson of deep faith gave voice to his fear and despair. He shared his worries about the world our children are inheriting. He confessed his not unreasonable nightmare of losing his teenage son, now growing into a tall black man, at the hands of a troubled person or a policeman who might make a poor decision. Inspired by the family members of the slain who did so, he also wanted to feel forgiveness, but, strong and devout as he is, forgiveness nevertheless seemed beyond his reach.

As I absorbed my friends' words, and the burden that they live with every day, I thought of Pomona College Professor Claudia Rankine's piece in the New York Times Magazine, “The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning.”<sup>iv</sup> Mourning, as in grief, because it is a daily strain to live knowing that as a black person, you can be killed for simply being black. She masterfully conveys the unremitting fear and terror of living in this condition.

Like Professor Rankine, my friends opened their lips to reveal—not praise or thanksgiving, but dashed hopes, unfilled promises. They opened a conversation about despair. As Mary Oliver writes in her poem, *Wild Geese*, “Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.”

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.<sup>v</sup>

Even as they my friends struggled to find redemption in this newest deep and ugly scar, they refused isolation. They still listened to the call of the world, offering itself to their imagination.

Genesis teaches, “*Lo tov be’ot adam levado*--It is not good for humans to be alone.” It is not good for human beings to be isolated. It is not good for our neighbors to live in fear, to be unable to trust in the future, to be unable raise their children with confidence because of the color of their skin. It is not good for people to live inside their greatest fears without cease. We live in an uneasy balance between autonomy and community, between loneliness and connection. There are important public policy changes to be made, on gun control, on the Confederate flag, on police education and oversight, on restoring voting rights; there are significant inequities to correct.

But beyond the public square is the private circle. Along with those is this—encircling one another with compassion, learning another’s story, imagining ourselves in one another’s skin. “Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.” When hatred is visible, let it be blinded by love. When churches are burned down, let our homes, our places of worship and our neighborhoods become sanctuaries. When individuals and communities feel alone or forgotten, let us make room in our lives to mitigate their fears and uphold their dreams.

Significantly, for generations, often invisible to the white communities that feared or misunderstood it, the black church provided sanctuary, in every sense of that word. It is in the black church, where praise, thanksgiving and supplication are heard in equal measure.

As President Obama reflected so powerfully in his eulogy for Mother Emanuel’s pastor, “Over the course of centuries, black churches served as “hush harbors” where slaves could worship in safety; praise houses where their free descendants could gather and shout hallelujah -- rest stops for the weary along the Underground Railroad; bunkers for the foot soldiers of the Civil Rights Movement... places where children are loved and fed and kept out of harm’s way, and told that they are beautiful and smart -- and taught that they matter. That’s what happens in church. That’s what the black church means. Our beating heart. The place where our dignity as a people is inviolate.”<sup>vi</sup>

My friends who poured out their hearts, who are still struggling with forgiveness, nevertheless returned to church the Sunday after Charleston, and the Sunday after that, and they are in church today on Independence Day weekend. They returned, because despite the violation of Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, in the black church they can pour out their hearts. They know and continue to feel, “Our doors are still open.”

It is in houses of worship, places where we ask God to open our lips so our mouths may declare God's glory, that we too find our place in the family of things.

The name of the church where a hater intended to sow hatred, and instead discovered family members offering forgiveness and a nation reviled by his actions, is officially Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church and unofficially, Mother Emanuel. Just up the freeway from us is in San Francisco is Temple Emanuel. In the Central Valley is Iglesia Emmanuel. In Alameda, where I used to work, and also down the street in Los Altos are churches named Immanuel Lutheran Church. Why is "Emanuel" such a popular name for places of praise, supplication and thanksgiving? *Imanu-El*—"With us, is God." Emanuel means God is with us.

When we are present with an open heart to the despair of another, God is with us.

When we announce our place in the family of things, God is with us.

When we strive to beat our swords not just into ploughshares but into musical instruments, God is with us.

When we act to bring into being Isaiah's vision of the wolf lying down with the lamb, God is with us.

When we build a society reflecting the radical equality, ultimate dignity and infinite value of all of our brothers and sisters, God is with us. *Imanu-El*

The Talmud asks, "How do you know when the night ends and the day begins? One rabbi said: "The night ends and a new day begins when you can tell the difference between a blue thread and a purple thread." No, his study partner replied, "The night ends and a new day begins when you can see the face of your brother."<sup>vii</sup>

When we recognize the face of all of our brothers and our sisters, *Imanu-El*.  
God is with us.

Whether we praise, offer thanksgiving, or seek answers to our prayers, let us do so in service to strengthening our resolve to truly see one another, to embrace one another, to provide safety for one another, and to recognize and claim our place in the family of things.

*Adonai sefaiti tiftach u'fe yagid tehillatecha.*

Eternal God, Open up my lips that my mouth may declare your glory.

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<sup>i</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/27/us/dylann-roof-was-questioned-by-police-in-march-record-shows.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/27/us/dylann-roof-was-questioned-by-police-in-march-record-shows.html?_r=0)

<sup>ii</sup> Rabbi Eric Yoffie, Union for Reform Judaism, Biennial Sermon, December 18, 1999 / 9 Tevet 5760

<sup>iii</sup> Yehuda Amichai *Greater Tranquility*, Translated by Glenda Abramson and Tudor Parfitt HarperCollins Publishers, 1983.

<sup>iv</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning.html?_r=0)

Thanks to Rev. Dr. Emily Click for calling attention to this piece.

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.onbeing.org/programreminded-people-of-all-colors-and-religions-of-family-of-things/mary-oliver-listening-to-the-world/7267>

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.c-span.org/video/?c4542228/president-obama-eulogy-clementa-pinckney-funeral-service>

<sup>vii</sup> William Silverman, *Rabbinic Wisdom and Jewish Values*, p. 5 quoted from Talmud Brachot