

The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



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A NATION SITS SHIVA

During the 35 years I've been a practicing rabbi, I have officiated at something like 3,000 funerals. While many of the deceased succumbed to what one might call "terminal longevity," there were also victims of murder, mayhem and the



terrorist attacks of 9/11; people who died in traffic accidents, airplane crashes and capsized boats; depressed souls who committed suicide or OD'd as well as those who suffered from unimaginably debilitating diseases, where death represented a sad and ironic blessing. In many cases, the funerals were celebrations of life in which laughter mingled with tears; in more than a handful, they were agonizing exercises of stunned disbelief where the unsaid, unanswered question "WHY?" permeated the chapel. In most cases, my role, in addition to

shaping and leading a funeral service, was to help in whatever way I could, to prepare mourners to enter *shiva* -- the seven-day Jewish period of mourning.

When observed to its full extent -- which some do, and some do not -- *shiva* is meant to provide us with an opportunity to fully express our grief; to receive love and comfort from family and friends; to contemplate the nature of life and death, and thus begin preparing for life without our loved one(s). It is a daunting process -- part communal and part private -- by which we take the first baby steps toward a return to life and emotional health, hopefully buoyed by the

memory and spiritual presence of the ones who have passed away. Mourning is a process which ideally leads to a destination: acceptance.

It is an old Jewish custom that when a person dies, instead of sending flowers (we come from the desert -- a place of few if any flowers) friends, neighbors and compatriots make contributions in the name of the deceased to causes or charities which may have special meaning to either the deceased or his/her family. In many cases, it will be a foundation or association which does research into the disease which claimed the person's life; in others, a cause or organization to which the deceased belonged.

With this week's unspeakably horrific act of terrorism at Charleston's historic Emanuel AME Church, we as a nation are once again in mourning; we are all, in a sense, once again sitting *shiva*. Of course, unlike the Jewish process of mourning, there are no age-old rules here, no laws or customs for we as a nation to observe -- or not observe as may be the case. In our search for a modicum of comfort, we are plagued by the unanswerable question WHY? Across the nation -- and indeed, around the world -- people are responding in various ways. Some are predictable, others confusing.



Vermont Senator (and Democratic presidential hopeful) Bernie Sanders emailed a message to his mailing list urging his friends and supporters to make contributions to Emanuel AME . . . a very Jewish thing to do. All across the country, members of churches, synagogues, mosques and shrines are showing solidarity by holding multi-denominational services and candle-light vigils, praying for the victims and their families. Once again, unspeakable tragedy has served to bring many of us together . . .

[On the other hand](#), some have seen fit to use the massacre for advancing their belief that Christianity is under attack in America. (I wrote an essay about this, [The Endangered Super Majority](#), back in April.) Former Pennsylvania Senator (and GOP presidential hopeful) Rick Santorum called the act "an assault on our religious liberty," while South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham (another GOP presidential hopeful) said the shooter "might have been looking for Christians to kill." Along these lines, Fox News' Steve Doocy and guest E. W. Jackson declared that far from being a hate crime, the massacre was part of the "war on Christianity in America." Jackson (who is an African American pastor)

told Doocy, "There does seem to be a rising hostility against Christians in this country because of our biblical views . . ."

(It will be noted that nowhere in this essay do I name the person who allegedly killed the people at Emanuel AME. Readers of The K.F. Stone Weekly know that I never name mass murderers. It is my belief that doing so merely plays into their twisted desire for fame . . . or infamy - something which I absolutely refuse to do. To publicize the pathologically homicidal is to reward them for their pathology.)

Predictably, many are responding to yet another act of murderous gun violence by demanding the passage of laws which will keep guns out of the hands of deranged sociopaths . . . as if this will help. And just as predictably, the "Guns-don't-kill-people" crowd has responded with a renewed call for the passage of laws which permit concealed weapons to be carried virtually everywhere -- schools, sporting events, bars . . . even houses of worship. Unbelievably, National Rifle Association board member Charles Cotton actually blamed the Emanuel massacre on its now-deceased pastor (and S.C. state Senator) Clementa Pickney. In a post on the NRA website, Cotton wrote, "*The pastor of this church who was killed was a state legislator . . . and he voted against concealed-carry. Eight of his church members who might be alive if he had expressly allowed members to carry handguns in a church are dead. Innocent people died because of his position on a political issue.*"

The image is a screenshot of a forum post. At the top, the subject line reads "Re: Church shooting Charleston SC" with "Charleston SC" highlighted in red. Below this, it says "by Charles L. Cotton" and "Thu Jun 18, 2015 2:05 pm". On the right side, there is a profile picture of a man in a suit, identified as "Charles L. Cotton Site Admin". Below the picture, it lists "Posts: 14078", "Joined: Wed Dec 22, 2004 9:31 pm", and "Location: Friendswood, TX". There are also small icons for a globe and a 'Y' logo. The main body of the post contains a quote from "ShootDontTalk" which reads: "Something else to consider: The pastor of this church, who was killed, is a State Legislator in S.C." Below the quote, the user "Chas." has written: "And he voted against concealed-carry. Eight of his church members who might be alive if he had expressly allowed members to carry handguns in church are dead. Innocent people died because of his position on a political issue."

Another response to the killings is a growing movement to get South Carolina to remove the Confederate Flag from the state capital in Columbia. (**n.b.** *A large Confederate flag used to fly over the Capitol dome, along with the American flag and the South Carolina flag, but [was removed in 2000](#). However, a smaller version of the flag still flies on statehouse grounds, next to the Confederate Soldier's Monument. The flag is held in place by a padlock.*) The fact that that this flag is still waving high after the murders -- which has all the hallmarks of a racially motivated attack -- has sparked both anger and consternation. Many people living in South Carolina blanch at the thought of the flag being removed because, they say, "It's part of

our history." In addition to agreeing with this point, South Carolina Governor



Nikki Haley says there is no reason to take the flag down because "It hasn't hurt South Carolina's ability to attract or retain business." During last year's gubernatorial debate, Haley said, *"What I can tell you is over the last three and a half years, I spent a lot of my days on the phones with CEOs and recruiting jobs to this state. I can honestly say I have not had one conversation with a single CEO about the Confederate flag."* To many, the flag is "part and parcel of our state's heritage and history." But to many others, it is a symbol of racism and represents treason against the union in 1860. That so many have entered into *this* debate, is but another way of dealing with grief; another way of observing our national *shiva*.

The most unbelievable response to this tragedy comes from the families of the victims: they have, through their profound faith, expressed their forgiveness to the young man who so utterly changed their lives forever. I wonder how many could find it within their soul to show such dignity at a time of such misery. They are obviously made of much stronger stuff than most.

There are already many varied responses to the murders at Emanuel AME being evinced:

- The prayerful shedding of tears;
- The debate over gun control vs. more guns;
- Engaging in the argument over whether the attack was a racially-motivated hate crime or an "attack on religious liberty";
- Taking sides in the argument which posits that since the crime did not involve a Muslim, it therefore cannot be classified as a "terrorist attack."
- The question of removing -- or not -- a visible symbol of historic racism and bigotry;
- Engaging in a much-needed dialogue about race in America;

Shiva is a time when, ideally, our emotions rise to the surface, "have their say," so to speak, and challenge us to deal with them in the most positive and healthy way we can. As such, during *shiva*, all these varying emotions are free to compete with one another for supremacy - if but for the while. When properly observed, *shiva* - even for a nation - can lead to growth, understanding and, above all, a renewed commitment to celebrating life *lamrot hakol*, despite it all.

May the souls of

- The Rev. Clementa Pickney, 41
- Cynthia Hurd, 54
- The Rev. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, 45
- Tywanza Sanders, 26
- Ethel Lance, 70
- Susie Jackson, 87
- Depayne Middleton Doctor, 49
- The Rev. Daniel Simmons, 74 and
- Myra Thompson, 59

May be bound up in the bonds of life eternal.

And let us please say,

Amen.

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