

## What's In Those "Prayers," Anyway?

Rabbi Nicole K. Roberts

Shabbat evening, 16 February 2018

This week, the town of Parkland, Florida made the news because of a school shooting that left 17 people dead—most of them teenagers. There are now about 5 such shootings each month in America. Since 20 first graders were killed in Newtown, Connecticut in 2012, there have been some 239 school shootings, taking 138 innocent lives, injuring and traumatising countless more. That is, since I've been with you here in Sydney, 240 school shootings have taken place in America, and many more at large public venues, like music concerts and night clubs.

This madness has been going on for years, but the rate at which mass shootings occur has tripled since 2011. It's been going on for *years*, and yet what was Florida Senator Marco Rubio's response after learning of the Parkland shooting? That it was too soon to debate whether tighter gun laws could have stopped it. Because, he claimed, "you should know the facts of that incident before you run out and prescribe some law that you claim could have prevented it." *Too soon?* I don't understand how the 240th mass shooting of children is too soon. I don't understand how the 138th life extinguished is too soon. I don't understand how deciding to take some action that might at least reduce the wreckage of bodies and families and safety is a decision made too soon at all. What is America waiting for, if now is too soon? I shudder to think...

Florida Governor Rick Scott says, "There's a time to...have these conversations about how...we make sure people are safe," and by this he means... a later time. As a Jew, I do not accept this idea that we cannot respond *now* and with *outrage*, while our feelings are at their rawest and clearest. That we have to wait until we are somehow in a more measured frame of mind, a little more consumed in our own world than in our current, compassionate empathy for our fellow brothers and sisters, parents and grandparents, who are shattered by grief. I'm offended by the suggestion that, after 138 deaths, one could possibly deem it too soon for these conversations, when our tradition teaches that to take even one life is to destroy the entire world, and to save a life is to redeem the world. How can we wait?

There's another response that's causing offence to religious professionals, of every faith. Repeatedly, our politicians—those who have the power to be lawmakers, changemakers, and life savers—respond not with lawmaking, changemaking, and life saving action, but... with prayers. In speeches and in Tweets, they send their "thoughts and prayers," their "prayers and condolences," their "prayers and sympathies..." Initially, I wasn't so critical of politicians for making statements about thoughts and prayers. There is little one can actually say in the face of a tragedy. And I do believe it is helpful to know that someone is thinking of you in a time of grief. It is healing to know someone cares enough to pray. "You're in my thoughts and prayers" - I've said this many times and really meant it. Others have said it to me, and it helped me feel their camaraderie. So why am I offended when the politicians say the same? What's different?

As I thought through this question, a bigger one came to me: *What is the prayer they're praying?* How is it worded? What's in it? What prayer does one pray for those who've

died a preventable death? In Judaism, we're not meant to pray for an outcome that's already been determined. So that leaves prayers for the living - the family, the surviving friends, the teachers, and those whose lives may be at risk in other schools and towns... what *exactly* are the politicians praying for them? That God comforts the families, so that the pressure for sensible gun legislation will go away? That teachers will start carrying guns of their own, so that the carnage will be limited in future mass shootings? What is the prayer that they pray? What do you pray, when you hold the power to effect the change you want to see? Unless, of course... *you don't really want to see it.*

This is what's different. When we tell someone, whom we genuinely care about, that they are in our thoughts and prayers, we usually wish that there were something, *anything*, we could do. Sometimes there is, and sometimes there is not, and when there is not, we pray. Sort of like when we could no longer bring our sacrifices to the Temple because it had been destroyed. There was nothing we could do, but we wanted to do something, so we prayed instead. The American politicians, on the other hand, *can* do something, and yet they repeatedly don't. This is the difference. Their prayers are like empty sacrifices at the altar: empty of intention, empty of longing, empty of searching. *This is not how people of religion understand prayer.*

For decades, Reform/Progressive siddurim have launched us into tefilah with the words: "Pray as if everything depended on God, act as if everything depended on you." Prayer must never absolve us of responsibility, especially when we have the power to act. The time to act is now, our politicians have the power, and people of faith must demand they learn what prayer is really about.