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How To Tragedy



By Marty Kaplan



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This is what you do when it all goes to hell again.

You casually turn the television on while the coffee water boils, but the news punches you in the gut and takes your breath away.

You instantly revise the whole history of the world in order to make the horror now unfolding the inevitable trajectory of reality.

You say out loud, even if there is no one to hear you say it, "Oh, my God."

You do not notice that you have pulled God into the picture. You do not yet wonder what kind of God, if any, could cause or permit this nightmare to happen.

You pray that no one you love was there, but you know that everyone who was there was loved by someone who is also praying they were not there.

You pray that whoever did this does not belong to any tribe that you do.

You do not yet wonder Whom it is you are praying to.

You text your family and friends, who are doing the same thing you are, their TV remotes in one hand and their cell phones in the other.

You watch the president call the massacre an act of terror and an act of hate. You learn this is the fifteenth time a mass murder has required him to console us. You cannot help thinking it's not the last time he will have to do it.

You learn what set the shooter off: the sight of two men kissing. You wonder how anyone could live in Florida, or anywhere, without having seen that happen before. You shudder at, but gain no insight from, the proximity of love and hate.

You text a friend about going to the West Hollywood Pride Parade to show L.G.B.T.Q. solidarity. He texts back, "I'm thinking it's very dangerous No way of guarding against anything Boston marathon flashbacks." You reply, "Vs Je suis Charlie?" He forwards an L.A. Times tweet: "Man with weapons, possible explosives arrested, said he was going to L.A. gay pride parade." You stay put.

You hear a gay bar called a "soft target," and you are forced to confront the inconceivability of hardening the soft targets where you live your life, like the mall you were planning to shop at this afternoon, or the café where you ate last night, which in hindsight could

be the twin of the Tel Aviv café where terrorists killed four people a few days before.

You hear that the bodies of the victims are still being identified. You see parents on the streets of Orlando showing photos of their missing kids to passers-by. You cannot begin to imagine the pain of the looming moment when they will hear their child referred to as their "loved one."

You read a stream of I-told-you-so tweets about "radical Islamic terrorism," prompted by a presidential candidate with zero self-control and zero capacity for empathy, and you recall that narcissism is not the description of a colorful personality trait, but the diagnosis of a psychiatric character disorder.

You watch that candidate go on to assert that the murder of 50 people by a man born in New York is manifest justification for banning all Muslims from entering the U.S., and you realize that national tragedy has lost whatever power it once possessed to impose an armistice on partisan bitterness and grace our mourning with dignity and unity.

You hear the sound a military assault rifle makes when it kills and wounds 103 people in less time, as one of the survivors put it, than it takes to play a song at a nightclub.

You read an outpouring of heartfelt grief from scores of members of Congress who have received scores of thousands of dollars from the NRA, and who have fought every gun safety bill ever brought to a vote.

You do, finally, think about God.

You contend with the same question that gnawed at believers in a benevolent deity when the Lisbon earthquake and tsunami struck on All Saints Day of 1755, killing some 50,000 Catholics. The same question that seized the victims and descendants of the Shoah. That ravaged the families of 9/11, and the families of all the other passengers on the other planes that have fallen like Icarus from the sky. The same question that scares every patient awaiting test results. That stalks Orlando. That haunts America.

Why? What kind of God lets tragedy happen?

You know the answers.

God's ways are mysterious. God's plan is beyond understanding. God created the world, but then withdrew from it. God gave us the free will to choose life or death. God and Satan struggle for our souls. God gives life everlasting to the good. Good weeps at our plight. God is Nothing. God is Being. God is chance. God is dead.

You turn the television off. You turn your phone over.

You are alone with your breath.

In, out. In, out. In, out.

You are grateful.

God is gratitude.

This is my column from the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me if you like at martyk@jewishjournal.com.