

Shalom Aleichem Tywanza, Sandra, Shira and Khaleel

Rabbi Zoë Klein, Temple Isaiah, Rosh Hashanah, 5776

As part of the traditional Jewish bedtime ritual, we call upon four angels to protect us. These are the four angels that surround the Throne of Glory. We call upon the angel Michael on our right. We call upon the angel Gavriel on our left. We call upon the angel Uriel who is before us. We call upon the angel Rephael who is behind us.

Michael, Gavriel, Uriel and Rephael, emissaries of God, who surround us and protect us. Four ethereal, powerful, beings of light, moving with us, like the wheels of a chariot. The archangel Michael, advocate of Israel, Gavriel the angel of strength, Uriel the angel of light and guidance, and Rephael the angel of healing.

We ask for their protection now, as we lay 5775 to rest and step into 5776.

Shalom Aleichem, Malachei ha-Shalom. Peace be upon you, angels of peace.

I want to call upon four other beings of light. Four angels who have profoundly influenced our lives, our world. I call upon their protection. Their deaths were the blast of the shofar, stirring us out of moral slumber.

On Passover we drink four glasses of wine and we ask the four questions. It is in fact one question, repeated four times.

Mah nishtana ha-laila ha-zeh?

Why is this night different from all other nights?

I believe that each of these angels asks us a question. A question that demands a response.

I call upon the spirit of four martyrs, all of whom died during this summer. The first on June 17, the second on July 13, the third on August 4 and the fourth on August 19.

Shalom Aleicha, Malach ha-Ahava, Peace unto you, Oh angel of love, Tywanza Sanders.

Tywanza, with your majestic, contagious smile. 26 years old, a graduate in business administration, you loved your mother so much that you tattooed her name over your heart when she was fighting cancer. When she said that no woman would ever marry you with her name across your chest, you said, "Well, that will be their loss." Tywanza, entrepreneurial and artistic young man. You wrote a poem called "Tragedy" which ended with the words "Divided by color, so we are all trying to be equal."

You were praying in a small prayer circle at the Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, along with three members of your extended family, when the man just a few years younger than you, who had been praying beside you for an hour, pulled out a gun saying that he was going to kill everyone. You said to the man: "You don't have to do this. We are no harm to you."

When the killer pointed the weapon at your 87 year old aunt, Susie Jackson, you jumped in front of her, receiving the first bullet. You were the youngest of the nine victims and Susie was the oldest.

You didn't run the other way. You didn't play dead or duck behind a pew. You didn't think about age, about you having walked this earth only 26 years and your beloved aunt having had 61 more years of life than you to realize her dreams.

You only thought: Family. Protect. Love.

The killer said: "You rape our women, and you're taking over our country, and you have to go." And with your entire being, body and soul, you exemplified: Family. Protect. Love.

V'ahavta et Adonai Elohecha, b'chol levavcha, b'chol nafshecha, u'v'chol me'odecha.

In a split moment you demonstrated love, with the last beat of your heart, with your very soul, with all your courage and might.

Reverend Pinkney died with you. A man who has spoken powerful sermons against racism and hatred. You don't leave behind a legacy of words. You didn't have time to compose your message to the world. But your final moment was an ageless sermon, a brilliant poem.

The confederate flag has been taken down from the South Carolina state capitol. We talked about how the killer obtained a gun when he had been arrested and charged with felony drug possession, unless the gun was given as a gift in which case no background check was required.

But what else has changed? You ask us the question:

Mah nishtana ha-shana hazot mi-kol ha-shanim?

How will this year be different than all other years?

***Shalom Alayich, Malach ha-Tzedek,
Peace unto you, Oh angel of Justice, Sandra Bland.***

You were euphoric at having gotten a job at your alma mater. 28 years old from Chicago. You had suffered pain in your life. You had lost a pregnancy. You had walked through the valley of tears.

A Waller County state trooper pulled you over for failing to signal a lane change. The stop turned confrontational when the officer asked you to extinguish your cigarette. You questioned why, and he ordered you out of the vehicle. The officer attempted to pull you out of your car, saying, "I'm going to yank you out of here." You said, "Don't touch me." He pointed his Taser at you and said, "I will light you up!" Soon you were forced to the ground and handcuffed. And three days later you were dead in a jail cell of asphyxiation.

Some say you committed suicide. Others say you did not, in fact you were trying to arrange bail with your family.

You became the target of a blame-the victim game. Media questioning your mental health, blaming a woman with a history of sadness, instead of the criminal justice system that denied you your dignity. A system that makes a routine traffic stop for an African American a life threatening experience.

People have said that it's not about police corruption. That the real issue is about knowing how to behave when the police stop you. It's about being compliant and polite. It's about respecting authority more.

Had you been polite to the police officer, they say, you'd be alive today. Just as they say Michael Brown would be alive today had he only followed orders. And how one reporter said that in the heartbreaking death of Eric Garner, we should ONLY blame (the word ONLY was actually used) the "man who tragically decided to resist." In other words it was Eric Garner's fault. It was Freddie Gray's fault.

These are the same people who frown at the Black Lives Matter movement by saying, why single out black lives, when ALL Lives Matter. Which is like seeing your neighbor's house on fire, picking up your hose and spraying your own house instead of the one that's burning, instead of the one with children running out of it with their hands up in the air screaming, and saying ALL houses matter!

It reminds me of when I was talking with a friend about girls who were being pushed off a sheer mountainside to their deaths in Afghanistan for tarnishing their family's honor by falling in love with someone their own age, and my friend responded by saying, "Well, we all reach a cliff at some point in our lives."

No, not the same thing. You deciding whether to sell that property or set up a 1031 exchange is not the same as having your own father push you to your death.

ALL lives matter. Of course they matter. We invented that. It is our Torah that gave the world the concept that every person is made in the Image of God. You're welcome, humanity. But that person's house is on fire. And they're rioting.

King said, "A riot is the language of the unheard." Let's listen.

I've been pulled over a fair number of times. The routine is reliably courteous. It is me digging through my glove compartment for my registration, and in return I get either a ticket, or a warning, or a "just-get-that-headlight-fixed" wink, or a "You're a rabbi? Well, then, just put in a good word for me with the Big Guy upstairs, I could use all the help I could get," or a "have a nice day," and it never crosses my mind that I might be in a life and death situation.

But police stopping people without reason, putting their hands on suspects or jailing people like Sandra for infractions that at most would earn a white person in a suit a desk ticket is happening not just in a few well-publicized cases a year, but routinely, in hundreds of thousands or even millions of incidents we never hear of.

Matt Taibbi wrote: “If you’re continually handcuffing people, sitting on them, putting knees in their backs and dragging them to jail in cases when you could have just handed over a summons, a certain percentage of these encounters are going to end in fights, struggles, medical accidents and other disasters...”

“In *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander described how white America re-seized control after slavery by instituting a series of repressive “vagrancy laws,” under which nonwhite Americans could be arrested for such absurdities as “mischief” and “insulting gestures...”

“That’s why the issue isn’t how you died, but why you were stopped and detained in the first place. It’s profiling, sure, but it’s even worse than that. It’s a systematic campaign to harass people, using misdemeanors and violations as battering ram.

Taibbi writes: “We’d call it murder if a kidnapping victim died of fright during the job. Of course it’s not legally the same thing, but a woman dying of depression during an illegal detention should be the same kind of crime. It’s especially true given our long and sordid history of over-policing misdemeanors.” (From *Sandra Bland Was Murdered* by Matt Taibbi)

Sandra, you called a friend from jail and left her a voicemail in which you said: “I am still at a loss for words, honestly, about this whole process. How this switching lanes with no signal turned into all of this, I don’t even know.”

You ask us: *Mah nishtana ha-shana hazot mi-kolha-shanim?*

How will this year be different than all other years?

Shalom Alayich, Malach ha-Cherut.

Peace unto you, Oh angel of Freedom, Shira Banki.

Your parents said you were an intelligent, beautiful, gentle, curious, musical girl. They said: “Even adolescence had passed over her with grace, and she blossomed like a beautiful flower.” They also said: “All of Shira’s innocence, beauty, happiness and goodness fell on the altar of hatred, malice, cruelty and ignorance. We are left with pain, longing and shock that every parent would rather die than feel.”

Shira, you marched at the gay pride parade in Jerusalem amongst friends, supporting the rights of people to express their identity and live in security. You were celebrating freedom. You were stabbed by a man who had been released from prison just weeks before, after having served ten

years for stabbing marchers at a gay pride parade in Jerusalem, despite the fact that he was outspoken about wanting and planning to do it again.

You are now eternally sixteen.

Your death was a shofar blast to the Jewish people. A wake-up call. Reminiscent of the wake-up call we received when Yitzchak Rabin was assassinated at a peace rally by a Jewish man. When we realized that while we were supposed to be a nation of priests, we have built a nation like all other nations. With religious extremists, civil unrest, terror.

For Israelis, what happened the day of your death is more important than the Iran nuclear deal. While American Jews are yelling at each other over whether the deal should or shouldn't pass, Israeli Jews are looking at a different existential threat.

The same day that you were killed, 18-month-old Ali Dawabsha and his mother were burned to death in his family home in a firebombing attack perpetrated by extreme right-wing Jewish terrorists.

Flames of hatred spreading throughout Israel. A shofar blast. A wake-up call.

Israeli President Reuven Rivlin said: "We must not be deluded, a lack of tolerance will lead us to disaster. We cannot allow such crimes, and we must condemn those who commit and support them."

He said: "Every society has extremist fringes, but today we have to ask: what is it in the public atmosphere which allows extremism and extremists to walk in confidence, in broad daylight? What is it that has enabled these weeds to threaten the safety of the entire garden of flowers?"

"We must be thorough and clear; from the educational system, to those who enforce the law, through to the leadership of the people and the country. We must put out the flames, the incitement, before they destroy us all. We will not be zealots. We will not be bullies. We will not become an anarchy."

You were a beautiful flower. You marched in a parade to celebrate people's freedom to express their identity, freedom to live openly, honestly.

Your death challenges us. How do we recognize the Jewish soul of the man who murdered you? Do we take the easy road and say you and I are Jews, you and I who study a little Torah, come to holidays once in a while, express our faith through social justice, while he who immerses in Torah all day long and observes the laws of kashrut and Shabbat, he is not a Jew? Do we just cut off the fringes of our people's tapestry? Or do we engage in the hard soul-searching to identify the zealotry in our own tradition, recognize zealots as cousins, as branches of the same family tree, fed by the same scripture? How do we find the courage to own that part of our culture, and yet rebuke it, put out those flames?

Shira, your parents said: “We have no issue with people wearing kippas or with beards. We know that many prayers were said in sincerity and emotion for the recovery of our daughter — both in public and behind closed doors. Our dispute is with hatred and the sanctifying of your objective at the expense of the pain of another person... We will try to hate less and love more.”

You ask us: *Mah nishtana ha-shana hazot mi-kol ha-shanim?*

How will this year be different than all other years?

Shalom Aleicha, Malach ha-Chochma.
Peace unto you, Oh angel of Wisdom, Khaleel Al-Asaad.

You were a national treasure, Khaleel. 83 years old, renowned antiquities scholar. You spent more than 50 years as head of antiquities in Palmyra. An irreplaceable scholar, one of Syria’s most prominent scholars. You were the most important pioneer in Syrian archeology in the 20th century. Wrote many books. A treasure for Syria and the world.

No one can talk about Palmyrian work without talking about you. 2,000 year old ruins, a UNESCO world heritage site.

You knew every nook and cranny. More than an academic, you lived in the very place you studied, your knowledge was personal and intimate, not filtered through keyboards and computer screens. You breathed Palmyra’s dust, felt its earth on your hands.

You refused to reveal to ISIS leaders where valuable artifacts had been moved for safekeeping. ISIS called maintaining ancient statues apostasy. They made the curating of antiquities a capital offence. They called you the “Director of Idolatry.”

Many feared the Islamic State would destroy Palmyra’s antiquities, but nobody anticipated it would murder their keeper.

You chose to stay in Palmyra, knowing ISIS was closing in. You rescued hundreds of history’s relics.

They beheaded you and hung your body from one of your beloved ancient columns.

Historian Tom Holland said that your devotion to your work even unto costing you your life “shows that it is not only religiously-inspired interpretations of the past that people feel are worth dying for.”

The world is experiencing the worst refugee crisis since World War II. In particular, 54% of all Syrians are either refugees who have left Syria or have been displaced from their homes. Over 200,000 have already died in Syria.

You are the most prominent Syrian scholar ISIS has killed to date. Keeper of Syria’s long history, its heritage, preserving those ancient trading hubs along Silk Road.

While protecting ancient history, you were also trying to protect us from the jihadist campaign to take us back to pre-history. Even as 2,000 year old ruins are being demolished, we are being catapulted back pre-enlightenment with beheadings of children and adults, forced marriage and sexual slavery, people stoned and burned alive.

Judaism believes in a God of History. Our Torah begins with the words *In the beginning*, implying an unfolding of time. We believe in man's evolution, in our ability to learn and improve. Memory is an essential part of the Jewish way of life. When the past is destroyed, when history is systemically obliterated, the continuum of man's development is arrested, and we become locked in and eternal illiterate adolescence, our decisions determined by our rage and our lust.

You ask us, Khaleel: *Mah nishtana ha-shana hazotmi-kol ha-shanim?*

How will this year be different than all other years?

How will this year be different?

In the traditional Jewish bedtime ritual, we say:

*Miy'mini Michael, umi'smoli Gavriel,
Umil'fanai Uriel, umei'achorai Rephael,
V'al roshi Shechina.*

On my right, Michael, on my left Gavriel,
Before me Uriel and behind me Rephael,
And above me, Shechina, God's Presence.

On my right, Tywanza, on my left Sandra,
Before me Shira, and behind me Khaleel.

On my right, LOVE. On my left, JUSTICE.
Before me, FREEDOM. Behind me, WISDOM.

Tywanza Sanders, LOVE.
Sandra Bland, JUSTICE.
Shira Banki, FREEDOM.
Khaleel Al-Asad, WISDOM.

Four beings of light. Four angels who have profoundly influenced our lives, our world. Their deaths are the blast of the shofar.

May we rise out of our complacency this year and answer their call to love, to justice, to freedom, to wisdom.

We hear your question. We will rise to your challenge. We will remember you. Your faces and your message. We hear your question, and we know it demands an answer. We will work toward change. For wisdom, for freedom, for justice, for love. We will take up the radiant divine image in you and lift it high, like a torch, as we cross the threshold into a new age.

Shalom Aleichem, Malachei ha-Shalom. Peace be upon you, Oh angels of peace. Shalom Aleichem. Shalom.