

The Boston Sermon
Acharei Mot Kedoshim
Proud to be a Bostonian
Rabbi David Nesson

If you didn't know it yet, you know it now. I grew up in Boston Brookline actually, and Boston is my home. I was born in a small hospital called Brookline Hospital, (it is no longer there) and spent the first 5 years of my life in Dorchester, then a center of the Jewish community. When I was five we followed the Jewish migration to Brookline.

I don't question for a moment that any city can inspire love and dedication among those who were born there or lived there. Hopefully, all of us feel a strong, inspiring connection with the place of our birth or the place we call home. But, I also believe that there are some cities which inspire a greater sense of connection: a pride, a uniqueness, a more intense sense of belonging. And, Boston is one of those cities.

If you've never been there, if you've never lived there, you might pick up some of that sense by listening to the incessant ramblings of us Red Sox fans or picking up on the academics who talk about the intellectual environment of the city. But, if you have lived there, and even more importantly, if you were born there, you know that it goes much deeper than that. To be a Bostonian means to believe without apology that you are truly privileged to call such a place home.

You can't grow up in Boston without knowing about the Boston Marathon and about a holiday that is celebrated no place else in the world except Massachusetts, the holiday of Patriot's Day. which is celebrated on the 3rd Monday in April . In case you need a reminder, it is celebrated as the anniversary of the battles of Concord and Lexington at the beginning of the Revolutionary War. It is about the very core of what freedom means for America

Patriots Day is marked by two major events in the Boston area, the running of the Boston Marathon and the annual Patriots Day Red Sox game at Fenway Park which begins each year at 11 a.m. The reason for the early starting time is that back several decades ago, there was a doubleheader played on this day and the idea was that people would leave Fenway Park after the first game, walk a couple of blocks to Kenmore Square, watch the lead runners in the Marathon as they approached the finish line and then go back to the 2nd game. But everything changes over time. The marathon times keep getting faster and baseball games take longer. So no one can get out to see the marathon runners (unless the game is a rout). And yet, the 11 a.m. starting time stays. Such is the value of tradition.

As a child and all through my Boston years, I remember walking down to Beacon Street at Washinton Square and watching the runners, with all of my friends, going to the bakery on the corner or the deli in the middle of the block and just hanging out, enjoying the moment, celebrating marathoners and freedom.

Which is why, beyond being a proud American, what happened in Boston this week, feels personal and close to home.

And I have to ask myself this shabbat, What is there to say today about the horrible event that took place in Boston this week?

What is there to say today that hasn't been said

That we are shocked by what happened ?

That we hope and pray for the victims and for their families?

How can our hearts not go out to the family of Martin Richards, the 8 year old who had written that sign No More Hurting People - Peace, and the rest of his family, his sister Jane, the little Irish Dancer, who lost her leg, and his mom who suffered a brain injury.

Our hearts reach out to the family of Krystal Campbell, the outgoing 29 year old, and across the ocean to China, to embrace the family of Linzu Lu, the graduate student at Boston University,

and the to family of Sean Collier and to all the wounded whose lives are changed forever

That we will not let this evil act weaken our resolve?

That next year the Boston Marathon will run it's 118th race

All these things are true, so we say them again today.

But I wonder: Does the Torah have anything to say to us today that can bring any comfort and any wisdom to our wounded souls, and to our hearts that are so bewildered and so scarred?

I want to study with you today the verse that is at the heart of today's Torah reading, and that is at the very center of our religious teachings

. The Torah this week contains the verse that is the crown jewel of our tradition: 'v'ahavta lireacha kamocho'—thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

I thought that I knew this verse, and that I knew what it meant, but this week I learned to understand this verse in a whole new way.

I used to think that I knew who the neighbor in this sentence was. I thought it was the person who lives next door. You know their name, you have a relationship of some sort with them

And I thought that what the Torah was teaching us in this verse was not just to love humankind in general. That is easy. That does not cost you anything.

But to love the person next door—the one who plays loud music at night? The one who steps on your grass? The one whose dog disturbs your sleep? I thought that that was what the Torah was teaching us: to love the person with whom we are in daily contact instead of just loving humanity. That is not easy to do, but this is what I thought the Torah was teaching us.

And then, this week we learned a whole new understanding of what this verse means and we learned it from the people of Boston We learned that we now live in a whole new world, and that therefore we need to learn a whole new understanding of what our neighborhood is, and who our neighbor is.

As we sat spellbound before the television on Monday, and watched the horror on the news over and over , we realized two incredible things were happening before our eyes.

The first was that a sacred American holiday, a day dedicated to sports and to tradition, was being desecrated before our very eyes. We looked at these runners—some of whom were youngsters in their prime, and some of whom were running in their tenth or fifteenth or twentieth marathon and some of them in their 70's and some of them- disabled, being pushed in a wheelchair, to 'run' in the race, and one of them, Castrataro Grayzel , a member of our own congregation just rounding the corner onto Boylston street when the second bomb exploded a hundred yards ahead of her, —that at the moment of their greatest joy, at the moment when they were just about to go across the finish line, and run into the waiting arms of those who loved them—these people, and thier families the ones who love and support them some much, were about to be blown up, were about to be killed or wounded, for no reason, for nothing wrong that they had done, simply because we are Americans, lovers of freedom, descendants of those who fought in Concord and Lexington and simply because there were evil people out there who rejoiced in causing bloodshed.

The bombs went off at ground level, and as a result, many of them struck these runners and the crowd there to greet them, in their legs, so that when they woke up in the hospital the next day, many of these innocent celebrants would find out that they had lost one, and in some cases both their legs.

Can there be anything crueller, anything more vicious, than what happened on Boylston Street this week?

And then we looked at the news again, and this time we learned something else, something that we had not noticed the first time.

We saw people coming forward—unasked—to perform acts of loving kindness for neighbors whom they did not know, whom they had never met, and whom they would probably never see again.

We saw interviews with runners, who had run twenty six miles in the marathon, and then, when they heard what had happened, ran another two miles to the nearest hospital that they could find in order

to give blood! In order to give blood to whom? To people they had never met but whom they felt an obligation to. To people whom they felt were their neighbors on this earth who needed help.

We watched people who were standing behind the barricades, waiting to cheer their husbands or their wives, their parents or their children, across the finish line, who pushed those barricades away and ran onto the street so that they could respond to the people who were lying on the ground, twisting and turning in pain. They did not know these people. They had never met them before. But these people were their neighbors and so, instinctively, without regard for themselves, they felt the need to reach out to them and to help them in any way they could.

There was the veteran who was giving out American flags to help support wounded soldiers, who sprang into action, carrying people out of danger, and going back a second and third time to do it again

There is a man named Tyler Dodd. This is his story:

There was a woman named Victoria—I don't know her last name—who was hit by shrapnel from the bomb. She went into hysteria when the bomb struck her from out of nowhere, as she was coming to the finish line. She lay on the ground, writhing in pain, amidst all the chaos and the confusion, the screaming and the shouting that was going on around her, weeping—out of control. Somebody named Tyler saw her, lifted her up and carried her to a medical tent. And as he did, he calmed her. He introduced himself to her, and told her that before he became a firefighter, he had been a soldier in the war in Afghanistan. He told her that he had been injured by shrapnel there, just like she was now. He lifted up his shirt and showed her the marks of the surgery that he had gone through. And he reassured her that, just as he had made it, so would she.

And then, he placed her carefully on a makeshift couch in the tent, and rushed back to see if he could help someone else that was injured.

Victoria thought she would never see him again,

And so she went to an NBC reporter whom she met in the hospital, and she spoke to Governor Duval Patrick, when he made the rounds in the hospital, and came by her room, and asked her if she needed anything, and she asked them both to help her find this man-Tyler--whatever his last name was. NBC put this story on its broadcast several times that day. The governor mentioned Tyler in his interview with another station. He said: "I don't know whether this man was assigned to the medical tent that day, or whether he was a volunteer who jumped in to help. But either way, we want to find him so that Victoria and all of us can thank him for what he did." The Boston Globe ran a story entitled: "Looking for Tyler".

At first Tyler did not want to come forward. He explained that he did not come forward right away because he was shy and more to the point, that he did not want to be in the limelight, and he did not want to overshadow all the other good people who did acts of rescue that day.

There was a young mother named Karen, who, when the first bomb went off, did what most of us would have done, she began to run away. But something inside her said- no I have to go back..and she ran into the fray, right to the heart of the first explosion, where she found a little girl who had lost her leg, and was being treated to stop the bleeding. She took the girl's head in her hands, and told her to look at her, that it would be ok That little girl was Jane Richards, Martin's sister

These and so many more are the living embodiment of the verse in today's Torah reading: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself'. For them, a neighbor did not mean just the man next door, it now means the neighbor was anyone who lived in your community who needed you

There were others who chose to run TOWARDS the injured instead of running away from them, which would have been the expected thing to do.

Without calling attention to themselves, without patting themselves on the back for what they did, these first responders ran towards the people in pain, instead of running away from them. And by so doing, they put into practice the hardest and the most difficult verse in all the torah: 'V'ahavta lireacha kamocho'—thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

God bless them for what they did!

Let us understand who is the neighbor in this global village in which we now live. And let us strive to fulfill the commandment, which is at the heart of the Torah.

This is a week in which we have seen an eight year old boy hug his father at the finish line, and then turn around and was gone This is a week in which we have seen innocent college students lose their lives, and in which we have seen innocent people lose their legs. This is a week in which we have seen envelopes that contain poison that can kill anyone who opens them sent to the White House and to the Senate Office Building. This has been a week in which it is easy to lose faith in human decency and sanity. And therefore, let us rejoice that Tylor Dodd and so many others did what they did has come forward.

These are the things that make us proud to be who we are, proud Americans, these are the things that make me proud to be a Bostonian

And I hope and I pray that we will learn from them, and that we will strive to be a little bit like them. I hope and I pray that we will strive to acquire something of their compassion and their courage. I hope and I pray that we may learn from these good people—whose names we do not even know—how to practice the central commandment in the Torah, the commandment that is found in today's Torah reading veahvat leraycah kamocho

Amen.

(Many thanks to fellow Bostonian Rabbis Joseph Potasnick, Robert Dobrusin, and to Rabbi Jack Reimer, Lynn Grayzel, and my family in Boston for many of the insights and stories in this dvar torah)

Rabbi Nesson