

**DISCUSSING THE UNTHINKABLE WITH CHILDREN AND STUDENTS: Processing the emotional aftermath of a murder**

**By Rabbi Dr. Dovid Fox**

Death, under any circumstance, is a painful and troubling event to face.

When our young people learn about the death of someone whom they knew, particularly if they have not encountered loss before, our task is somewhat clear. We open up a dialogue at an age-appropriate level, we listen to the child's thoughts and observe their emotional expression, and we validate their personal reaction. Depending upon their age and maturity, and upon the questions which they pose to us, we can offer information, we might correct misunderstandings, we can clarify concepts, and we can offer support that we will continue to be open to them as they struggle to cope. Some of the same messages which we try to give ourselves when faced with tragic loss are given to young people, always at a pace and level which the child or teen can relate to.

The challenge of helping a child or teen calibrate and integrate news of a grotesque death, such as an avoidable and apparently intentional loss of life, shares some of the same guiding steps, yet also requires other interventions and perspectives. Specifically, when a person has taken the life of another, and when homicide erupts within our community, the impact on us, whether Jewish adults or Jewish children, has a discernible and traumatizing impact.

Let's address the layers of personality or of the self, which are shaken (rightfully so) when we learn of a murder.

- **THOUGHTS:** We are taught to think that homicide is abhorrent and entirely alien to our way of life. When reality challenges this premise, one normal reaction is to find that the news is literally "unbelievable." The mind may obsess or dwell persistently on the words, the images, the incongruities of accepting that someone has murdered, someone has been murdered. Those thoughts become hard to shake and create mental stress. Children may say that they cannot stop thinking about it, that they cannot get the image out of their minds. Just like some of us adults. Many remain stuck in that state of "disbelief."
- **FEELINGS:** People react with a range of emotions upon hearing horrible news. This can depend on age, on gender, and on prior exposure to death. Some become numb, and we may notice that a youngster seems subdued and morose. Some become overtly sad and we may see tearfulness, withdrawal and emotional pain. Some become angry and seem to act out with frustration and temper upon hearing about a crime of violence.

Others regress, acting out of character, whether by joking about death, or seeming to gloss over the event and distracting themselves with trivial interests. Still others seem to react not at all.

- **ANXIETY:** Many people respond to frightening news with a different level of "feeling" which is actually based in physical and neurological processes called anxiety. They may grow nauseous, they may have trouble sleeping or trouble waking, and they may become inattentive and distracted. They may vocalize raw undifferentiated panic, or specific fears such as fears for their own safety, or the safety of family and loved ones. They may report feeling sick, listless, weak or in pain. They may seem agitated and hyper. They may worry irrationally and uncontrollably. These are anxious reactions which often follow frightening events.
- **RELIGIOUS TURMOIL:** Hearing about a murder or intentional avoidable killing can infiltrate one's spiritual process. Some react by becoming intensely enveloped in a "religious behavior", even compulsively, with vows to (as an example) daven with immense concentration or excessive frequency, or to make profound commitments to "never do \_\_\_\_\_ again" or to "always do \_\_\_\_\_ from now on." Some feel a spiritual dulling, and express a loss of drive or conviction about religious practices. Some have profound spiritual crises and questions and seek answers.

The reality is that the range of reactions outlined above are all actually "normal" ways of trying to grapple with highly abnormal information. The bottom line is that we as Jews are not socialized or conditioned to consider that homicide can occur among us. It runs far contrary to our beliefs, our traditions, our values and our cultural self-image as a nation which abhors those things which the Torah and "moral society" have always condemned. It is shocking, and it is difficult not to lapse into a judging and condemning mode of thinking upon learning that a homicide has happened. While our moral conscience definitely promotes that reflexive and strong view, it is also very important, especially as teachers and as a parents, to be attentive to those other layers of functioning - the thoughts, the feelings, the anxiety and the soul - which are always activated when hearing grotesque information.

The following are helpful guidelines to help address a child or teen's reactions:

1. Talk with them. Do not assume that they will speak up if they need to, but rather be proactive. Ask them if they have heard about the event. Encourage them to dialogue with you about what they know, and what they do not know. At a level, pace and degree which is appropriate to their age and maturity, respond to questions they may have, and correct misinformation which might be troubling them (i.e. "I heard that they did not catch the person"; "I heard that the person is going to kill more people"), and give them reassurance as to their safety.
2. A parent's job is not to act as judge and jury but when the facts are verified, a parent, just as a rabbi or a teacher, retains their responsibility to educate a child about right and wrong. Assert

to the pondering child that murder is wrong. Assert that this is not our way of life. Confirm with the child that this is not the Torah way at all, ever. Focus less on the person(s) involved in the crime and more on the concept. Refrain from editorial statements about the person(s) which only serve to distract from the issues which may need your attention. Caution against needless rumoring and gossip, which likewise distracts from the more important psychological issues and reactions. Reassure your children that they are safe and that this is not at all common.

**3.** Steer clear of misleading "mussar" messages such as "now you know why we are not allowed to get angry at people" or "every time you embarrass another person it is just like murder." Now is not the moment to inspire nor discipline your child in any way. Now is the time to support and nurture them, and console their fears and sadness. Stay focused on the present.

**4.** Assure that your child is maintaining a routine, including eating, sleeping, arising, school attendance and other responsibilities. Structure is healing. Normality is soothing. Be patient and gentle but help them return to regular functioning.

**5.** Younger children need to know that they are safe and that it is safe for them to voice their feelings. Older children need to ask their questions and be given short answers that satisfy and are sensible. Older teens need to voice their philosophical musings and to be heard, while also presenting them with alternative ways of approaching matters. Avoid arguing, disapproving, scolding or guilt tripping when a child shares their views. Validate, as outlined earlier. Normalize, meaning helping a child see that what they are experiencing is a normal reaction (unless of course you are candidly worried about a child's strange behavior; when you are uncertain about how to understand a specific reaction, consult with our crisis team!).

**6.** Offer encouragement. A person's initial reactions will change with time, and it is helpful to point out to a child that what they are now experiencing is a normal stage, and that they will likely have different thoughts and feelings and attitudes as the days pass. Be an open door for each child to speak with you, and check in with them regularly. Do not assume that a child's silence means that they are not struggling. Do not "pathologize" and assume that a child's reactions are indicative of deeper problems. But consult with our staff when you are not clear.

**7.** Allow your children to have their spiritual and religious reactions but aim to help them regulate their thoughts and behaviors rather than adopt extreme changes. Offer them the opportunity to discuss their confusion with a trusted religious authority or mentor. Address spiritual matters yourself, provided that you are able to tune in to what your children are dealing with rather than clouding matters with your own internal agendas. You are there to guide them, to educate them, to encourage and inspire them. That is the role of parents and teachers.

Speaking about our "role", let us also be clear that beyond our responsibility to our children and students, we also must be "there" for ourselves in the wake of horrible events. We must also take stock of our own reactions, and allow ourselves to accept that staying stoic and rigid is not a sign of healthy coping. In fact, when we steel ourselves and block out our normal reactions,

we set an internal stage for developing cynicism, pessimism, fatalism, and what emerges is tension, frustration and even moodiness which can become hard to regulate! Check in with yourself. Address your emotions, worries, troubling thoughts, and seek camaraderie and support from those whom you trust with your feelings and struggles. Spouses need to show warmth and reassurance to one another. Speak with your own spiritual leaders and mentors. Process your internal experience. You are dealing with a very abnormal crisis, and we all react, just as our young ones do. Give yourself the same outlets and inroads which you provide those who turn to you.

Whenever tragedy erupts in our midst, our "presumptive reality" is shaken, or even shattered. We are flooded with legitimate questions: "how could this happen?" "What was the reason or cause?", "why didn't we see this coming?" "I should have known" "I should have seen that this would happen" "I always knew..." It is normal to find ourselves rethinking our assumptions. That is part of being in shock. It is also what happens because the mind and heart so much want to undo and erase the unthinkable: the mind scrambles to create ideas that would have prevented it, or that console us into thinking that we really knew all along what this person was like. We, on the other hand, recommend keeping those thoughts at bay, at a distance. There is no point in speculation, in conjecturing, in interpreting or in trying to create sense out of the senseless. It distracts us from the bitter reality that someone has been killed, and that someone killed them. That reality, and its internal impact, should draw our self-care focus, rather than derailing us into zones of experience which will create further consternation and distress. We discourage our children from rumor and conjecture, and we can stop those processes in ourselves and attend to the more important needs within ourselves.

Remember that the ways in which a child is "walked through" a crisis or trauma will shape the ways in which they will respond to subsequent life challenges. Your words, your demeanor, your honesty, your sincerity and your respectfulness can teach them resiliency and can equip them with tools and skills for coping and handling the stresses which life will bring them later on.

May Hashem guard and protect our people and may we know of no more suffering.

For further assistance, consultation and instructional material please contact:

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