



A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

by Alexander Jefferson



As I'm sure most of you know, last week in Mumbai, India, terrorists attacked the Chabad House and took nine Jewish men and women hostage. After nearly 40 hours of attempts to rescue the captives all nine were found dead. Today, the funeral for a few of the victims was held *on Har HaZeytim* (The Mount of Olives). I was unable to attend the funeral, but I stood atop the roof of the Yeshiva building and turned all my thoughts towards those who were being buried a mere mile from where I stood. Night had just fallen, and I could see clearly across the way to the mountain and the mass of people in attendance to pay their respects. I stood entranced in thought as my peripheral vision encompassed both the Western Wall *and Har HaZeytim*. Who were these people who were killed? I had read an array of articles on the attacks tallying the deceased, but *who were they?* How can the all-loving G-d I have learned so much about allow for such an attack? What am I to take from it?

After I came down from the roof, I took out my laptop and began to inquire about the victims. I did not have to look far for an incredibly personal account of the characters of two of the fallen. My older cousin and his fiancé spent the second half of last year volunteering for a Jewish Organization in Mumbai. They spent many *Shabbatot* and *Chagim* at the very Chabad house that was so brutally attacked at the end of last week. The two of them were fortunate enough to get very close with two of victims, Rabbi Gavriel and Rivka Holtzberg. I went into my e-mail and read the things that both my cousin and his fiancé had written about the Holtzbergs since the attack. My cousins told in great depth about the hospitality and kindness of the Rabbi and his wife. They opened up their home to thousands of Jews from across the world and offered a Kosher meal and a Jewish Community to anyone with such a desire. They were loving towards each and every person who passed through their home regardless of level of observance. Their life choice of preference would not be to be living in a foreign country, but they saw a need in the world and happily filled it. My cousin and his fiancé did a tremendous job telling me all about two of those I watch buried, and my first question was answered.

I now knew a fair amount of details about two of those who were killed, but my mind was still spinning with questions. How can such a tragedy have befallen such great people, and what am I to take from this? A particular thing my cousin's fiancé said about the Holtzbergs stayed in the forefront of my thinking. *They were so devoted to making people feel comfortable no matter what level of observance.*

We live in a society in which people are classified based on how *religious* they are. But what really makes a more observant Jew? Is someone who maybe drives on Shabbat yet never lies or speaks a word of gossip any more religious than one who keeps strict Kosher and steals money when no one is looking? I have always struggled with society deeming someone more or less religious. Aren't we all Jews and all trying to find our own way? The Holtzbergs erased all such divisions and got to know the story of each visiting Jew and treated them with loving-kindness all the same.

I continued to ponder on other things my cousin and his fiancé had said and began to apply them to things I have learned this year. At the end of *Parshat Bereishit*, the men of the world took whatever they saw to be desirable. Men became selfish in getting what they want. The world was destroyed by the flood because the world became about "taking" and there was no "giving"; no love. Perhaps the flood teaches us that if this selfishness can become acceptable in society, the world is not worth existing. We ought to each ask ourselves if we are more givers or takers in society? Our mission is to make the world a better place each day and with each action that we do. This stretches from the little things like picking up trash and giving a little to a beggar, to spending years of your life in India to give a *Shabbat* meal or Pesach experience to those who would not have had one otherwise. The Holtzbergs did not simply do what they found desirable. They left their comfortable home and their families and lived their lives as givers rather than takers. They preferred to give to the world through kindness and sharing a love for Judaism.

Suddenly I realized I may have found an answer to my question. If Hashem is all loving, why would he allow for such a catastrophic tragedy, and what can be taken from it? Perhaps there comes a time when we need to step back and realize that, as much as we would like to believe we do, we don't know the whole picture. I am not in any way claiming that I have any idea why the Holtzbergs were murdered, nor can anyone or will anyone ever know. But perhaps their passing allows us to take a step back, look at the legacy they leave behind, and realize what we need to strive to change in ourselves. The lives of so many were tremendously enhanced by the Holtzbergs having been in them. They lived in a remote location, yet held true to their Jewish practice and ideals. They loved each and every Jew for his positives and allowed each of them to celebrate his or her Jewish identity in whatever way they may have found for themselves, regardless of the world's subjective deeming of observance level. Perhaps the murder of the Holtzbergs can serve to remind us that our goal in this world is to bring Hashem into the world through love, kindness, giving, and *mitzvot*.

Alexander grew up in Houston, Texas and attended Bellaire High School there. He was the President of the Theater Club and directed the Senior Play "Miss Witherspoon". He was the Sports Editor of "The Three Penny Press"; the school newspaper. Alexander was also the Mazkir Galil of the Texas Bnei Akiva Chapter. He is planning on attending the University of Pennsylvania after Orayta.

His favorite part of Orayta is:

"The Philosophy that's taught at Orayta encourages us to be inquisitive about everything and to find meaning behind your actions. And that we're taught to develop a relationship with God beyond what we were taught in Day School."