

Strong Enough To Weaken

Look, I know that what I'm going to talk about this morning is going to upset a lot of you. And I know that going in. I know that. You really aren't going to be happy. Yet, I have a responsibility. I have a sacred obligation to talk about things that make people upset. So I have to talk about this. I refer, of course, to J.J. Watt.

I am, in fact, a rabbi: a pastor/minister/teacher/spiritual 'master' in the literal sense of the word, not in the slang sense that some police departments use. Specifically in NYPD, someone's rabbi was a senior staff person or other influential individual who could help younger officers out or 'fix' things for them as they came up through the ranks. Like the proverb says, get yourself a friend and acquire yourself a rabbi.

A few years ago, District 1 got a new captain and I stopped by to introduce myself. His administrative assistant went to tell him that 'the rabbi' was here to see him and he told me he expected to see some deputy come in, some Some old and grizzled (wizeden? wizzled? wizzled) deputy who fought alongside Teddy Roosevelt in the Spanish American War. And then, no, I walk in. A short, chubby bearded Jewish guy.

Of course, I didn't start out as a rabbi, either. I started out as a writer and comic actor, a director, a lot of things, a theater guy, in my very short first career. But I wanted to make a difference in the world, and I missed Jewish learning. I had been to Israel at 15, and

had been part of NFTY, the vice-president of my Youth Group, and had been very active at Brandeis University, which is like NFTY for four years. Really. It's a lot like Greene Family Camp with midterms. I was also drawn to the rabbinate because I loved Jewish tradition, and loved to study the history, and loved celebrating holidays. You know what you don't get to do when you are a rabbi? Celebrate Jewish Holidays. It's okay—I'm not complaining. My point is that what you think you are getting into isn't always what you are getting into, and you don't figure it out until some point later along the way.

And then, much like what I spoke about last night, your ability to survive and thrive is directly related to your ability to change. To remain flexible and open and resilient. And many of the things you end up doing as a pastor, or a chaplain, they really challenge you. That's something that you end up having in common with combat veterans and police officers and other first responders.

This is due to things that you may experience first-hand, but also due to vicarious trauma. Now, I am lucky. I am blessed. I get to share and be in your most amazing moments. I get to stand under the Chuppah with you, I get to name your children and grandchildren. I watch your kids become bar and bat mitzvah. I get to watch you come alive in Torah. I get all the good things. That doesn't happen when you are wearing a law-enforcement uniform.

That doesn't happen when I get called out to serve this county as a representative of the Jewish community and our commitment to being involved in the community, to be part of the solution, and by participating physically. I don't go in with the SWAT team, mind you. I show up when the media does, when a deputy is sitting in the back of a car because he just had to shoot someone, or I meet with the family of someone who just got shot by a deputy. A few years ago, we had a horror happen. An entire family was murdered in front of a sole teenage survivor of her own attempted execution. I was part of the team that went to talk to and give care to the involved officers, medics and administrative staff.

Not one of those people went into their job because they wanted to experience bad things. None of them said "I hope I get to watch someone burn, maybe this will be the day that I pull someone out from underneath a car. Oh boy! Maybe today I'll get shot or get to shoot someone! Maybe today I'll make a mistake and shoot someone because I don't get enough help, or training, or support that I need."

So for any of you that are concerned with the disturbing level of what can only be described as police malpractice we hear about, I can tell you, ostensibly as an insider but also enough of an outsider that I feel I can criticize fairly, I can tell you that it's a problem. Lack of training for overworked, underappreciated [police], and a lack of understanding of what that job does to them. These are real problems.

Every interaction our deputies and officers have is either during, or related to, some stressful or negative event. Nobody's having a good day—even off duty deputies don't like getting pulled over.

People don't go into LE to hurt good people, and if they have, then they certainly don't need a badge and a gun. Now, every day, they respond all day to people having bad days. Nobody calls to say send a unit over right now—I completely nailed this enchilada recipe. I think it's the fresh cilantro. I don't know. Get here now!

And yet through training, experience, cultural reinforcement and natural selection, some that survive the job become very good at coping with the ugly realities of The Job. They develop a clinical distance. They get hard. They develop mechanisms for coping.

The problem is the coping mechanisms they develop are incredibly destructive. there's an open secret that many of our officers get their counseling from a wonderful firm: Beam, Daniel, Walker and Cuervo. Peers also get together and talk, which is good, because only another officer can understand what it is like, Just like only another person who does what you do can understand what you do. Rabbis do it too. We also sit around and compare wounds—but with police, too many aren't getting the help they need. It's like people sitting around showing each other their lacerations. “Look at this!” “Wow, you should get that looked at.” “Nah, that's not bad—you can't even see bone...”

First responders don't like to admit that we are vulnerable or scared. Our poor self-care feeds into further disability and disfunction. Drinking and other addictions, Divorce and other estrangements; Domestic violence, which is really covered up for fear of losing a career and livelihood, so people don't reach out for help; Even though though they are also dealing with all that negative energy day after day after day with not enough training and not enough resources. All in a culture that puts shame upon anyone who might be enduring a spiritual crisis and need or want help.

Because any perception of weakness might impact their promotion, or the respect of their peers, or their own ego, their self image as protector, first responder, warrior, they play hurt or they self medicate. They push themselves beyond what is safe, or sane or reasonable. Because of this sense of responsibility or a sense of somehow being 'strong' enough. And this leads to serious injury and serious problems.

There's an analogy of our reading today in Torah the story of the Akeida--the near sacrifice of a beloved son. We ask our first responders to sacrifice themselves and put themselves in harms way. Every day is the akeida. And then not only do they sacrifice themselves physically, but also spiritually, and so too their families and their friends. And yet society expects them to continually go above and beyond, and we all buy into it and we need to stop and think about what we are asking of them and why.

I was in H.E.B. JJ Watt is everywhere. He is our patron saint. Our favorite son. And we have offered him up, week after week as some sort of vicarious symbol of who we are, right? Strong, powerful, the best. The best ever. And we count on him. Texas can't win without him. So he has had a herniated disc, torn core muscles where one's leg muscles are literally sewn back together so the thighbone doesn't detach from the hip? Take a week off and some ibuprofen. Get back out there! We need you! I know about back surgery and herniated discs. He had surgery mere months ago and he went back out there—he sacrificed himself. We played into it. We love him. What must it be like to be him, to feel that kind of pressure? That adoration. His life has changed.

Now, mark my words. We have not yet seen the mark that young man will make on the world. I truly believe that. Because he is so driven, so competitive, so disciplined and of such seemingly high character, his true greatness is yet before him. But I don't think it will be as defensive player of the year. I fear that he will push himself into a wheelchair and he will then go on to be a great advocate and inspiration for disabled athletes.

And we should be ashamed of our part in it, by encouraging the idea that self-care, physical or spiritual, is weakness.

J.J. Watt, and the Law Enforcement that we rely upon, this is what happens when you play hurt and refuse to accept the limitations that are upon you as a human being. It does

not matter how strong you are, if you are the best, the strongest—if you get hit by a truck, you are going to get knocked down.

If you drink, and take pills and whatever else you choose to do: smoke, sniff, shoot, watch...however you choose to numb your pain so you can continue to work hurt, and you are not getting the kind of attention you need, you will break down. There is no question. The only question is, how many people are you taking down with you?

Which is a terrible irony because the people that push themselves too far often do so because of the idea that other people are counting on them and if they don't get the job done, everything will fall apart. Commitment and love and discipline does not require you to be a statistic, a cautionary tale, or a martyr.

Now, most of us don't play professional football, or deal with horrible tragedies. We deal with lots of little tragedies.

Now if you were to take a huge hit of radiation, you would get sick and die. If you take lots of smaller hits of radiation over a long enough time period, same thing. If you were exposed to a low level constantly? Same thing. It hits you at once or it all adds up. Like sunburns and skin cancer.

There are two ways to break a metal spoon—a steel spoon. I'm not strong enough to just snap it, torque and pull it apart. I could cut it with bolt cutters real easy though. I could also just gently bend it back and forth a little bit again and again and again until metal fatigue does its thing and it just falls apart. It just gives out. Same result. This is the difference between acute trauma and chronic stress.

Almost 30 percent of Americans in any given year are suffering from an emotional or spiritual crisis, or an ongoing personality issue. And something like one in 17 or 18 of us should be hospitalized because we are having such a difficult time functioning.

Because of the state of the world, and in particular this election cycle, some have described the situation as the national nervous breakdown. There's a reason for it. Pick up a paper! Of course it could be worse. We could be living in Europe. That's one of our fears, we don't want that situation here.

Believe it or not, one of the greatest and most important resources we regular people have is the same resource we use for the police or for Mr. Watt. That is chaplaincy. Pastoral care, support and community commitment to the individual. Helping people change and grow spiritually and remain resilient. And that is something that this particular congregation provides. My chaplaincy, which you provide, is a way of the congregation supporting the county's first responders.

But I urge you to consider the tremendous resources this congregation provides for you as well. Not for big stresses like multiple vehicle accidents but for smaller, more personal, private and no less painful traumas: illness and disease in our families, divorce, children with educational, emotional or developmental challenges, our aging parents, our own aging. Changes that are unavoidable but that you must endure.

Here is a place, this synagogue, this is a support structure, a place where you can be human—and know that you aren't alone. That you are cared for. That you are valuable. Even if you aren't perfect. Even if you are deeply flawed. Even if the things that life has thrown you and that other people have thrown upon you are leaving you feeling unbalanced. That's what this place is for. That's what Jewish community has always been for.

I hope that every member of this community will participate in the annual campaign. It's important. We don't push ourselves to breaking any more. We don't let one person or a few people push themselves too far. We all push together because today we read about the binding of Isaac, and we don't believe in human sacrifices.

Shana Tovah U'Metukah.

I promise, I had no idea that Mr. Trump's comments today would have had anything to do with the topic of my Sermon, which consisted of a discussion of post critical stress,

bad coping mechanisms, and the importance--the imperative-- of destigmatizing mental healing and spiritual care in particular among veterans and law enforcement. And everybody. Becuase look around.

And like a gift, Mr. Trump carelessly (not maliciously) frames my sermon in the context of breaking news.

Isn't that crazy? This would be like talking about how dressing up like a French cop and robbing Kim Kardashian at Paris Fashion Week has always been a secret dark fantasy of mine during last night's sermon (It isn't and I didn't)

My issue with Mr. Trump's--assumedly unintentional message? It does not make you weak to need help processing traumatic experiences, and strength has nothing to do with surviving moral, or mortal, trauma.

You might be numbed enough by alcohol, painkillers, adrenal fatigue or depression to not feel the impact. That's not the same as being strong. Numbness is not strength. How dare we define character as refusing to let catastrophic herniations and muscle tears keep you from playing professional football. That isn't strength or courage or character. It's literally insanity.

How fascinating that the main story today involving the Republican Candidate concerns a careless suggestion that the wounded just aren't as strong as some others. Literally putting out there one of the most dangerous ideas about psychic injury.

The self-loathing that arises among sufferers who view themselves as weak and defective might have something to do with the self-harm, substance abuse and suicides destroying our military and police veterans and their families. What Mr. Trump--clearly accidentally-- said was harmful, uninformed and deeply troubling to me. But it seems he said this mere hours after I had delivered my sermon. I couldn't have timed it better.

Nor could I predict Joe Biden would raise many of the same issues in his response to Mr. Trump. Once I have a workable copy of my remarks I will post them. My sermons involve a good amount of improvisation; a calculated risk, to be sure. In any event, Once I transcribe and coordinate my delivery with my written remarks, I am very curious to see how eerie the coincidence is. I intentionally avoid politics and the very topic became the political story of the day.