

Reflections on Sichuan

In September 2009, I went with the Centre on Behavioral Health at the University of Hong Kong to Sichuan province in China. Our goal was to train primary school teachers affected by the earthquake on 12 May 2008 on how to use the arts in their classrooms for expression, communication, and relaxation. The day after the training was over, we were taken to see first hand the damage done by the earthquake in nearby Beichuan.

From a high vantage point, we looked out at a valley. Despite the overcast sky and rolling fog, we saw what was once

a village. The entire area was filled with rubble of buildings and houses in various stages of collapse. The earthquake was so violent that not only had the buildings collapsed, but the mountain that we saw across from us had physically moved. The devastation was so immense that the area will never be cleared since it is impossible to account for all of the dead. It will be an everlasting memorial site.

Driving back down the hill, we stopped at a gate of what was once Beichuan Middle School. Once inside, we walked up the path to a wall made of blue, aluminum siding with a banner. In front of this wall there were two makeshift altars and piles

of concrete debris and sand bags. We stepped onto these provisional platforms to look over the wall. On the other side were collapsed buildings, broken windows, piles of rubble and a few trees. All three hundred people who were in the school died in the earthquake. Only the 30 who were on the playground survived.

Lining the path from the entrance to the wall, there were tables set up selling either memorial souvenirs or packets of candles, incense sticks and hell money for use in the temporary altars. My colleagues all purchased sets to offer homage to the dead. I watched and thought about what to do to honor this



moment. As I was making up my mind, one of my colleagues – the only other Western one – came up to me. She said, “I purchased a set for you. I hope you don’t mind,” as she handed me the small packet.

I’ve never participated in a non-Jewish ritual. I’ve gone to temples and churches, sat in on services as an observer, but never actively participated. It’s an intentional choice I’ve made to avoid idolatry and because it’s simply not my ritual to perform. This altar in front of me was not like others I have seen in Asia. There were no statues or graven images. We were not in a temple. We were standing steps away from massive destruction and great loss. In lack of another way to offer my thoughts and express my grief, I thanked her and took the packet.

But I knew that I could not participate for what it purely was, as I did not know what all of the folk rituals meant. In order to make sense of it and find meaning, I placed it in the only real context that I know and saw it all through a Jewish lens.

I looked at the packet in my hands. I imagined walking into a synagogue and giving money in exchange for a siddur. There was no way to participate without these essential objects. Unlike the siddur, when this ritual was completed, I would not return any part of the packet. No, it was not like exchanging money for a siddur. Rather, it was like exchanging money for the opportunity to pray, the chance for words to escape from my lips.

Crouching down, huddled over the altar with others, I removed the two candles. There were red, each perched on a stick. I lit them from candles that were already burning in the altar. They must have been placed there by someone



Feature

by Jordan Potash

who had completed their ritual. My candles would become a link in a chain of prayers connecting who was there to who will come after. Staring at the two candles, they morphed into the familiar symbols of how we start Shabbat and the holidays. With them lit, it seemed that I could begin.

I looked at others and saw that the incense was next. I lit each one, blew out the flame, and allowed the fragrant smoke to rise. One of my favorite phrases in the Torah is *ריח ניחוח*, (*reiaich nichoach*), “fragrant smell”, often used in conjunction with Temple sacrifice. I just like the sound of the words together when they are read or chanted. Nothing changed around me, but the smell entered my nostrils and immediately transformed the space. It was not just ruins, but a sacred space in time.

I knew from previous observations that I was to hold the incenses ticks together, bow a few times and place them. As I looked at them in my hands, I briefly saw them as a lulav – one standing straight up in the center, the two side ones gently curving out. I thought about shaking the lulav on Sukkot in the six directions to mark that God is all around. Here there was only forward movement, forcing me to focus to that place beyond the wall where once stood a school. I saw others move their lips and bow several times. The actions seemed to me to be the final movements that accompany the final line of the Kaddish Yatom – Mourner’s Kaddish. I silently said the kaddish, offered the bows at the appropriate time and placed the incense.

The final part was to offer the stack of paper money. I tried to hold them to the

flame, but it was too thick of a stack to burn at once. I saw others take a few at a time and fan them to allow the fire to catch. What was I suppose to think? The words of U’taneh tokef started to play over in my mind:

“Let us now relate the power of this day’s holiness, for it is awesome and frightening... who will live and who will die; who will die at his predestined time and who before his time;...Who by earthquake and who by plague...”

Spiritually, I understand the metaphor of this prayer and the exaggeration used to highlight the final line of the possibility of overturning harsh decrees through *tshuva* (return), *t’filah* (prayer) and *tzedakah* (charity). The words themselves have always been scary to me, even when I was a child,



but here, in this place, they are harsh, mocking, cruel.

As I burn the money, I begin to think about my views on God's role in natural disasters. I don't believe that God causes acts of devastation. I can't. I won't. I believe that God set the natural laws of the world in motion at the end of creation. With the exception of a few brief times noted in the Torah, I do not think that God intervenes. Then the Hallel service Psalm 115, verse 16 came to mind:

“The heavens belong to God, but the earth God gave over to humans”

God's role is not disaster, but rebuilding – not cause, but response – not punisher, but care giver.

As I hold each note over the candle and see it slowly become engulfed in flames, I think about my own praying in general. These paper offerings through a combination of my actions and the natural world are transformed. Could I pray as if each word I uttered would ignite in flames the moment it came into contact with the oxygen of the world around me? Could I hold each sound between my lips for a brief amount of time until it became too hot and had to be let go? Maybe it is the true essence of prayer, hopeful words let go of and transformed by the world. Maybe it is forgiveness, old pain let go of and transformed by the world. Maybe it is grief, personal suffering let go of and transformed by the world.

When I get to my final notes, I am aware that *הוֹחִיב גַּם הַיָּר* and burning smoke are blending into bitter sweet smells in my nose and causing my eyes to water. I hold on to the last few notes, not wanting to let them go, but knowing that I need to. I ignite them, hold them until the flames are too close, and I let them go. I quickly take a picture of my burning note, so that, I can hold on to something – some idea, some memory, some hope that my contributions in Sichuan were meaningful, that my presence was a fitting tribute to the victims and survivors, and that my personal transformation would take hold from this day forward. *א*

Jordan is a mental health therapist and art therapist in Hong Kong. Jordan can be contacted at www.jordanpotash.com.

