

## **Rabbi David's Remarks and Prayer at San Quentin, July 19, 2020**

I want to acknowledge all the cars going by who are honking. I want the people inside to hear those horns. They need to know that we are thinking about them. Those honk are actually prayers.

I am Rabbi David Cooper, emeritus at Kehilla Community Synagogue.

Many of you here today have been here more times than me and I am losing count. In San Quentin people cannot be distanced, cannot get enough or any protection from the coronavirus. And people here are also put into isolation -- it can go on for weeks, months, years, decades. And being put in isolation. Solitary confinement is torture and is no protection of people from Covid.

I've been here before to protest the death penalty. Some people think that the Jewish tradition's relationship to the death penalty is summed up by the Five Books of Moses advocating for capital punishment. But my Jewish tradition did not stop with the black letter law of the Torah. 2000 years ago the rabbis argued about those laws and they created a standard for execution for which they set the bar so high that no one could get executed. That's all in the Talmud. But suffice it to say, one of their main objections is one that is still relevant. They said that no earthly court could be entrusted with the authority to kill people. And today in America, no court can be trusted to act outside the reality of systemic racism -- and we can see that in the grossly disproportionate statistics of who sits in this prison and on death row. It is an outrage.

Psalm 46 verse 7 describes God as doing justice for the oppressed, giving food to the hungry, and freeing those imprisoned. The tradition understands that we, all of us, are God's agents in this work. God as the liberator of the incarcerated is celebrated in Jewish prayer at least four times everyday. It is because of this mandate to act with divine agency that I am here today.

I am here protesting because every person incarcerated in San Quentin today is on death row. Every person. And not only those incarcerated but their guards as well and that means also the family of the guards. And they too deserve our compassion today.

Something must be done, and that means we must draw attention to what is happening here. We must shout it out for all to hear: murder is happening behind these walls. Murder is happening because some people's lives are treated as if they did not matter. People's lives are treated as expendable. But every person's life is sacred. And that is what every demonstration at San Quentin is about.

As of Friday, 12 people have died from the virus here. 37 across the state. We need to say the prayer for the dead, the Kaddish. I want to say it 37 times, but that would take too long. That the list *is too long* already tells us so much. And the list will get longer each day, and how much longer? I want to say enough is enough, but in fact we have long passed that point, we are at the point of shouting it is too many now and it was too many when it was only one person.

## **KADDISH**

adapted from Marge Piercy

Look around us, search above us, below, behind.  
We stand in a great web of being joined together.  
Let us praise, let us love the life we are lent  
passing through us in the body of our people  
and our own bodies, let's say amen.

Time flows through us like water.

The past and the dead speak through us.

We breathe out our children's children, blessing.

Blessed is the earth from which we grow,

Blessed the life we are lent,

blessed the ones who teach us,

blessed the ones we teach,

blessed is the word that cannot say the glory

that shines through us and remains to shine  
flowing past distant suns on the way to forever.  
Let's say amen.

Blessed is light, blessed is darkness,  
but blessed above all else is peace  
which bears the fruits of knowledge  
on strong branches, let's say amen.

Peace that bears joy into the world,  
peace that enables love, peace over everyone  
everywhere, blessed and holy is peace, let's say amen.

*Ended with the intoning of the traditional Mourners' Kaddish*