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I Waited Out the JCC Bomb Threat With Zumba & Psalms

By [Benjamin Shalva](#) Mar 6, 2017



A few minutes before a madman called our children’s Jewish day school and threatened to extinguish the heart at the center of our lives, our 11-year-old son was standing in that same school’s sanctuary, reciting a speech he’d painstakingly prepared.

“My favorite psalm,” he began, eyes never daring to drift from the script in his hand, “is called [Min HaMeitzar](#). It is a journey. In every verse we face a problem head on and get through it. And during the chorus we collect ourselves and keep moving.”

We had gathered, that morning, in celebration. Lev's 5th grade class had just completed a semester's long study of a "greatest hits" selection from the Book of Psalms called Hallel, a selection that congregations recite on holidays and at the beginning of each Hebrew month. So to celebrate, the school had invited parents, teachers, and children from the younger grades to attend a precociously preteen student-led service—replete with awkward pauses, goofy grins, and the occasional burst of tear-jerking transcendence.

"From out of the depths I called to God," my son read. I hadn't given much thought to this psalm, not since seminary. But having just been informed that we must exit the school immediately, that our lives and the lives of our children had been threatened, that, at any minute, our world might literally explode, I was grateful to my son for pointing the way back to these words.

*From out of the depths I called to God. God answered me by setting me free. God is with me, I shall not fear.
What can mortals do to me?*

What can mortals do to me? Mortals can actually do plenty. Mortals can upend prayer with paranoia. Mortals can curtail celebration by dialing the front desk. Mortals can spit venom and send a mass of wide-eyed students and stunned, shaken teachers streaming outside on a mercifully mild Monday. To wait. Because that is the business, I discovered that day, of bomb threat victims. We wait. We wait for the cops and the all-clear. We wait to resume our prosaic lives. We wait, surrounded by squad cars and steely-eyed sentinels, for the world to make sense again.

And, while we wait, apparently — we do Zumba. The psalm continues, "*through my helpers I face my foes.*" And our helpers had appeared in the guise of one spandex-clad Zumba instructor, an instructor who happened to have rented the school's gymnasium that morning to teach her middle age gals how to shake it.

"Okay!" she called, stepping before our displaced assembly. "Everyone ready?" Samba began to stream from a nearby phone. The children edged forward. The adults edged forward, too. "Right leg! Left leg! Right! Left!" We were doing Zumba. We stomped and shimmied. We hooted and hollered. Lev ran over and begged me to stop—I was embarrassing him. I laughed and, despite his protestations, held him close. "Dance with me!" I yelled. He refused, but with a smile. He ran back to his friends and I kept dancing. The lump in my throat dislodged, and for the briefest of moments, I was set free.

We received the all-clear a few minutes later. We returned, as best as we could, to our regularly scheduled lives. We collected ourselves, as my son would say, and kept moving. But fragility lingered. Terror had touched us—the morning could not be undone.

The Psalm my son read contains the line: "I shall not fear," but I walk through my world, now, shaken. I hug my children before they climb on the bus and bury my nose in their hair, breathing them in, chiding myself for such thoughts but nonetheless picturing dark depths to come. "It is a journey," my son had explained in his speech. "When we reach the end, we rejoice in God's name because we know that God has been with us and was protecting us the whole way." I hope he's right and we reach the end in celebration.

In the meantime, however, I will Zumba before my foes.