

As I mentioned last night. A lot has changed in the last year. The biggest changes for us, and the changes I am focusing on as we enter the Jewish year of 5780, are the changes in our world, especially the Jewish world, as a result of the mass shooting at Pittsburgh and the many similar attacks that happened in these last twelve months.

But this morning, I want to start with a change that predates what happened in Pittsburgh last October. This morning, I begin with the change that I imagine many people had been waiting for, for well over a year. Last September, in the the third game of their season, and for the first time in 635 days, the Cleveland Browns won a football game.

Most of you know that despite their glorious name, I do not know this because I am an avid Brown's fan. I know this, because Thursday, September 20th of last year, was also the first time in my life that I sat in the stands at First Energy Stadium to see the Brown's play.

So for those who were not there. Let me give you a first hand account of what changed that day. On a perfect fall evening, it was a typical Brown's game. Fans were excited, even though the Brown's were pretty quickly losing fourteen to nothing. Then our quarterback got hurt. And with a little pause for compassion, excitement began to build and the stadium started to cheer. It was almost like the whole place had been waiting for this moment.

Turns out there was this rookie Bayker Mayfield, who was pretty good at throwing the ball. And guess what. He did what he was good at and I got to see the Brown's win their first game in the last nineteen tries.

I know for many of you, the sermon can stop here and you'd be perfectly satisfied. But I did not come here to talk about the Browns. I did come here today, to share that we should follow their strategy.

In a battle with much more serious consequences, General George Washington once wrote, "Offensive operations . . . is the surest, if not the only means of defense."

What was true for Washington in the 18th century, was true for the Browns in 2018. And it is true for us today.

## **The best Defense is a strong Offense.**

For those who observe a second day of Rosh Hashanah, tomorrow we read the words of the prophet Jeremiah in our Haftarah.

In the instance that you may think that Jeremiah's words were only written for a people three thousand years ago, I want to assure you that they were written for us, today, in this very moment.

Three thousand years ago, Jeremiah spoke to our Jewish ancestors in the diaspora. Like our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents, their relatives had been expelled from their homes. And like us, they had found a new home. They settled in, made a life for themselves. It was outside the Jewish land of Israel, but it was a place where they had the opportunity to thrive. They came to be known as *Matza Chein B'midbar* - the generation who found comfort in the wilderness<sup>1</sup>.

But there were times when they cried out. And Jeremiah's ears were quite sensitive.

קוֹל חֲרָדָה שָׁמַעְנוּ

We have heard cries of panic

פֶּחַד וְאֵין שְׁלוֹם:

Fear without (shalom) relief.<sup>2</sup>

But a good Prophet . . . like a good coach, does not cower in fear?

Jeremiah turns to the people.

***You shall take up your timbrels***

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 31:2

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 30:5

***Move forward.  
Cry out in joy, shout at the crossroads of the nations!<sup>3</sup>***

When our place of comfort has been tainted. When the sacred places we have known are desecrated to such a degree that we are crying out in panic. When we experience *pachad v'ein shalom*, fear without relief -

Jeremiah tells us to get out our instruments, keep moving forward and tell the world who we are!!

He tells us to go on offense. He was right then and he is right now. It is time for us to use his playbook.

**It is time to get out our instruments and start making noise.**

A few weeks ago, we said our goodbyes to our longtime friend and congregant David Shapiro. Had he lived a few more weeks, we would have celebrated his 97th birthday just before Rosh Hashanah. Many of you know stories about David. But he did not often share what he did for the Wooster High School Band.

Among the fifty or so Jewish families who lived in Wooster decades ago, David Shapiro was one of the most successful and most philanthropic. It was therefore no surprise that when the Wooster High School bands uniforms and instruments were destroyed by vandalism, that David and his brother decided to anonymously pay for everything to be replaced.

But even for David, this was a big bill to pay. The Shapiro brothers went to a friend, explained the situation and asked him to share the cost of replacing the instruments and uniforms. He agreed, but on one condition. "I'll give you the money if you get the Wooster paper to cover what we are doing and put our picture on the front page", he said.

David did not understand. "Why? Why do we need such publicity? This is not about us"

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<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 31:4 & Jeremiah 31:7

His friend explained. "Because I want this town to see a picture of three Jewish men on the front of the local paper and know that the Jewish community cares about giving."

This is Jewish offense. To turn pachad v'ein Shalom, fear without relief into Shalom v'ein pachad, relief without fear, we have to let people the positive values we stand for as a Jewish community.

I never saw any pictures of the violence at the Tree of Life synagogue. But one of the most striking images that stands out clearly to me to this day is the banner that stretched across the Pittsburgh Post Gazette the following Friday night.

Yitgadal v'yitkadash shmei rabbah . . . in big Hebrew letters . . . . the words of Mourners kaddish, our prayer for those we lost.

This time we did not ask to be on the front page of the paper. And this time, there is no mistaking who this is about. This is about us.

But this is not who we are. We are not just a people attacked. We are not just a people in mourning.

It has been eleven months since last October. The traditional period of time we mourn our loved ones. It is time to return to life. And it is time to write a new headline for the paper.

In a few weeks, on Friday October 25th, we are thrilled to have our Artist in Residence Josh Goldberg bring his music to our bima. When we booked Josh over a year ago, we had no idea what last year would hold for us. And we had no idea that October 25th would be declared "Show Up For Shabbat" by the American Jewish Congress.

We are going to change the headline on the paper this year. When the reporters shows up on our doorstep on the anniversary of the Tree of Life shooting, as they will, we are going to show them our sanctuary, filled with three congregations, praying together. We are going to let them hear the beautiful music of a young artist who has poured his soul into making Jewish prayer as exciting as a rock concert. We are going to remind them that when fear overwhelms our world, that we play offense. We return back to life with such fervor that it is contagious. That is what we have

done since the days we crossed the sea. That is what we have done since Jeremiah told us to get out our instruments and shout in the streets. And that is what will happen this year.

And whether you are a once a year Jew, an "every week" Jew or even if you just sat next to some Jewish guy who didn't know what he was doing at a Brown's game once in your life, I hope you know that you are invited to be here as we start to play offense. We've been doing it for four thousand years, and our record is pretty good.

The best defense against people who fill the world with hate, is to run the score up so high in the other direction that it is not even worth their time to try.

As I have said before. The real problem we face today is not a security problem. It is a moral problem.

But let me be more specific. It is OUR moral problem. In the same way that David Shapiro had to come to terms with what it meant to represent Judaism to his community, we must come to terms with what it means to represent Judaism to ours.

Abraham Joshua Heschel was fond of telling a story at this time of year. It is about a boy who was always forgetting things, so he devised a system. Every night before he went to sleep he would write a list of where everything was that he needed for tomorrow. "My shoes are in the closet, my papers are on my desk, my shirt is in my top drawer, my bag is in on the hook . . . and I, he would write on his list, am in my bed."

When Heschel tells the story he explains that the boy wakes up, follows all of his written instructions, but when he goes to look for himself, he is not in his bed, so he asks "Where am I?"

I have a slightly different take on the story. In Rabbi Heschel's version, the fact that the boy needed to write down where he was is an absurdity. In our post-Pittsburgh world, I think it is necessity.

In a post-Pittsburgh world, our children expect to experience anti-Semitism. If they are on a college campus, they may see a swastika on their dorm like the one at Tufts University a few weeks ago. If they march

for women's rights, gay rights or human rights they may find themselves having to justify their stance on Israel. God willing they will never face violence, but the world is going to tell them all sorts of things about Judaism. Some of these things will be positive, supportive and pride filled. Some of them will not.

The moral dilemma we face after Pittsburgh is not that hate is knocking on our door after being dormant for half a century. Our moral problem is that if we are too passive. If we do not help our children learn what it means to be positively Jewish, that what the world is going to teach our children about Judaism is only what they are against.

We must be the ones who are going to tell them where we stand and who they are. We must tell them and show them and share it with them, because if we do not, they may find that the only time they know they are Jewish are the times they are on the defensive.

Bari Weiss, author of a recent book on Anti-Semitism named it in her recent article in the NY Times:

***"the only way to fight [anti-Semitism] is by waging an affirmative battle for who we are"***<sup>4</sup>.

To be on offense is to understand that putting a note explaining who we are is not absurd, it is necessary. It is necessary because they are likely going to see a swastika on a building and mourners kaddish in the newspaper.

So let them hear from us that those are just small pieces of who we are. Let them hear from us that to be Jewish is to be part of a people who house the homeless and gather our interfaith friends for Mitzvah Day. We are a people who sing every chance we get - songs about peace and compassion, prayers about Israel, a country we love no matter her flaws. We are the people who brought you the day of rest and the One God and then called ourselves *Yisrael*, the people who love to struggle with that One God. We are a people who make mistakes, and then study them obsessively. We love to study them in the Torah, to argue around our seder tables and debate how many days of our holidays we should

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<sup>4</sup> Weiss, Bari, "[To Fight Anti-Semitism Be a Proud Jew](#)" NY Times Op-ed 9/6/2019

observe. And most often, we are happiest when no one wins that debate, when we simply agree to disagree. And then we argue again.

And we are a people who fill each others homes for seven days when we lose a loved one and who bless the newest member of our family on the eighth day.

This is what it means to be Jewish. It means that we are much more than people who are against anti-Semitism. To simply be against something is to just play defense. Being on offense is defined by what you stand for. Our moral dilemma today, is that we no longer have the privilege to be ambivalent about who we are with our children.

But our moral dilemma may also be our greatest gift.

My friend called me a few months ago. Do you want to get season tickets to the Brown's? He asked.

I paused . . . and before I could say anything, he said,

"They're gonna win ya know."

The thing about playing offense is . . . not only is it a lot of fun and filled with excitement. The offense always looks downfield with the belief that they will change the score.

Henry David Thoreau wrote that "I must walk toward Oregon, and not toward Europe. . . . We go eastward to realize history . . . we go westward as into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure."<sup>5</sup>

While we pray facing Israel to the East, the American Jewish community has always been the shining example of a Western philosophy. American exceptionalism may be something we wear on our sleeve too easily, but Jewish American exceptionalism has been a reality.

Since the days we began building synagogues and community centers in the 1760's, we are the exception among Jewish communities of the world. We are the Jewish model for creating a sense of community in the

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<sup>5</sup> Henry David Thoreau. "Walking: Top Essays", p.7

diaspora. We are the model for a pluralistic Jewish life, where Reform, Conservative, Orthodox and secular Jews balance their differences for the sake of the greater whole. (CAMP)

It was in American synagogues where the most glorious music thrived because we broke barriers and brought instruments where they had never been. It was in our Jewish community centers that charitable funds were established that helped give birth to the state of Israel. It was in our minyanim where women were included and in our seminaries where the first gay person could stand proudly as himself, as a Jew and as a leader among our people.

We accomplished all these barrier shattering achievements, not by playing defense, but by looking West - by dreaming about what was possible - and by making it happen.

I will not hide from the fact that Pittsburgh shook me in ways I had yet to experience. In many ways, it knocked me down. But, I'm a part of a team that has been knocked down a lot. And every time we get up, we get better, we make more progress. We start to play offense and we learn exactly how far our vision can take us.

And here is the other thing I know. I have never seen a generation of teenagers more ready to take the reigns of the mess they have been handed than the kids we are raising today. We may stand in judgment, as elders always have, of the ways their world is foreign to us. What Pittsburgh was for us, Stoneman Douglas was for them. The next class of rookies who are about to take the field are fierce. They are smart. They have more access to information than any generation prior. And they are wonderful at using their voice. They are a generation that plays offense. And they will carry us well, but we have to cheer them on and set the stage for their success. Not only in Jewish life, but in the world they will inherit.

They are the generation of Malala Yousafzi, the Afghan young woman who became the youngest person ever to win the Nobel Peace prize. They are the generation of fifteen year old Greta Thunburg who spoke at the UN last week, looking the leaders of the world in the eyes and said "You are not mature enough to tell it like it is, even that burden you leave to us children.

We have come here to let you know that change is coming whether you like it or not."

What I can tell you from my experience here in this synagogue, is that Malala and Greta are not anomalies of this generation. They are emblematic of it.

Just a few weeks ago, we heard a taste of that generation, as we heard from our very own confirmands. If you were not with us that night, I encourage you to go back and watch the video of their speeches. You will hear the voice of leaders ready to take the ball and run. As our confirmand Ethan Madden said passionately that night, "I am proud of who I am. I wouldn't change my faith and beliefs for anyone. I am a proud member of the Jewish community. [I will not] shy away from it. I will stand up to others make a stand when necessary."<sup>6</sup>

We have a generation of quarterbacks growing up in our midst. They are proud of who they are and they are motivated to make the world they will inherit a place worthy of that inheritance. Let's follow their lead and start playing offense to win.

May 5780 be a happy year. May it be a year of joy, a year of peace, a year with a good quarterback and a great offense. But most of all, may this be the year, when the great values of our tradition, the instruments of our people, play so loudly, that we are certain the gift we will give our children, shalom v'ein pachad; a world where there is peace and no fear.

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<sup>6</sup> Excerpts from Ethan Madden's confirmation speech from August 30th 2019