

Motzaei Shabbat Chayei Sarah  
November 4, 2018 - 26 Marcheshvan 5779  
Hebrew Institute of Riverdale - The Bayit

## ***Loss, Unity and Hope: Reflections After Pittsburgh***

### **Opening Thoughts - Rav Steven**

Joyce, Richard, Rose, Jerry, Cecil and David, Bernice and Sylvan, Daniel, Melvin and Irving: How do we grieve you, honor you and perpetuate your values?

I don't expect to have all the answers, but on the heels of Parashat Chayei Sarah, I find strength in three lessons from one action Avraham Avinu performed upon the death of his beloved wife Sarah.

Bereishit 23:2, after recording Sarah's death in Chevron, recounts: ויבא אברהם לספוד לשרה ולביתה - Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and weep for her.

Where did he come from? What is the meaning of his coming?

Rashi explains that it was a geographic coming - Avraham was in Beer Sheva when Sarah died, and he had to journey to Chevron to mourn her and bury her.

This is the first response - to go to the place. And while only inner family is inner family, these victims, faithful shulgoers and fellow Jews from Pittsburgh - they are family. And when a family member dies, you pick up and go to mourn and grieve and honor and remember them.

So may we all consider making the trip - in the right way and the right time - to Pittsburgh. To be in the place. לבוא, to really come.

And then many medieval commentaries suggest that the basic meaning of לבוא is to come מבחוץ אל הבית, from outside to inside. Avraham was just outside Sarah's tent when she died, and he entered. He did make a long journey, but rather crossed a physical threshold to become a part of the experience. This is what these 11 precious souls did, every week. They entered their shul, their sacred space. With all their rich lives outside, they dedicated themselves to coming in, and to holding the door, literally, for others to come in and experience their community.

May we all consider honoring their memory by coming מבחוץ אל הבית - into this space, into other sacred spaces and spaces of service and community, devoting ourselves even more to this Bayit and to the places where we can help the world, to carry forward their values.

Finally, other commentaries say that **ויבא** means an inner movement, an internal awakening. Avraham was with Sarah - in Chevron, in the tent. He did not need to move one inch. But he had to make an inner movement. To express his emotions, to be fully in the grief and the remembering.

To be fully present in loss - in the grief, in the togetherness with others, and in the hope - still requires a coming. Moving ourselves fully into that place of being, in all its parts. Avraham teaches us to enter - **לבוא**.

So while the news cycle is already moving on in this new week, we stay. In fact, we enter even more deeply. May we enter all the feelings and responses that this terrible horror and loss demands of us - to feel the loss, to feel the power of the response, and to feel the vision of where we go from here.

To help us **לבוא**, to enter, in remembering those who crossed the threshold of Tree of Life Synagogue every Shabbat, what follows are the reflections of three of our clergy who answered the call **לבוא**, to traverse the distance and go be in Pittsburgh last week, remembering the victims, offering comfort, and holding loss, unity, and hope.

### **On Loss - Rav Ezra**

מונה מספר לכוכבים לכלם שמות יקרא:

“He counts the number of the stars - for each one he gives a name.” So we recite in Pesukei D'zimra each day [Psalm 147]. God promised to our forefathers that we would be innumerable as the stars, and yet God knows the number -- for he has given each one of us a name. It is a Godly act to count and to name. Last Shabbat, this past week, today, that uncountable number is now 11 less. 11 stars, 11 individuals. Joyce. Richard. Rose. Jerry. Cecil. David. Bernice. Sylvan. Daniel. Melvin. Irving.

Are these not the stars in Joseph's dream?

ויחלם עוד חלום אחר, ויספר אתו לאחיו; ויאמר, הנה חלמתי חלום עוד, והנה השמש והירח ואחד עשר כוכבים, משתחוים לי.

And he dreamed yet another dream, and told it to his brethren, and said: 'Behold, I have dreamed yet a dream: and, behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars bowed down to me.' [Genesis 38:9]

But today, not the stars of Joseph's brothers, bowing in recognition of Joseph's power, but rather: 11 stars, bowing down, crushed under the weight of death, bearing the burden of millenia of anti-semitism, prostrated, not with subservience and respect, but in bloody lifelessness and destruction. When we take a step back and think about Yosef's dream, Yosef's prophecy, we will notice that its realization consists of attempted fratricide, grief, loss, kidnapping, manipulation, arduous physical and spiritual journeys, spanning the course of decades. In fact, Yosef's dream is not much of a dream at all. It is reality, and it is a nightmare.

My time in Pittsburgh was reminiscent of the Halakhic category of *aninut* - the period between death and burial, when a mourner is busy with practical matters related to funeral arrangements, and grappling with the shock and nightmare of what has befallen their family member. Desperation, grief, devastation, felt those first days, but that can not ever be entirely alleviated. Perhaps, like Joseph's dream, consolation may come eventually, in the course of decades, or lifetimes, but for now, and for the near future, *aninut*, nightmare.

The night I arrived, Marlene, my host in Pittsburgh (and friend of Shoshana Bulow and Seth Goldstein), walked with me the two blocks from her home to Tree of Life. The sky, rainy and cloudy, made seeing or counting the stars, impossible. As we walked, she shared with me about her friend and colleague, Joyce Fienberg, with whom she had just had lunch the day the day before she was killed. We arrived at the memorial to find Joyce's name emblazoned on a star - "Joyce Fienberg." One of eleven. In the most Godly of ways, in recognition of the brokenness and finitude before us, we counted and we named.

### **On Unity - Rabba Sara**

We had already called a cab and were about to leave the Tree of Life Synagogue last Sunday. At that point, the police were still investigating, and were only letting a few people at a time gather. There was just a smattering of flowers on the ground.

Suddenly, a man wearing a hard hat jumped out of his van, holding a large white wooden memorial. Greg Zanis is known for making and hand delivering 5,000 of these monuments, that have now become associated with commemorating loss at mass shootings. We have seen these large white monuments outside of the night club in Orlando and in Las Vegas, and now, outside of the Tree of Life shul.

Looking to help with anything, Maharat student Emily Goldberg Winer, Jonah Winer and I each grabbed a monument and began to slowly carry them up the hill, placing them in front of the

synagogue, one at a time. The memorial plaque was heavy, and it was cold and raining. I looked down, and saw that I was carrying the plaque for 87 year old, new grandfather, Melvin Wax. Turns out that I had heard a little about Melvin earlier that day. Bonnie, his sister in law, works at the front desk of Shira Berkovits' building, where I was staying. We stopped and talked to Bonnie, who knew three of the deceased- Sylvan and Bernice Simon and Melvin.

Melvin loved to lead services; he was often the first to shul, she told us. As I carried that plaque, I felt heavy with the burden of my task. I imagine that "Mel" as he was called, might have arrived at the words of "*shema yisrael hashem elokeinu, hashem echad*" just as the gunman, filled with hate, gunned him down, and 10 more throughout the building, in cold blood.

I can't stop thinking about the Chassidic teaching about the meaning of *echad*. *Echad* is of course translated as "one", as in one God. However, explain our chassidic masters, you can't get to one unless you bring two people together. Indeed, *echad* shares a root with the word *yachad*- meaning together and *achdut* or unity. The essence of "one" then is actually in bringing people together.

This - unity - is the message of Pittsburghers, where it seemed that the entire city had a shared body language. We walked into a Starbucks. People looked devastated, strangers hugging one another. Two police officers walked in, and a group of people jumped up to thank them and cry a little together. At the interfaith vigil we attended on Sunday night, Wasi Mohamed, Executive Director of Islamic Center of The Muslim community announced that he raised \$70,000 (now close to \$200,000) for the families of the victims. But that's not all. He went in to say: "We just want to know what you need ... If it's people outside your next service protecting you, let us know. We'll be there."

And across the US, small and larger gatherings have brought people from different backgrounds, faiths and denominations together.

I am filled with heaviness. I have a hole in my heart, and tragedies like these are a reminder to all of us to hug all those we hold dear. But in the spirit of *achdut* - of the Pittsburgh way, this week, let's also reach across gender, race, religious lines, and try to carry other people's burdens, along with our own. This the meaning of *echad*.

### **On Hope - Rabba Anat**

Can we talk about hope after the hate-filled shooting in Pittsburgh?

On Thursday, I went to Pittsburgh, with our co-youth director, Eitan Cooper. As we got to Squirrel Hill, the sign of the Steelers, the football team, became the new symbol of Pittsburgh in these days of bereavement. The sign contains a yellow Star of David, instead of the yellow diamond, and the inscription that accompanies it, is: “stronger than hate”. In these days of hatred and anti-Semitism, this yellow star of David represents for me a most powerful transformation: the yellow star of the days of the Holocaust, that we are so familiar with, gets a new meaning here in America - the Steelers stand with the Jewish community in Pittsburgh and say, “no more!” We are **stronger** than hate.

Images from two funerals:

The first at noon was of Bernice and Sylvan Simon, parents of three children and about ten grandchildren. As we offered some words of comfort and support to the family, their daughter was so moved and replied, “we are one big family”, and burst into tears, asking us to stay in touch.

The second funeral was of Dr. Richard Gottfried - a member of a loving and supportive family. His spouse, before her eulogy, asked each of us in the room to look around and to offer some words of peace to each other, and so we did. The experience of saying “Shalom” to my neighbors at this funeral - comforting and moving at the same time.

At both funerals, we gathered together, liberal Jews and Orthodox Jews, Christians and Muslims, Pittsburghers and people from all over the world, showing solidarity, standing up against the terrible crime, sharing pain and sorrow, **all together**. Holding each other, comforting and being comforted. Praying together for a world of **love** and **peace**.

Spontaneous monuments we witnessed around the Eitz Chaim synagogue block:

Piles of flowers, of letters, of small memorabilia that describe each of the murdered righteous ones, and candles. We stood there, singing, shedding tears. Two women with head coverings held each other: one with a beret and the other with a hijab, crying in each other's arms. This hug of the two of them brought a tremendous נחמה (comfort) and hope to my heart.

We finished our Parasha this Shabbat with the pasuk:

וַיְבִאֶהָ יִצְחָק הָאֵלֶּלֶה שָׂרָה אִמּוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־רִבְקָה וַתְּהִי־לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַיֵּאָהֲבֶהּ וַיִּנָּחֶם יִצְחָק אֶת־רֵאָה אִמּוֹ:

And Yitzchak brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rivkah, and she became his spouse; and he loved her. And Yitzchak was comforted for his mother.

The Parasha opened with Yitzchak losing his mother - and it ended with his finding comfort after her loss.

Last Saturday **we** lost 11 people who were murdered in cold blood.

To be comforted, Yitzchak takes actions. Note the number of verbs in this verse: And Isaac **brought** Rivkah to Sarah's tent, And he **took** her. And he **loved** her. Yitzchak opens his most intimate place - the tent, where he **showers** upon Rivkah **love**. It is these significant actions that Yitzchak himself takes that bring him consolation, נחמה.

That was the feeling in Pittsburgh, and that was how the last week felt - doing for others, seeing the other and their needs, being there for someone else - those actions brought hope and comfort.

The hope exists in the act of love.

Some people asked me after tefilah on Shabbat, "What are we going to do next? Where do we channel the energy?"

When we all are still mourning with the Jewish community in Pittsburgh, let us strengthen the bonds among us, our family members and our neighbors, the Jews and the non-Jews - through actions with love. Let's strengthen this muscle as individuals and as a community, as we learn from Yitzchak, and may we find hope and comfort.