

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 2019
Rabbi Edward Elkin, First Narayever Congregation

After Pittsburgh

Shabbat morning October 27 this past year started out as a regular Shabbat. Services started at 9 o'clock and there were the usual handful of early birds (bless their hearts) present for the start of the service. We didn't have any bar mitzvahs or baby namings or aufrufs that morning, so while many more people would eventually arrive for the davening during the course of the morning, it was going to be a regular Shabbat at the Narayever, the kind that I cherish. The parasha of the week was Vayera, which culminates in Akedat Yitzhak, the binding of Isaac -- which we also read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. It's a tough passage, one that cries out for interpretation, both of God's actions, and of Abraham's, and we have centuries of Jewish commentary available to help us with that interpretive process. After the Torah reading, the service rolled on towards its conclusion. My habit during Musaf is to go downstairs to visit the children and their families participating in our kids' programs, and so I did that week. Everything like a regular Shabbat.

And then that day became anything but regular. On my way back upstairs for the conclusion of the service, a congregant called me aside. She told me that she had heard on the way over to shul that there had been a shooting at a synagogue in Pittsburgh that morning. There were fatalities, not clear how many. The incident was still going on. I was shaken, and unsure what to do. Should I announce this terrible news to the congregation, or not? I was hearing it second-hand, details were sketchy. I didn't want to spread rumours. Maybe there had been a misunderstanding? Sometimes in the heat of the moment, assumptions are made which are later proven wrong. Still, my congregant was certain of what she had heard and I know her to be a reliable source. I decided that I needed to inform the congregation, and so I did. After conveying the news, I read a psalm -- in keeping with the Jewish tradition of reciting Tehillim at times of trouble, as well as a prayer for healing for the wounded.

Tragically, as the world learned over the ensuing hours and days, a massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh had indeed taken place that Shabbat morning. Eleven dead, at the hands of a white supremacist who had posted anti-Semitic comments on social media, with special vitriol reserved for Jewish organizations which support immigrants and refugees. What a tragedy -- for the victims and their families, for the Tree of Life congregation, and for all of us in North America who had assumed that such things just don't happen here. In the powerful words of an elegy recently

וכן קרה במקדש המעט שלנו בבוא הצר לנוסות¹,
“This is what occurred in our Holy Sanctuary that day, as the enemy came to tread upon our holy space, wielding a sword to break apart our memories from that place...To the eleven, God spoke in a whisper, ‘The time has arrived to sanctify My name in public. And I know you did not ask for this.’ Even so they would be remembered and looked upon as personally bound to the altar as one united.... ובכן אבינו מלכנו עשה למען הרוגינו על שם קדשך
“And so our Father our King act for the sake of those who were slaughtered for Your holy name, Save us our Creator, for our eyes are upon You.”

As we gather to welcome our new year of 5780 together, we look back on the year just concluding and reflect on all that has occurred over the past twelve months. Among other highlights: On climate, we faced record temperatures, rising sea levels, accelerating rates of species extinction, threats to the global food supply, and a closing window of time to avert global catastrophe. Not one, but two Israeli elections which have revealed just how divided its society remains over its fundamental direction, and how stuck its political system is as a result, but also reaffirmed the resilience of its democracy in the face of serious attempts to weaken it. The 50th anniversary of the Moon landing, which inspired important conversations about human aspirations and priorities, human greatness and human follies. The report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls – which revealed persistent and deliberate human rights violations and abuses against indigenous people in Canada over the generations resulting in staggering rates of violence against women and girls, and stimulated an important conversation about the proper use of the word genocide. Repeated examples of race-baiting from the highest office of the land south of the border, racism in the Israeli election against the Arab minority, and the charged issue of race making a surprise appearance in our own federal election as well. The opioid crisis and other addictions continuing to ravage our families and communities. Worrisome conflict between China and the West, and between Russia and the West, and between Iran and the West. Turmoil in Britain over Brexit. Ongoing protests in Hong Kong, and lots of concern that there could be another Tiananmen Square in the offing. Continued stalemate over immigration and refugees, with millions of people out there still looking for a safe haven. The Jeffrey Epstein case, exemplifying ongoing predation and exploitation of women, tolerated or abetted by people with power. Other than perhaps the Raptors championship, it was mostly pretty tough out there in 5779, and there’s no reason to think that any of these challenges are going away in the new year or any time soon.

¹ “Eileh Ezkarah for Pittsburgh”, by Tamar Elad Appelbaum, Jonathan Perlman, Martin Cohen.

Still, out of all of it, my remarks this Rosh Hashanah morning are prompted by the Pittsburgh massacre, perhaps because it felt so close. Shabbat morning. Shul. Just three hundred kilometers away from here, Jews just like us, gathering to do what I gather Jews to do each week on Brunswick Ave, [and three days a year here at the JCC]. Daven. Honour Jewish tradition and values. Reaffirm our sense of belonging to the Jewish community, and to the whole Jewish people here, in Israel, and around the world. Reflect on our faith and feel the presence of God. Needless to say, harming no one. A friend and colleague of mine is the rabbi of one of the congregations which was using the Tree of Life building that morning, and he is still dealing with the aftermath. Three of his congregants were killed. I think, "there but for the grace of God go I", go we. And all the feelings that accompanied Pittsburgh only compounded by the attack on the Poway, CA synagogue on the last day of Pesach this last year as well.

But it is not so much what happened on October 27 itself that I'd like to reflect on with you this morning, but rather what happened over the two weeks that followed. You may remember -- it didn't take long for the Jewish community to mobilize in response to Pittsburgh, and our friends in the wider community as well. Vigils were held, and the following Shabbat was declared a Solidarity Shabbat. We at the Narayever, like most shuls, were packed with people that next week who were filled with a mix of emotions including horror, anger, sadness, fear, and defiance, people looking for a place to express their solidarity with and support for each other, but also for a place to be together in the strange but also somehow familiar Jewish experience of victimhood -- something that most of us had of course heard or read about many times in various contexts but had not personally been subject to much, if at all, in our lives here in North America.

All my colleagues reported the same phenomenon: packed houses for Solidarity Shabbat. I'm glad so many decided to be with the community that day. I couldn't help think of a powerful teaching in the Talmud, in which Rabbi Yochanan asks למה ישראל נמשלו לזית? Why are the people of Israel likened to an olive tree? To teach you that just as an olive does not give its oil except when crushed, so too the Jewish people do not repent and return to the right path except after being crushed by suffering" (Menachot 53b). Rabbi Yochanan's sobering insight is that the experience of being pushed around and beaten down like an olive awakens something in the neshama of the Jew that leads him or her to the right path -- which for all those who came out to shul on that amazing Solidarity Shabbat meant that even if they are not habitually shul goers, that Shabbat they needed to "return", in the original meaning of the word teshuvah, to be with their community and with their people.

So...there is lots that one could say about October 27, the day of the massacre, and the general upswing in anti-Semitism in the world, both of the right-wing variety reflected in the violence in Pittsburgh and Poway, and in the left-wing variety given expression in certain parts of the BDS movement and elsewhere. And there is lots that one could say about November 3, Solidarity Shabbat, and the extraordinary connection we felt with each other that day, and the wonderful outpouring of support we received from our many friends outside the Jewish community, including from many of our Muslim neighbours who have also experienced violence and hatred from some of the same quarters of society that produced Pittsburgh and Poway.

But my real focus with you today is on Nov.10. See, that next Shabbat, two weeks after the massacre, things went back pretty much to normal. Regular service, regular crowd. Pittsburgh had happened, and the impossible had now become a fact of life. We settled into a new normal, that ultimately didn't look all that different from the old. It's that phenomenon that I want to reflect on with you this Rosh Hashanah.

Last year in my Rosh Hashanah sermon I reflected on the controversial Michael Chabon commencement speech on intermarriage, and I claimed, contrary to the olive tree metaphor in the Talmud, that rising anti-Semitism was not going to lead the Jews to a new path, was not going to solve our Jewish identity and continuity challenges. Pittsburgh and Poway put that thesis to the test. My conclusion so far, even after these horrific tragedies which took place in 5779, is the same. Now I know that weekly synagogue attendance is only one possible criterion among many to measure Jewish commitment. There are all kinds of other ways that Jews identify. Still, based on my experience last fall, I feel fairly confident in claiming that our internal issues around the depth and strength of Jews' commitment to the Jewish tradition and community are not going to be solved by a Pittsburgh-inspired awakening of Jewish consciousness and participation among people who have otherwise chosen for whatever reason to keep their distance. Obviously everyone feels horrified by what happened, and many of us are feeling uncertain about what the future will hold and where this is all headed. But that doesn't mean that those who have not in the past chosen to participate actively or regularly in Jewish life are going to start doing so now -- just because we now have strong confirmation that there are people out there who really hate us.

God forbid a hundred million times -- if there should be another Pittsburgh, we'll have more candlelight vigils and more Solidarity Shabbatot and Rings of Peace, and we will feel a genuine sense of commonality and unity with our fellow Jews -- for a spell. But on the example of Pittsburgh, I predict that

that feeling will be brief – and not enough to sustain us as a people in the face of powerful assimilatory pressures from a wider society which -- despite the very real presence of virulent anti-Semitism on the part of some -- on the whole *baruch hashem* bears us no ill will.

Nor would I want that. As a rabbi passionately devoted to motivating people to greater Jewish commitment, I can say unequivocally that I'm not looking to achieve that goal based on a message about shared feelings of victimhood and persecution. I don't want us to be or to see ourselves as crushed olives. The philosopher Emil Fackenheim, who taught around the corner at U of T, said that after the Shoah, the 614th Jewish commandment was that Jews are forbidden to give Hitler a posthumous victory by abandoning their Judaism. There's something very powerful about that message, and I could probably give a very powerful sermon calling on people to respond to the hate directed toward us by people like the Pittsburgh shooter by doing more Jewish, giving more Jewish, participating more Jewish. In fact, that's the kind of sermon I grew up hearing regularly in my Long Island shul, long before Pittsburgh. The sermonic move was to motivate the congregation by citing the Holocaust and anti-Semitism. But that's just not the message I went into the rabbinate to teach, and while it can tug at the heart-strings, I don't think it's particularly effective either.

It is true that as Jews, we do share a historical consciousness of anti-Semitism throughout the ages. Despite all our differences in theology and politics and observance, that consciousness does unite us. But on its own, that's not enough to make us actually do more Jewish things -- because in North America at least anti-Semitism is simply not what defines our lives as Jews in relation to the wider society. In fact, in terms of threats to the Jewish people, I would go so far as to say that even after Pittsburgh, it is the *love* of the wider society towards us which poses vastly more of a threat to Jewish identity than do the pockets of hate which genuinely exist – in the sense that it is that love that has allowed so many of us to assimilate so seamlessly into that wider society. I welcome that love, but I also have to acknowledge that in terms of numbers, vastly more Jews are lost to the Jewish people through assimilation than through anti-Semitic attacks.

So what's a rabbi to do to motivate and inspire people? One voice that I keep coming back to in my own thinking about these questions is that of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. This year I taught an adult education series at the Narayever on Heschel. So much can be said about this extraordinary teacher. I barely touched the surface in the course, and will not be able to do even that here today. Heschel himself was a refugee from the Nazis, and lost many immediate family members in the Shoah including his mother and his sister. But that experience did not lead him to put anti-Semitism at the

center of his religious thought, or his program of Jewish renewal. And for him, the Jewish people desperately needed renewal. The contemporary synagogue that he observed in America had become in his eyes irrelevant, dull, oppressive, and insipid -- and the Jewish people had responded by checking out in droves.

What's Heschel's answer? Well, from his perspective, we're not going to find out what will bring about Jewish renewal by conducting demographic surveys and studies, by establishing measurable criteria and deliverables and metrics of success. It's not about research or logical deductions. It's not about innovation or jazzy creative programming or Jewish start-ups. We already know what people want, Heschel claims, and it's what they've always wanted – they want meaning, they want to recover a sense of awe and wonder about the world around them. They want to overcome their cynicism and their self-deification and they want to devote their energy to making the world around them a more just and peaceful and healthy place. They want to feel gratitude, and appreciation, and transcendence, and the energy to act which proceeds from those feelings. The most abhorrent thing in religion for Heschel is when people go through the motions, tick off the boxes – okay, I showed up at shul on Rosh Hashanah for an hour or two, check, back to real life. For him the life of the spirit *is* real life. Prayer is our greatest privilege, and represents a radical commitment.

Heschel combined extraordinary spiritual depth with courageous leadership on the societal issues of his day, most notably civil rights and the Vietnam War. The spirituality and the social action were not two separate categories in his thought; each one flowed naturally from and reinforced the other.

Heschel's teachings are beautiful. They provide motivators for Jewish living that are rooted not in anti-Semitism but in the positive life-affirming core of our tradition which resonate for me and many others. But from my perspective as a contemporary rabbi, I see two major problems with his prescription for Jewish renewal. First of all, in my experience, not everybody is actually looking for the spiritual path he is promoting, or at least they're not aware that they're looking for it. And second, of those who are consciously interested in exploring this spiritual side of the human experience, not everybody will find what they're looking for within Judaism. See, Heschel's own immersion in the Jewish world since his childhood in Europe was so complete, that for him, any deepening of an individual's spirituality would naturally lead them to more connection to the Jewish people, to Jewish prayer, to the Jewish way of life. But we know that is not necessarily the case. People who are looking for spiritual outlets, for meaning, have a great deal of choice in the contemporary world, many outside Jewish frameworks. Meditation, yoga, silent retreats, chanting,

mindful contemplative practice, etc. – all can be found inside the Jewish community, but also and in greater abundance outside of it. It's a very competitive spiritual market out there. Same for social activism, which was the other part of Heschel's amazing vision. Lots of initiatives within the Jewish community, but many more outside of it, for those who are looking for ways to make the world a better place. So while I know I need to do my utmost to make sure that *my* community at least is not the kind of dull, oppressive, or insipid place that Heschel observed in the North American synagogues that he visited – that it is rather a place where people can genuinely be both uplifted and challenged, and also motivated to work together on society's ills, I also know that these categories are somewhat subjective and it's not easy to create a community that meets everyone's disparate needs.

Heschel disdained a focus on numbers of people in attendance as a metric of success, but he did acknowledge the centrality of community. And Jewish community doesn't exist without Jewish people, in numbers, participating and contributing. The Jewish community doesn't exist without large numbers of Jews saying, in a deep and meaningful way, I'm a part of this. I'm in. This obligates me. This has a claim on me, such that I have to actually *do* something about it, sometimes sacrifice something for it -- whether time, money, or utter individual freedom of choice. Our day and age doesn't necessarily support the idea of obligation so much, our culture is much more comfortable with people doing things as a result of an authentic voluntary willing-up of the heart. But from where I stand, the counter-cultural category of mitzvah, commandment, is what we need to nurture in our generation. I feel a strong conviction that a Judaism that demands nothing of us doesn't really add anything much of value to our lives. Yet figuring out how to help others experience the mitzvot as commandments, without becoming authoritarian (because nobody likes that!), all in the context of a happily pluralistic environment, has been the most challenging puzzle of my rabbinate. I haven't come up with the secret code for solving that puzzle, but one thing I know I can do is surface the issue with you by speaking about it on the High Holy Days.

Contra Heschel, I believe that the feeling of obligation to being a strong link in the Jewish chain which goes back to Abraham and Sarah doesn't necessarily come out of the quest for spirituality. The spiritual quest can after all be conducted alone, or perhaps with one well-chosen partner or counsellor or guru, or in a small group. Judaism, by contrast, has always privileged the communal context as the place to find the kind of transcendence Heschel wrote about. And community can be really hard, for one simple reason -- there are people in it. People who are not necessarily of like mind. People who have different priorities, or politics, or styles, people

who can sometimes drive you bananas. Community necessarily entails structures and rules to keep things functioning and fair, hopefully administered with a light and loving touch, but rules nonetheless – which can sometimes lead communities to become places which Heschel would critique as cold and institutional instead of filled with התלהבות, passion and fire. Communities also need to raise funds, as we heard about from Mark and Benjy in regard to our shul's capital campaign – how that fits in with the notion of the community as a place of spiritual uplift is a continual challenge. As a rabbi, I can tell you that finding the balance is very challenging. Heschel himself found that out when some of his political activism, however venerated in hindsight, was not well-received by certain Jewish institutions of his own time.

But he never gave up on community, and nor should we. Allowing ourselves to be claimed by the demands of community is hard, but it gives us so much to be part of something bigger than ourselves, something that includes Jews of generations past, and something that includes people of our own time who are of different ages, different family backgrounds, different abilities and disabilities, different perspectives on politics and religion than our own – all sharing an affinity for this thing we call Judaism. A group of people who feel a sense of obligation to one another rooted in what they share, and not overcome by those areas in which they differ. How cool is that!

Community is not about nostalgia for some mythical past, and it's not about a nationalism or chauvinism that excludes or denigrates others – Lord knows there's far too much of that in our world today. It's about sharing with others something that's really big and really important. And it's about service – giving of oneself to helping make sure that the community thrives. We've got a lot of great people doing amazing communal work at the Narayever – all the time, and especially now that we are redeveloping our building on Brunswick to meet the needs of a 21st century inclusive congregation, an effort that has required a huge amount of volunteer time; there are those doing critically important communal work at other synagogues and also at the UJA and in other types of Jewish organizations as well like Shoresh and Veahavta and Mazon and the schools and camps and so many others. But the truth is, we need a lot *more* people to step up in order for our community to thrive. And my thesis is that despite the talmudic olive tree metaphor, anti-Semitism isn't going to be the motivator that gets us to that goal in any kind of sustained way. And a program of Heschelian spirituality and social activism, however important and wonderful, might engage some but will still leave lots of others on the outside, either looking in or not even that. And while different kinds of things will motivate different people, what I think we need most is to instill a sense of obligation, an "ought".

I wonder if you could take a moment to consider how you would fill in the following sentence: "My Judaism obligates me to _____". Perhaps later, go around the Rosh Hashanah table and let everybody share what they thought of. And if your answer is something along the lines of "be a good person", "be kind", "be honest", "fix the world" – I say, yes, yes, you are absolutely right. Judaism does obligate all of us to do those things, I have a thousand Jewish texts to prove it, and we all fall short in this area and have to work on being better. But, I want to suggest, Judaism also obligates us to do whatever we can to safeguard the Jewish present and future by continually challenging ourselves to also do more recognizably Jewish things, and to take into account in our individual actions and choices, each of which really matters, the interests of klal Yisrael, the Jewish people as a whole. Things like going to shul on Shabbat (you knew I'd say that!), taking an on-line Hebrew class, obtaining a lulav and etrog for Sukkot, giving to the UJA to help support the needy in our own community and in Israel, saying the Shema before bed, planning a trip to Israel, reciting Kiddush on Friday night, factoring in one's Judaism somewhere in one's dating, mating, school, work and place of residence choices, joining a synagogue if you're not already a member. There can be a thousand examples of ways in which we can "thicken" our Jewish identity and connection, none *instead of* "being a nice person" but rather in addition. We all have room to grow in this area as well. Yes, that's a lot of obligations, but -- whoever said Judaism was easy? Without this category of mitzvah – not in the meaning of "good deed" but in the meaning of commandment, we are not so much a community, as a collection of autonomous individuals exercising our right to cobble together a religious life as we see fit -- which is a fine reflection of where our society is in this generation, but pretty detrimental for the goal of building a strong Jewish community. Being a good person is critical, but when goodness is defined by the wider culture in ways only marginally related to traditional Jewish teachings and when it has little connection to any recognizable form of Jewish behaviour², then it is just not enough to sustain our people. You guys get this, I know that because you're here. You're here on a [Monday] morning because of some combination of genuinely liking the experience, and also feeling the Jewish obligation to be in shul on Rosh Hashanah. To the extent that it's the former, I'm delighted, that's what we strive for – to make this a positive and joyful experience. And I'm also asking you to build on and grow the latter, the sense of a Jewish "ought", no matter what your Jewish starting point is, in the coming year of 5780.

One piece of good news from this past year: turns out Canadian Jews might be different, more connected to their ethnic and religious roots than other

² Jack Wertheimer, *The New American Judaism: How Jews Practice their Religion Today*, p.258.

groups, and different from Jews south of the border; there was an important sociological study that came out this year which indicates as much.³ But I am chastened by Heschel not to rely too much on studies, and I know we are subject to the same powerful assimilatory forces as are our cousins in the States. I want to see way more Jews feasting at the extraordinary Jewish smorgasbord with all of its texts and traditions and music and food and communal life and rich history, and also helping to prepare the feast, and clean up after it, and generally take responsibility for it in meaningful ways, than I'm seeing right now. Taking a nibble and then running off won't satisfy you, and won't ensure that the feast will be ready and available next time you or your children might be hungry.

October 27, 2018 – we don't know how posterity will assess the significance of that date. Was Pittsburgh a one-time, exceptional tragedy? Or did it signal *has ve-halila* a new period of sustained Jewish vulnerability? I'm afraid of the latter, and I pray that we find the wisdom to respond appropriately, in ways that keep us feeling safe, and keep the forces of hatred and intolerance at bay. I am grateful to all the good people who are working on the very important challenge of securing our synagogues, schools, and other Jewish institutions, while balancing that goal with the need to keep our communities open and welcoming at the same time. Finding that balance point is a work in progress.

So the full meaning of Oct.27 remains to be seen. As for Nov.3, Solidarity Shabbat, with its outpouring of support and solidarity from within our Jewish community and from our neighbours, I feel more certain – that day was about the shock experienced by members of our community after the horror in Pittsburgh, and the genuine heartfelt sympathy of the vast majority of our neighbours. It affirmed our connection with each other in our shared experience as victims of hate in our own time, our identification with Jews across the ages who have been the victims of anti-Semitism, and our defiance of the haters.

As for November 10, 2018, the Shabbat after Solidarity Shabbat, two weeks after the massacre – as I see it, the meaning of that date, when things got back to normal at my shul and at all the others, is that anti-Semitic attacks, no matter how horrific, might lead to a refinement of our security protocols but are not going to fundamentally alter Jews' behavior, or their relationship to their tradition. Something else is required to generate the olive oil besides crushing the olives, something that will help Jews feel that sense of obligation to the community and tradition, to look at wherever they are on the Jewish path, however close or distant they may feel to community, to

³ Robert Brym and Rhonda Lenton, "2018 Survey of Jews in Canada", Environics Institute

God, to Jewish rituals, to tradition, and resolve to keep walking down that path, keep growing, keep learning, keep contributing, keep doing – because that is their joy, and that is also their obligation. Figuring out what that motivating something is, is my life's work.

This Rosh Hashanah, may the Jewish people in the Diaspora and in Israel find *bitachon*, the feeling of safety and security which is our birthright, and that of all members of society. May we honour the memory of the eleven who were murdered in Pittsburgh, and may we be elevated by these High Holidays to love our Judaism even more as a generative, humane, joyful and life-affirming tradition. Finally, may we be challenged by the holy obligations of our tradition to be the best people and the best Jews we can be.

תכלה שנה וקללותיה תחל שנה וברכותיה

May this year's troubles end and a year of blessing begin.