

Monday Morning in Pittsburgh

November 3, 2018; 25 Heshvan 5779

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom

I did not wake up on Monday with a plan to go to Pittsburgh that day—Even though that is precisely where I found myself three and a half hours after rolling out of bed that morning. The night before I had attended a celebration at the Federation for my dear friend Rabbi Uri Topolosky, who was being honored by his shul on his fifth anniversary as their rabbi. The keynote speaker was the famous Jewish activist Rabbi Avi Weiss. Rabbi Weiss was the voice of the Soviet Jewry movement; the leader of the effort to close the Carmelite monastery at Auschwitz; he was at Bittburg in 1985 protesting President Reagan’s laying of a wreath at an SS cemetery; and he was arrested for sitting in the middle of First Avenue in Manhattan when Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to town. His legendary activism has brought him to every corner of the world in support of the Jewish people and the State of Israel. He is also the leader of the maverick Open Orthodox movement, and the founder of both Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and Yeshivat Maharat, for the training of women to be spiritual leaders in the Orthodox community.

Very early on Monday morning I got a text from another local colleague that Rabbi Weiss wanted to go to Pittsburgh, and did I want to go too. Like I said, it took me about ten minutes to jump in the shower, throw some clothes on, grab a few Cliff bars, and head out the door. Not only was I going, it turns out, I was *driving*...with Avi Weiss in the passenger seat; Rabbi Topolosky, who is also the current president of the Washington Board of Rabbis, and Rabbi Dan Braune Freidman, the Director of Pastoral Care at the Charles E. Smith Life Communities in the back seat. As I got onto I-270 heading north, I said to my three rabbinic colleagues, what address should I put into Waze? What’s our destination? Rabbi Weiss gently said, “Just drive toward Pittsburgh; we’ll figure it out along the way.” Throughout those 3.5 hours each of us worked our phones, attempting to make contact with people we knew in Pittsburgh. We wanted to go to simply be with the people there...to offer our pastoral presence, our love, our solidarity. We decided the best place to start was at the Tree of Life Synagogue itself, the site where eleven Jews were gunned down in their sanctuary as they gathered together for Shabbat. After the first recorded act of murder in the Bible, the killing of Abel by his brother Cain, God says *kol d’mei*

achicha tzoakim eilay min-ha'adamah... your brother's bloods cry out to me from the earth.¹ Not blood...but the bloods [*d'mei achicha*]. It was as if we heard the bloods of our brothers and sisters crying out to us from that place, summoning us there, to a synagogue that had turned into a crime scene. A shul that was surrounded by yellow police tape; where throngs of FBI agents went in and out several times. At one point the *sefer Torah* was removed from the building. Even the Torah was taken into custody after this heinous crime. The shooter blasted the *aron ha'kodesh*, the holy ark with a spray of bullets. A police officer standing nearby told me that the holy scroll was not damaged, but would be considered evidence, scoured for gunshot residue, blood, and other possible clues.

It was unseasonably cold in Pittsburgh on Monday. The temperatures were in the 40's and there was chilly breeze blowing when we parked the car and walked to the corner of Shady and Wilkins Avenues. On one side of the street were a line of press tents and cameras...CNN, all the major networks, the foreign press. On the other side, bouquets of flowers, homemade cards and balloons; a line eleven tall, blue yartzheit candles; one placard featured the famous Pittsburgh steel mark logo, but instead of the yellow four-pointed star there was a yellow six-pointed star in its place. Several people have asked me, "What did you do there?" Well, I'll tell you, we just walked up to people and began speaking with them. 'My name is Adam Raskin, I'm a rabbi from the Washington, D.C. area, and I drove in this morning to be here with you and to remind you that you're not alone; that we are all connected by this tragedy.' After that brief intro, person after person began to share stories with me about their connections to Tree of Life, or to the victims of the massacre. One person told me about how Jerry Rabinowitz was her family doctor, and what a genuinely kind and wonderful man he was. Another told me that she was tutoring a child in the house across the street when she heard the shots ring out and the blare of sirens that followed. She still can't get those sounds out of her head. Another girl told me how she came home from her college campus when she heard about the shooting because she just needed to be back in her tight-knit community. An older man named Judah, a Holocaust survivor, said he was delayed getting to shul that morning because he got caught up in conversation with someone; had he been arrived on time though, he almost certainly would have been among the dead.

¹ Genesis 4:10

Then there were the others...people who had no direct connection to the victims but who felt inextricably drawn to that place. Like Sister Julie, a blond haired Catholic nun in blue jeans and windbreaker with a button that said "Nuns Against Guns," who just happened to be driving from her home in Philadelphia to a conference in Cleveland, and said she had to come and pray at this site. There was Matt, a recovering drug addict with tattoos all over his body including the word "Lord" inscribed across his throat, who just stood there quietly, paying his respects. He confessed: "Rabbi, I promise all my tattoos are of a *religious* nature." There was bearded man who showed up with a set of bag pipes, and said that God told him to go to the synagogue and play Amazing Grace. He did, right there on the street corner, and it was amazing! A Baptist pastor from Altoona drove in, as did a team from the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. A caravan of girls from the nearby yeshiva showed up...probably over a hundred of them, siddurim in hand. They chanted Psalms with such spirit and fervor. Soon after they left, a heard of boys from the Chabad day school came and davened mincha, right there in the cross walk. Bill Peduto, the Mayor of Pittsburgh, arrived just in time for *Ashrei!* The mayor offered words of condolence and reassurance that the Jewish community would be safe and that his police force was dedicated to protecting synagogues and Jewish schools. After that Rabbi Weiss pronounced the most beautiful, extemporaneous blessing upon the police officers gathered around the mayor, who risk their lives for the protection of the innocent. As the policemen bowed their heads, I saw many getting choked up and nodding in affirmation.

One of my colleagues found out that a vigil was taking place on the campus of Carnegie Mellon University, and we decided to head over there to see what support we could give to that gathering. We entered the massive hall, packed with students and faculty just as the president of the university Farnam Jahaniam rose to speak. The Iranian born president, a world renowned computer scientist and leader in higher education, first dabbed his forehead, and then his eyes as he began to weep openly before this learned university community, declaring that the attack on the Tree of Life synagogue was an attack on all of us. I was overwhelmed by how vulnerable and emotional he allowed himself to become. I had the opportunity to meet him afterward, and I told him that he was so real, so human, so accessible in his remarks. The Carnegie Mellon community was mourning in particular for Joyce Fienberg one of the 11 victims of the shooting, whose late husband Stephen taught statistics there for 36 years. The Fienbergs were known to welcome students in to their home, feed them, care for them, and treat them like family. We

spent time talking with students and faculty for a while after the vigil had ended. I met one student who lives in a Moishe House near campus. Moishe Houses are like community homes for Jews in their 20's. There are over a hundred of these houses in 25 countries. This young woman, however, expressed to me her fear that because her house is a Jewish residence, that she and her roommates were unsafe, and potentially a target. While there was a sense of resilience and strength, the fear created by this attack was also palpable.

After davvening ma'ariv at a nearby Conservative shul that had become a place of refuge for the community, we headed over to a condominium building where we heard there was a woman working at the front desk who lost two brothers-in-law and a sister-in-law from two different marriages in that shooting. We walked in, the four of us, and told her we had heard about her losses and just came to comfort her. As we all held hands and sang the Shema, right there in the lobby, people gathered with us...people entering the building, people coming off of elevators, people who came downstairs to pick up their mail. Before we knew it, we were a circle of people, not all Jews, holding hands, singing and praying together. It's a miracle that we made it home that night, at around 1:45 in the morning. It was an emotionally and physically exhausting experience. And while I regretted not being at Adas Israel vigil, I felt that providing direct pastoral support to people in Pittsburgh was where I personally needed to be.

The parasha this morning describes Abraham's deep sorrow at the passing of his beloved wife Sarah. The Torah says *vayavo Avraham lispod le'Sarah ve'livkotah...* Abraham came to eulogize Sarah and to weep for her.² I find the order here to be profound. First he speaks about her, gives a eulogy, reflects about her life, then he breaks down and cries. Friends, I have to tell you that as a rabbi I am very moved by the lifecycle events I am privileged to share with you, including the funerals. I try hard to hold it together for the eulogy and the interment, but often that means that afterwards...in my car on the way home, in the confines of my office, or in some other private place, I shed plenty of my own tears. I have been talking about Pittsburgh, writing about it, posting about it, sharing stories about it all week. But it wasn't until Friday that my eulogizing, if you will, turned into weeping. I was invited to the All Soul's Day service at St. Francis International School, a Catholic K-8 school in Silver Spring, run by the Franciscan Friars. They asked me to come, say a few words, and recites a prayer. All Soul's Day on

² Genesis 23:2

November 2nd is preceded by all All Saint's Day on November first, and its vigil the night before, is Halloween. So for those who say that Halloween is a totally secular holiday, you haven't been to a Catholic Church lately. On All Soul's Day, the congregation prays for all their deceased relatives. I walked into the sanctuary and saw on the steps beneath the altar, picture frames of deceased relatives, surrounded by flickering votive candles. Then, a parade of children in their parochial school uniforms approached the altar carrying frames in their hands.

Alongside their own family members they placed photographs of the eleven Jews who were gunned down in Pittsburgh. After that, another line of children placed not flowers or wreaths, or crosses or rosaries, but stones, as is *our* custom, beside each of the pictures. The principal told me that he had collected those stones along the path between Auschwitz and Birkenau, when he participated with other Catholic educators on the March of the Living. Then the children's choir began to sing:

Let me be an instrument of your peace...

And I lost it. After a whole week of processing this experience verbally and in writing, it was on Friday in a Catholic Church among a group of children, many of whom may never have met a Jew before, that finally opened the floodgates for me.

Rabbi Weiss kept saying throughout the day in Pittsburgh, "Just as hate knows no bounds, so too love knows no bounds." How true is that statement. It is impossible to fathom the hatred of someone who barges into a synagogue and mows down bubbies and zaidies, grandmas and grandpas; elderly people and retirees. But it is also incredible to fathom the outpouring of love, support, and solidarity that has enveloped the Jewish community in Pittsburgh and beyond. *Just as hate knows no bounds, so too love knows no bounds.*

And let us remember today that we are linked in tragedy with the members of Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston—whose pastor flew to Pittsburgh to spend Shabbat with the Rabbi of Tree of Life; we are linked with the fallen of First Baptist Church in Southerland Springs, TX; with the victims of the shooting at Kroger in Louisville, KY just this past week; with the murdered at the Pulse Night Club in Orlando. We are one with the members of the Sikh Temple in Oak Creek, WI and with the Islamic Cultural Center in Quebec City. Wherever hate, bigotry, anti-Semitism, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia has turned violent and deadly, we share that pain, that loss, that suffering.

And with every American who is disgusted by the increase of hateful rhetoric and violence that has been bubbling up to the surface in our country; with every American who is distraught over the scourge of gun violence in our communities, our schools, and our houses of worship; every American who believes that words do matter, that language does affect behavior, that the way we speak to and about each other does have very real ramifications, we must say loud and clear that we expect better from our leaders; we demand a higher code of conduct for those who presume to represent us or to lead us; the America that we love does not demonize difference or stoke stereotypes about others. They may think they're not responsible or that they're off the hook or that you can't possibly attribute the deep divisions in our country to political rhetoric or sound bytes...but we know better. And we should not stand for it.

Instead...let us proclaim the words we sang earlier: *Olam chesed yibaneh*...We want to build a world of lovingkindness. And we are in search of fellow builders! We extend our hand in partnership with anyone who wants to be "an instrument of peace." It may be true what the Haggadah states, *she'bechol dor va'dor omdim aleinu lechaloteinu*, that in every generation some wicked force rises up to kills us. But today I know that the Jewish people are not alone in this country or in this world. I have felt the power of love and solidarity from far and wide. And while my heart is still broken because of our losses, it is also swelling because I know I am not alone; I know that *we* are not alone.