Do Something

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Shanah Tova

It has been almost a full year since a shooter entered the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. It has been almost four full seasons since

- Joyce Fienberg, 75
- Richard Gottfried, 65
- Rose Mallinger, 97
- Jerry Rabinowitz, 66
- Cecil Rosenthal, 59
- David Rosenthal, 54
- Bernice Simon, 84
- Sylvan Simon, 86
- Daniel Stein, 71
- Melvin Wax, 88
- and
- Irving Younger, 69 Zichronam Livrachah -

lost their lives simply because they were praying in a synagogue.

In the wake of that horror, thanks to the leadership of Rabbi Marx, Amy Abrams, and immediate past president Dave Simon, in cooperation with our entire Beth Or staff, board, and congregation, we responded to hate in such a profound way. Our gathering here last October sticks in my mind as one of THE best examples of the power of community that I’ve ever personally witnessed.

So much of that evening has stuck with me ever since. The moving words spoken that night remain forever in my heart. The image of a thousand people gathered together in solidarity is forever etched in my mind. But in my gut - in the pit of my stomach - there has remained a different kind of feeling. It is a sense of uneasiness, of despair, of fear, and of emptiness. After the words shared on that October evening calmed me, and after the images of solidarity consoled me, I went home and wondered, now what?
What had we **solved** by coming together that night?

I want to be crystal clear - our gathering together in the aftermath of the Pittsburgh Shooting was **necessary**, **important**, and **healing**. But when we got beyond the important steps of mourning and comfort, I couldn’t help but ask myself, now that we’ve cried and hugged and united, what is it that we have **done**?

All throughout 5779 I have asked myself, what actions have I taken in the aftermath of the horror of Pittsburgh to make sure that this doesn’t happen again? It doesn’t take much reflection on my year to arrive at the following answer: **“I have not done enough.”**

Because it **has** happened again. It happened again in a synagogue in Poway, and again outside a synagogue in Miami. There have been attacks on Jews in Brooklyn, in Paris, in Buenos Aires. All of this happened **just this year**, and all of this was only in the Jewish community.

We saw the mass shootings in El Paso and Dayton this year. And as we were reminded by a phenomenal panel put on by Beth Or’s Social Justice Committee, we don’t even need to look to the headlines of mass shootings or hate crimes. All we need to do is drive a few miles down the road. Gun violence is a health epidemic that rears its ugly head in America every single day, including right here in our city of Philadelphia. It happens with such regularity that much of it goes unreported. **We** might not see it, but people like Dr. Amy Goldberg, Surgeon-in-Chief at Temple University Health System sees the aftermath every single day. As she so poignantly said in our panel discussion, “there are journalists covering wars overseas, there are reporters covering the mass shootings, but no one is covering my war.”

On this Rosh Hashanah, as I stand here before **all of you**, as I stand here before the **Holy Ark** with our sacred Torah scrolls within, and as our tradition tells us, I stand before the open **gates of the heavens**, I am feeling that same gut-wrenching feeling I felt after our gathering last October.

I look up and imagine the open gates of the heavens.

I look down and realize I have stood idly by - I have stood idly by the blood of my neighbor.
I think that this issue of gun violence resonates the most with me because of what we’ve seen in synagogues – my place of work, and in schools – institutions where I will send my children for the next two decades.

But as we all know, there are so many issues facing our world. It’s our relationship with our cell phones and technology, it’s the state of our fragile planet earth, it’s our politics, it’s poverty, it’s people in cages, it’s our youth who are reporting increased feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression.

It’s our relationships with one another, it’s our relationship with the Divine, it’s how we talk to each other in person, it’s how we talk with one another in virtual spaces.

I am busy. The daily demands on my time are seemingly endless. But today I am asking myself, if this laundry list of issues doesn’t inspire me to act, what will?

Jewish commentators throughout the ages have wondered about the words “Lech Lecha” – God’s call of action to Abraham. What was that “Lech Lecha” moment like? What inspired Abraham to take action?

Genesis Rabbah relates the following story:

“Rabbi Yitzchak said: [Abraham’s Lech Lecha moment] may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a bira doleket/a castle aglow.

The man said, ”Is it possible that this castle lacks a person to look after it?”

In that moment, the owner of the building looked out and said, “I am the owner of the castle!”

Rabbi Yitzhak continues: ”Similarly, because Abraham our father said, “Is it possible that this castle has no guide, no one to look after it?” The Holy Blessed One looked out and said to Abraham, “I am the Master of the Universe.” … Hence, God said to Abraham, Lech Lecha.”

What made Abraham go forth, according to Rabbi Yitzchak? It was the Bira Doleket. The Castle Aglow. And in fact, the whole Midrash hangs on these two words.

Because the words “Bira Doleket” allow for interpretation regarding the source of the light. It could simply mean that the castle is lit up, or it could mean that the castle is in flames.

The text, like any good story, is ambiguous. When I read the text, I see the castle spewing white-hot flames. So reading this text spurs within me that all too familiar gut-wrenching feeling.
If the building is on fire, and the Master of the House calmly says, “I am the master of this place” I immediately worry for his wellbeing.

If our traveler encounters a burning building and asks “who owns the place?” instead of “where is the closest bucket of water?” that worries me too.

Rabbi Yitzhak ends the parable by saying that Abraham, looked at our world as a Bira Doleket. And upon learning that there was a Master of the castle, Abraham went forth. He took action. He did something.

A central theme of these High Holy Days is the book of life. Our tradition asserts that God has an open book, and spends the next 10 days between tonight - Rosh Hashanah, and the very end of Yom Kippur, tabulating our good deeds and bad deeds. But this year, I am less worried about my good deed to bad deed ratio.

This year I am imagining a different version of the book of life. This one is not a huge book with nearly 7 billion pages – one for each person on earth. In this book, rather, I find the broad strokes of history. Not the daily acts of kindness that I know each of us do – offering a smile, holding the door, caring for those in need. These small acts are for the other book. In this Book of Life, it is only the actions that help pour water onto the flames of our burning castle grace these pages.

I fear that in this book, my page is blank. I fear that I have not made enough of an impact.

This year – 5780 – feels to me like a time that requires big action to help our world. And I fear that this is how we will be judged this year. Not on the small and random acts of kindness that are of course so necessary. But rather we will be judged on how we respond to the big issues of our day.

That is the book of life that instills in me yir’at shamayim – the fear or the awe of the heavens.

My blank page in that Book of Life is asking me – challenging me - to answer the call of history.

I think about this as an individual – what personal legacy do I want to leave on this earth? I think about it as a member of the Jewish People – what gift, on top of the mounds of
gifts our People has already given to this world, do we, this generation of Jews, want to leave to our world?

And as an American? How will we make the most of the gifts given to us by those who declared independence and all those who have served our country – the soldiers and the teachers, the leaders and the dreamers, the innovators and the scientists who have gifted us Life, Liberty, and sacrificed some, or all, of their happiness so that we could pursue ours? We American Jews, we Jewish Americans, are the inheritors of gifts given to us by those who filled the pages of the grandest Book of Life. What will we write on our pages? What kind of world will we leave for our children?

While writing this sermon, I rewatched Climate Activist Greta Thunberg’s 2018 Ted Talk. And frankly, when I wrote this sermon over the summer, I had no idea she would make the splash she has in our news cycle. The then 15-year-old Thunberg said the following to the room full of adults: “If I live to be 100, I will be alive in the year 2103. When you think about the future today you don’t think about beyond the year 2050. By then, I will, in the best case, not even have lived half of my life. What happens next? The year 2078 I will celebrate my 75th birthday.”

Thunberg continues, “If I have children or grandchildren maybe they will spend that day with me. Maybe they will ask me about you – the people around in 2018. Maybe they will ask why you didn’t do anything while there still was time to act. What we do or don’t do right now will affect my entire life and the lives of my children and grandchildren. What we do or don’t do right now, me and my generation can’t undo in the future.”

These powerful words from Greta Thunberg’s talk could be about anything and I think they would still ring true. She is telling us that our actions matter, regardless of the issue we might be discussing.

I know that all of us see the big issues of today from many different perspectives. I know that all of us see different paths to solutions. And so I reemphasize – the Book of Life I imagine is blank. I don’t see the book of life asking us to do a particular thing about a particular issue. Rather, I see the book of life asking us, demanding of us, to do something.
This is a tall order. But we, the Jewish People, our friends and families, have History on our side. The Jewish People have always answered the call of History in a big way. The Jewish People have, and continue to, make our impact on the world.

In perhaps one of History’s greatest ironies, the earliest reference to Israel outside of the Hebrew Bible, tells of its destruction. Dating back to approximately 1230 BCE, the hieroglyphics on the Merneptah Stela – an ancient record of the Pharaoh Merneptah’s history, tells the tale of the Pharaoh Merneptah’s conquests throughout Africa and the Middle East. Lines 26-27 read,

“The Canaan has been plundered into every sort of woe:
Ashkelon has been overcome;
Gezer has been captured;
Yano’am is made non-existent.
Israel is laid waste and his seed is not;
Huru is become a widow because of Egypt”

Israel’s introduction to the world, via Pharaoh Merneptah’s history, was the tale of its utter destruction.

And here I am, one of the People of Israel, over three thousand years later, delivering a High Holiday sermon in which I footnote the Pharaoh Merneptah – the king who supposedly conquered Israel, whose seed is not.

The fact that we are still here - the fact that we the Children of Israel have given so much to our world to make it a better place in the thousands of years after this ironic “shout out” from King Merneptah, gives me great hope that we too – this generation - will make our mark on the pages of the Book of Life for good.

So where do we start? And what should we do?

I recognize that this is the moment in my sermon where things could get very divisive. I recognize that this is the moment when I could give you a list of Jewish rituals to do, petitions to sign, calls to make, groups to join. But I’m not going to do that.

Because I have faith.

I have faith in Democracy – that all voices – within reason – should be heard, and that the good ideas and the best actions will rise to the top. I believe that stupid slogans like
“Jews will not replace us” and “It’s all about the Benjamins” will be tossed onto the trash heap of History where they belong, alongside King Merneptah’s ridiculous claim.

I also believe in Jewish tradition - I take pride in the fact that our Talmud bravely records the minority opinions with the majority opinions, and it even records the stories of people who were considered heretics. I believe that this was done all with the faith that future generations would glean meaning and inspiration from all that was preserved and move forward bravely. I think that History has validated the faith of our ancestors.

So tonight I suggest no specific action. Instead I simply want to highlight that our tradition demands of us that we do something.

“U’Tshuva, U’Tfilah, U’Tzedakah – ma’avirin et Ro’ah HaGzeirah.”

“And repentence, and prayer, and justice, will avert the harsh decree.”

I SEE THIS AS OUR JEWISH CALL TO ACTION

Tshuvah - returning to ourselves and finding what matters most to us,
Tfilah - meditating on, and contemplating all those things that matter to you
Tzedakah - choosing a cause and doing something to make our world more just.

If we use all three of these tools, we will be on a path towards action. We will be on a path towards fixing that which needs to be fixed – whatever that may be for us.

And lastly, it will fulfill that which our liturgy promises: Ma’avirin et ro’ah haGzeira: It will ameliorate the harsh decree.”

But there is one final question worth asking regarding this second half of the liturgy. I personally do not believe in a literal divine reward and punishment system within Judaism. I don’t believe that those of us who get sick or have misfortune are being punished by God. So then what is the decree we speak of in the liturgy? What is our motivator to act? Why should we do anything at all?

Each of us needs to find that thing which motivates us. For me, I catch a glimpse of the harsh decree every day.

This summer, I had the pleasure of playing softball with our Beth Or Red team. The weeknight games often meant that I arrived home after my children’s bedtime. Missing bedtime with the kids is a tough one for me. But I head out to the field for my own piece of mind, and I do it to show my kids that parents need playtime too. Without fail, each morning
after a game, my four and a half year old son Mark wakes me by jumping on my back. He puts his face a few inches from mine and asks,

“Dad, did you win last night?”

“Yes, Mark, we won last night.”

“How did you do?”

“I played well, Mark. Should we go brush our teeth?”

“Sounds good.” He says. And so the day begins.

But I know that one day, God willing, my children Mark and Sophie will grow and learn. And they will see the world in ways that you and I cannot.

And one day, I will wake up from the rush and the fog of diapers and parent - teacher conferences and one day SAT’s and college admissions. And I’ll rub my eyes as I awaken, asking myself how my children have grown up so fast.

And I imagine that they will wake me up once again but this time not from my slumber. They won’t be asking about softball. They won’t be asking “How did you do.” Instead they will ask,

“What did you do?”

What did you do, Dad, when you saw the Bira Doleket? When you saw the Castle Aglow?

What did you do when you saw the world ablaze?

I pray I’ll have an answer to the question. I pray we’ll all have an answer to the question. I pray it’s an answer we will all be proud of.

Shanah Tovah.