

## Solidarity Shabbat in Memory of the Victims in Pittsburgh

November 3, 2018

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There are certain events that are so important that you remember exactly where you were when you heard the news. I will always remember the spot – right there, during the Torah procession – where I heard about the unfolding massacre last Shabbat in Pittsburgh. My parents talk about the day President Kennedy was shot. I think back to November 4, 1995.

I was a college student at Michigan, and it was Saturday afternoon; so I was doing what almost every other student was doing. I was watching Michigan lose to Michigan State in East Lansing. The news broke between the third and fourth quarters: “Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin has been shot.” He had appeared at a huge peace rally in what was then Kings Square in Tel Aviv; the space was subsequently named Rabin Square. Inside his breast pocket was the blood-stained songsheet from the evening: [“Shir LaShalom, A Song for Peace.”](#)

When it comes to Israel, every generation has its moment. For my grandparents, it was May 14, 1948, hearing David Ben Gurion’s declaration of Israeli statehood just a few hours before Shabbat, and a few years after the Holocaust. It seemed like a miracle.

For my parents, it was June 7, 1967, the third day of the Six Day War, hearing Colonel Motta Gur announce: “*Har Habayit b’yadenu*, The Temple Mount is in our hands.” This was not part of the original war plan. My mother, who still lived in Jerusalem, remembers entering the Old City, which for 19 years had been on the other side of a double-barbed wire border fence, and dancing at the Western Wall. Four days later the war would end and, along with it, the feeling that the Jewish state was perpetually vulnerable. That generation defines its connection to Israel around the elation of that moment.

My moment was November 4, 1995. I remember the hope surrounding Rabin’s ascendancy in the Labor Party. Such promise! An Israeli military hero who commanded troops in the War of Independence and the Six Day War now wanted to become a soldier for peace, promising dialogue with the Palestinians.

That speech in the Rose Garden, in front of Yasser Arafat and Bill Clinton, still plays in my head: **“We say to you today in a loud and clear voice: Enough of blood and tears. Enough. We are today giving peace a chance and again saying to you in a clear voice: Enough.”**

Those were hopeful times, but they weren’t easy. I was in Israel, leading a USY teen tour, in the summer of 1995. On one Friday afternoon, I was walking near downtown and I came to Paris Square – those who have been to Jerusalem know it as the area across from the Conservative Center, about a

block from the Prime Minister's residence. On that afternoon, there was a huge rally. There had been a bus bombing a few days earlier in Ramat Gan. Rabin was pressing ahead with the peace process, and his opponents were angry. There were posters with the Prime Minister dressed in Nazi garb or sporting a Hitler-style moustache. Angry chants. Harsh rhetoric. It was a little scary.

Months later, special commissions would report on the consequences of the angry and, at times, irresponsible rhetoric. The politicians didn't pull the trigger, the reports concluded, but they helped to foment the anger; they helped to sustain an environment where Yigal Amir could imagine to himself that it was actually a *mitzvah* to assassinate the prime minister. And that's what he did, just after Shabbat in Israel and during Shabbat here, on November 4, 1995.

And the bullet pierced more than the prime minister's vital organs. Gone was our sense of security; gone was the feeling that this could never happen; gone were the hopes and dreams of a generation. In the special services that followed throughout the community, everyone was asking the same questions: What is going to happen next? Is this the end of the peace process? Are the forces of hatred going to win? And those questions still linger.

The events of last Saturday at Tree of Life in Pittsburgh have brought up similar questions. On Tuesday, as part of our community gathering of prayer and solidarity, we passed the microphone. An older member asked: What is going to happen to us? We've been through this before, and it wasn't good. The days when Jews were powerless, the ultimate Other; those days are over; we are supposed to be safe. What are we going to do, more than one person asked, to curb the rise of antisemitism? How can we protect ourselves from things we dub unimaginable? These are the questions of the moment.

Personally, I am not scared for my life. I am not scared for my children's lives. But I am scared for my country. I am scared about the polarization. I am scared of the rhetoric that normalizes hate. I am scared for the future as I wait for that courageous political leader to plagiarize Yitzhak Rabin: "Enough of blood and tears. Enough." Enough of the pipe bombs. Enough of the shootings. Enough of the division between "us" and "them."

- When you hear the chants in Charlottesville, "The Jews will not replace us!" ...
- When you hear the fearmongering about "rootless cosmopolitans," "globalists," terms that have histories in anti-Semitic circles dating back at least to the 1920s ...
- When you hear dehumanizing terms like "horseface" or "dog" or "goofy" or "Miss Piggy" used to describe those who disagree with you ...

Words don't pull triggers, but they do legitimize hate. And this week, more than ever, we need to proclaim through our words and our deeds that *love* is stronger than hate. We have to examine our national discourse. We have to ask our leaders, we have to ask ourselves: Are we communicating what needs to be said? Are we hearing the messages we are supposed to hear? And if the answer is "no," then what we are going to do about it?

Of course we have to vote. And we also have to give; the traditional term is "*b'ad hazkarat nishmoteihem*, for the sake of the memories of their souls." The [Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh](#)

has set up a fund for victims of terror, which is listed in your Shabbat program. The [Anti-Defamation League](#) has long been a leading voice in fighting hate, antisemitism, and discrimination of all forms. [HIAS](#) caught the attention of bigots like the Pittsburgh shooter because of its assertion that “we used to settle refugees because they were Jewish; and now we settle refugees because we were Jewish.” We must respond to hatred with acts of kindness and love.

Today’s Torah portion, which describes death but is called Life, Haye Sarah, concludes: “When Abraham breathed his last, dying at a ripe age, old and contented, and he was gathered to his in, his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah.” How beautiful it must have been; these two brothers, separated since childhood, coming together to bury their dead and comfort one another. That’s what communities do.

How beautiful it was on Monday evening at Adas Israel – 5,000 people gathered, among them political leaders, faith leaders, black, white, brown, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh – bringing love, consolation, and comfort.

- I find strength in the notes of support I’ve received from colleagues in the clergy.
- I find strength in the little acts of kindness, like the Muslim community that raised more than \$120,000 to support Jews in Pittsburgh.
- I find strength in being together to celebrate two *b’nai mitzvah*, in solidarity, overshadowing the tumultuous days of the past week with the warmth and camaraderie of Shabbat.

I hear in the back of my mind the consoling words, the ode to friendship and peace in President Clinton’s broken Hebrew: “*Shalom Haver.*” “*Oseh shalom bimromav, hu ya-aseh shalom, aleinu v’al kol yisrael v’imru amen.*”

And I pray for the victims. I pray for the families. I pray for our nation. I pray for the Jewish people with the words from that blood-stained song-sheet:

*al tagidu yom yavo / havi'u et hayom! / ki lo khalom hu. / uvekhol hakikarot, / hari'u  
lashalom!*

Don't say the day will come, / Bring the day about! / For it is not a dream. / And in all  
the city squares, / Cheer for peace!

Shabbat shalom.