

**After Pittsburgh, What's Changed?
And What Hasn't?
Solidarity Shabbat
Parashat Hayyei Sarah
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Rabbi Carl M. Perkins
Temple Aliyah, Needham**

Two weeks ago, we had a distinguished guest in shul: Jerry Rubin, the Executive Director of Jewish Vocational Service (JVS), who has spent much of his professional career helping to resettle refugees in this country. It was National Refugee Shabbat, an effort organized by HIAS, the Jewish community's immigration aid society, to make people aware of the worldwide refugee crisis, the role that organizations like HIAS or our own local JVS have played, and what we might do if we want to be of help.

We were one of hundreds of synagogues that participated in this effort.

Then, just last week, one of those synagogues, Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh, was attacked by a well-armed gunman, who had previously posted that he was concerned that “the Jews” -- in particular, Jews like “billionaire George Soros” -- were conspiring to destroy our country. In the resulting carnage, eleven people were killed and a half dozen were wounded -- including six police officers who entered the synagogue to neutralize the attacker. All this past week, funerals for the victims have been held. The last of them, the funeral of 97-year-old Rose Mallinger, known to her circle of friends and admirers as “Bubby”, a Yiddish term of endearment for “Grandma,” took place yesterday. And today is Shabbat, the day of rest.

It's the Shabbat of *shiva*. Every *shiva*, except those terminated by a holiday, lasts for seven days. And every seven-day period contains a Shabbat. So every *shiva* contains a Shabbat. The Shabbat of a *shiva* is different from the other days of *shiva*. You're in mourning -- but you don't show it. No outward displays of mourning are permitted. So, if you go to synagogue, and someone (not knowing you are a mourner) offers you an *aliyah* to the Torah—which is somewhat incompatible with the mood of mourning -- you must accept it. You can't demonstrate, through your behavior, that you're a mourner.



That's fortunate, for in a sense *we're all mourners today*: those of us who are Jewish, and those of us who are not Jewish.

How can we not be?

After all, it was just one week ago that a man that previously none of us had heard of, Robert Bowers, posted on social media that he couldn't "sit by and watch his people get slaughtered."

He had been led to believe that Jews were destroying American society through their embrace of refugees and so-called immigrant "invaders." He singled out HIAS, the organization that sponsored Refugee Shabbat. "HIAS likes to bring invaders that kill our people," he wrote.

Think about that: If you believed, if you truly believed that HIAS and the Jewish community were engaged in a conspiracy to "bring [in] invaders that destroy our people," you might feel riled up, too. You might feel drawn to take desperate measures, too.

This kind of talk -- that is, depicting Jews as part of a nefarious, international conspiracy -- is nothing new.

Already a century ago, anti-Semitism was a key component of nativist thinking in this country. And one of the rumors circulating then was that Jews were set on controlling U.S. immigration policy.

But that was then.

How is that in our country, in the second decade of the 21st century, in a world in which we can communicate extraordinarily rapidly, in which we can check facts and refute rumors at a click of the mouse, we've come to the point where malicious rumors can be spread with impunity, and people can be led to believe the worst outrageous lies?

How can it be that people will pay money -- that people *do* pay money -- to hear "performance artists" -- glib charlatans who peddle untruths to entertain? How can it be that it is *entertaining* to throw around dangerous, hurtful, false rumors?

ANTI-SEMITISM IS NOT NEW. Anti-Semitism has been around, of course, for thousands of years. And even *American* anti-Semitism is not new.

Let's remember our origins: It was in 1654 that 23 "bedraggled Jewish refugees" first arrived in New York harbor from Brazil. Peter Stuyvesant, the Dutch Governor of the colony tried to keep them out. The Jews, he claimed, were "deceitful," "very repugnant," and "hateful enemies and blasphemers." He tried to get permission to evict them, lest they "infect and trouble this new colony." But his request was refused. They were permitted to remain in New Netherland, provided that "the poor among them shall not become a burden to the community, but be supported by their own nation." (Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History*)

And certainly in the centuries since then, there has continued to be anti-Semitism. In the 1930s, Father Coughlin broadcast weekly anti-Semitic diatribes to 30 million listeners. Also in the 1930s, the German-American Bund was founded, which excoriated Jews as part of a vast international conspiracy. And the "America First Committee" established in 1940, at one time claimed 15 million supporters. (Were it not for the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, who knows what would have happened?) Now, it is true that World War II diminished the intensity of American anti-Semitism somewhat, as a half million Jews served in the U.S. Armed Forces. But all you need to do is to read *Gentleman's Agreement*, the 1947 novel by Laura Hobson, about a journalist who pretends to be Jewish to see what it's like—or see the award-winning film of the same name starring Gregory Peck—and it becomes clear that anti-Semitism hadn't disappeared. We were always seen as "other," at least by some. And that has never gone away.

There's a message in that observation: *Last week's attack is not just an isolated event.* We shouldn't just relate to this as a security concern, to be dealt with with armed guards and locked doors. These efforts are important—in fact they're critical—but they're not enough. We have to recognize that the crime that took place last Shabbat is part of a broader phenomenon. A way of thinking that always has been and remains very threatening. A way of thinking about Jews—for that matter, other strangers—and acting on that thinking -- that is toxic.

It's coincidental, isn't it, that today we read of our ancestor, Abraham, in a Torah portion that emphasizes the motif of "the vulnerabilities of newcomers to town," as my colleague and friend, Rabbi Daniel Nevins of the Jewish Theological Seminary, puts it. The theme is "announced" by Abraham with his first words in our portion: "*ger v'toshav anochi imachem*": "I am a stranger; a resident living among you." In essence, Abraham is the father of all immigrants. He is vulnerable. He has to humble himself and pay top dollar to improve his status from tenant to owner.

And the theme of the vulnerable stranger continues to be expressed in our *parashah* with the story of finding a wife for Isaac. What is the tip-off that confirms that Rebecca is “The One?” *She’s compassionate to the stranger*. And from this we learn that *we must be as well*. Later on in the Torah, we’re actually *commanded*, in language that alludes to the story of Abraham, to be compassionate to strangers:

We mustn’t exploit them.

Instead we must help them.

We can’t charge them interest on their debts.

Instead, we must “strengthen” them.

The Biblical tradition of reaching out to and welcoming the vulnerable stranger -- this too is part of the American story, and part of the American *Jewish* story.

Not too far away from us is the colonial city of Newport, Rhode Island. And in the city of Newport is the oldest synagogue building still standing in the U.S. (It was built in 1763.) On August 17, 1790, George Washington visited that synagogue; four days later, he wrote a letter thanking the synagogue’s warden for his hospitality. In it, he wrote:

“The government of the U. S. ... gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.

“May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants; while everyone shall sit safely under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.”

That’s a wonderful dream-like image, isn’t it -- each one of us sitting under our own tree, unafraid? With those words, Washington was quoting the prophet Micah (4:4). The very next line in that passage from Micah is also worth quoting: “*All the nations may walk in the name of their gods; but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever.*” In a sense, you could say that that verse expresses a kind of religious tolerance, a pluralistic vision that is also part of the American story, an *essential* part of the American story, embodied in the Bill of Rights and in the many legal protections we Jews have enjoyed in this country over the years, and embodied in other ways as well.

During the past week, people have been gathering all across America. People have wanted to do something, to express their revulsion at the attack and their sympathy with its victims. Some have chosen to write letters to the community. I want to read to you an excerpt from a letter by one child, that came to me via Facebook:

Dear Tree of Life,

...I am in 4th grade. I am very mad and very sad. And if anyone is reading this, I just want to say I will honor and pray for those who got injured or died or helped. America was created for religious freedom. And when something like this happens we need to make the good voice louder than the bad voice.

That letter reads as though its author imbibed George Washington's sentiments.

I want to show you a logo that has gone viral over the past few days. Not everyone here is a football fan, so not everyone here understands the depth of the creativity of this logo, so allow me to unpack it for us.

It all began in 1960, when U.S. Steel chose as its logo the "Steel Mark," consisting of three four-pointed star-like figures within a circle. (The figures are technically called "hypocycloids.")



The Steel Mark's three colors represent the three materials used to make steel. Yellow stands for coal; orange for iron ore; and blue for steel scrap. The combination of those three substances is what gives steel its remarkable strength, which is far greater than that of iron alone.

Two years later, Republic Steel, a steel company in Cleveland, approached the owners of the Pittsburgh Steelers, a formidable NFL team (outside of New England, of course) about placing the logo on their helmets for the 1962 NFL Season. (This was an early example of product placement.) They went for it, and a year later, they got permission to change the word Steel to Steelers on their helmets.



For years, this logo has been emblematic of steely Pittsburgh, its powerful football team, and its strength and grit.

Fast forward to last week.

Tim Hines is the CEO of a marketing agency in Pittsburgh. He lives near Squirrel Hill. Last week, he heard the sirens. He was particularly struck by the fact that this crime was fueled by hate.

As he began to process what had happened, he began to doodle. And before long, this is what he came up with:



“It was all emotion,” he said. “While it’s a tribute to the victims and the Jewish community, and while it’s a nod to the strength of Pittsburgh, I think it’s also an image of hope, ... an image of love being shared.”

This, too, is America. America at its best. America at its strongest—and, dare I say, *greatest*.

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So which is it? Which vision of America will triumph? The xenophobic, hate filled, apocalyptic vision of American vigilantes and their enablers? Or that open-hearted, compassionate, hopeful vision expressed in George Washington’s letter -- and that fourth grader’s condolence note?

We have a role to play in all this. And that is to continue to be who we are:

- To continue to **practice**, to **teach**, and to **share** our Judaism with our neighbors, our fellow Americans;
- to continue to **stand up for refugees**, and for other marginalized people;
- to continue to have faith that we can form alliances with other men and women of other faiths and of none, and to pursue such alliances;
- to continue to work at building a better world, strong enough to hold at bay the hurtful, hateful, destructive forces that lie deep within the human heart.

As Rabbi Nevins put it, “Last Shabbat, a hateful person channeled the xenophobic rhetoric of our times into lethal violence, robbing the world of eleven precious people. There are many more like this man. But even if they try, the power of compassion remains far greater than their power of hate. All of us **are potentially strangers, but we are capable of becoming like siblings.**”

Let’s do that. Let not allow this to deter us from our effort to become like siblings -- even with those who are very different from us.

Let us persist, until decency is not a “pious aspiration” but a “reliable value.”

That is what strength really looks like.

Shabbat Shalom!