

On October 27, 2018, right here at Congregation Or Atid, our community celebrated the baby naming of my daughter Arielle, who was four months old at the time. My parents, grandmothers, and in-laws came in from out of town. It was a wonderful morning, followed by a Kiddush luncheon for all in attendance. Towards the end of the service, we got word that something was happening at a synagogue somewhere in Pittsburgh, and that police officers were involved, possibly wounded from gunfire. I, along with some of the leadership of the synagogue, decided that since whatever was happening there did not directly affect us here, we did not need to mention anything at the moment.

Later that day, we all learned the details of what happened at Tree of Life Synagogue in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh. The day quickly turned from one of “joy” to one of “oy.” The Richmond Jewish community, supported by the greater Richmond community, responded quickly with statements of solidarity, support, and a truly moving and powerful vigil at the JCC, where all of the local rabbis spoke, as well as leaders of other faith traditions and elected officials. The following Shabbat, November 3, was billed as “Show up for Shabbat,” and was meant to be a demonstration of confidence and solidarity, that we were not afraid to come to synagogue, not intimidated by anyone who might threaten us.

Outside of joyous life-cycle events or High Holy Days, it was the most well-attended service of the year. Congregants who normally don’t come on Shabbat morning were present. Many unaffiliated Jews who hadn’t set foot in a synagogue in years were there, feeling called to be present with their fellow Jews in a time of vulnerability. My friend and colleague Reverend Daniel Glaze of River Road Church, Baptist attended. We were even honored by Henrico County’s police chief at the time, Humberto Cardounel Jr., and his wife.

However, after nearly three years, I have to confess something about that day. I was profoundly ambivalent about the entire “show up for Shabbat” promotional campaign. While it was wonderful to see so many people in our worship space, I could not help but feel that for many people, the motivation for coming to Shabbat services was prompted by the murder of Jews. I would like to be clear: vulnerability and a need for solidarity are very good reasons to be a part of a community. However, they are not enough to create a deep, meaningful, and purposeful Jewish life.

Earlier this year, the results of Pew’s 2020 study of the American Jewish Community were released, a follow up to Pew’s 2013 study. While many aspects of the study were discussed, one piece of data that was hardly mentioned, was, in my opinion, one of profound importance. One of Pew’s questions was, “What is the most essential thing about being Jewish?” Respondents could select multiple answers. The most popular response across all ages, religious groups, and demographics - a whopping 76% of all respondents in the 2020 study, and basically unchanged from 73% in the 2013 study, was “Remembering the Holocaust.”

In my humble opinion, this is tragic. The memory of the Holocaust is not a sustainable way to promulgate a healthy and flourishing Jewish existence, and most certainly not beyond two or three generations. Similarly, it elevates something that was done to us, rather than something that we do, creating a memory where we have lost our agency and turning us into victims in our own eyes.

Please don’t misunderstand: the Shoah is necessary to learn about. It is an essential piece of modern Jewish history and its effect on the Jewish experience for the last 70 years is immeasurable. But it should not be the most essential thing about being Jewish and it should not motivate us to be Jewish. Personally, it doesn’t motivate me. It is the kind of Judaism that would be a negative affirmation, which says, “I’m going to be more Jewish because they hate me.” Even the post-Holocaust notion that, “Hitler tried to wipe us out, so I’m going to make sure that we survive by being Jewish” still frames it in a reactionary way. Nothing positive or sustainable can come from that.

Arthur Hertzberg, a 20th century Jewish historian once said, “The only thing more dangerous for Jews than Antisemitism is no Antisemitism.” He meant that the absence of Antisemitism would require those many Jews who have abandoned Jewish practice as their primary form of Jewish identity, to figure out why they should remain Jews. French Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre said, “the anti-Semite defines the Jew.” Unfortunately, this applies more often than we might want it to.

Salo Baron, the academic who pioneered the study of Jewish history, once wrote, “All my life I have been struggling against the hitherto dominant lachrymose conception of Jewish history, because I have felt that an

overemphasis of Jewish sufferings distorted the whole picture of the Jewish historic evolution and, at the same time, badly served a generation which had become impatient with the nightmare of endless persecutions and massacres.” Part of Baron’s work was to show that, while persecutions and massacres certainly occurred, there were also long stretches when Jews enjoyed relatively comfortable lives and were not plagued by overt Antisemitism.

I have to tell you: I hate Antisemitism. Of course, we should all hate Antisemitism and stand strong against it in a plethora of ways. What I mean is that I hate talking about Antisemitism.

I hate how some of the talk about Antisemitism exaggerates the problem and paints a picture of contemporary Jewish life in America as if it were Germany in the 1930s, diminishing what America is and everything that American Jews have achieved. This is not Kristallnacht. What we are experiencing is not government-instituted Antisemitism, but an Antisemitism which our government is committed to fighting. I hate what the conversation about Antisemitism does to Jews, the fear it instills, and the attention it demands. I hate how it drives a bigger wedge in our already polarized moment, because we are only comfortable condemning it when it comes from the “other” side.

There is a joke that goes: What is a Jewish optimist? A Jew who thinks things cannot get any worse. What is a Jewish pessimist? A Jew who is certain that they can and will get worse, but is not sure how soon. By anticipating the worst, we do in fact protect ourselves from being caught off-guard by bad turns of events, and we prepare ourselves by anticipating cataclysm. The upside is that we remain vigilant in a world that can be truly dangerous. The downside is that this worldview could become the sum total of our identity.

We cannot let this happen because Jews are not victims. We live in a culture of victimhood. Everywhere we look, whether on the personal or communal level, people claim that they have been a victim of injustice, the result of which merits moral superiority over the perpetrator. Being a victim is easy. Everyone has compassion for you. The problem is that victims have put themselves in a place where it is nearly impossible to improve their situation. In the victim mindset, only someone else has the power to make it right. Victims cede their lives and agency to someone else.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has taught that when a great wrong has been done to us, there are two questions we can ask ourselves: “Why did this happen?” or “What then shall I do?” The first one involves looking back for some cause. The second one looks forward and, understanding that this is the starting point, tries to work out some future goal. Looking back puts us in the frame of an object acted upon by forces beyond our control. Looking forward puts us in the driver’s seat, where we become choosing moral agents, deciding which path to take, and what we want to be. Rabbi Sacks astutely observes, “The first leads to resentment, bitterness, rage, and a desire for revenge. The second leads to challenge, courage, strength of will, and self control.”

When something bad happens, we can complain, or we can do something about it. Admittedly, Jews are really good at complaining. But we are even better at doing something about it. Jews are conditioned to the second response, and the status of victimhood goes against what it means to be a Jew. In the musaf liturgy on festivals, we find the expression, “Because of our sins, we were exiled from our land.” We refuse to define ourselves as victims of anyone or anything else, whether that might be the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Romans, the Nazis, fate, original sin, unconscious drives, or genetic determinism.

Our people rebuilt Jerusalem after the destruction of the first Temple, reconstituted a home- and synagogue-based Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple, kept rebuilding communities and arriving at new ways of thought during the persecutions of the Middle Ages, and built a flourishing and successful state in the wake of the murder of Six Million of our brothers and sisters.

One of the most familiar and kitschy phrases about Jewish holidays is also terribly misleading. You all know it. “They tried to kill us. We won. Let’s eat.” While it may evoke a smile, it really furthers the victim mentality that we reject, as well as undermines the essence of nearly all of the holidays. This pithy statement may be a close estimation of Purim and Hanukkah, but misses the richness and complexity of these holidays. It might be used to describe Pesach, but there are significant problems with it: nobody tried to kill us, per se; it wasn’t “we” who did the winning, God rescued us in the foundational moment of our people as a corporate entity; and our eating is ritualized with lots of rules about what we can and cannot eat. Finally, this narrative doesn’t even remotely approach the meanings of Rosh Hashanah, Sukkot, Simchat Torah, Shavuot, Tisha B’Av, a bunch of other minor holidays, and today, Yom Kippur, on which we don’t even eat.

When we say “They tried to kill us. We won. Let’s eat.”, we are not only misreading the holidays. We are also distorting Jewish history. “They” didn’t always try to kill us. We have been hated, but we have also been treated as equals. We have been weak, and we have been strong. Ultimately, this false summation of the Jewish holidays is grounded in a sense of perennial victimhood, which is antithetical to the Jewish psyche.

The core of the Jewish experience is sanctifying the mundane and living in relationship with God. We express gratitude that we are alive. We express gratitude that the world exists, and that we are able to enjoy all of the beautiful things that it has to offer. We express gratitude that we are members of a people that has maintained its sense of self, and its dignity, since the days of Abraham and Sarah four thousand years ago, and we celebrate that membership through festivals that bring joy to our lives.

Rabbi David Hartman taught that, in the second half of the twentieth century and in the twenty-first century, Jews have a choice as to how our lives and identities would be shaped. Rabbi Hartman said that we can choose Auschwitz or Sinai. For Hartman, Auschwitz was to be remembered and mourned, but it was Sinai and the teachings of Jewish tradition over the millennia that give Jewish life meaning, value, and a future. The challenge of Jewish life is how we learn from our ancient tradition, and how it evolves to be relevant with the best of modern thought. Dwelling on Auschwitz turns us inward and makes survival the main concern of Jewish life, pushing aside the important work of imbuing Judaism and our lives with value, purpose, and holiness. While we must protect ourselves and ensure the survival of the

Jewish People, our mission must be to create a dynamic Jewish life that challenges us to be our best selves and connects us to the foundational moment of Torah at Sinai. Choosing Auschwitz results in victimhood. Choosing Sinai calls us to holiness.

Deborah Lipstadt, renowned scholar and newly-appointed U.S. envoy to monitor and combat Antisemitism, recently released an insightful and powerful book called *Antisemitism: Here and Now*. The title of the final section of that book is “Oy versus Joy,” a phrase I am using in my remarks today to frame how we might view various aspects of our tradition. Lipstadt tells us that Antisemitism is cause for “oy,” but when we look at the supportive response we have received from the communities in which we live in the wake of many of these attacks, we have cause for “joy.” If Jew-hatred becomes the sole focus of our concerns, we run the risk of seeing the entire Jewish experience as a negative one, as victims instead of moral and choosing agents. Fighting Antisemitism is ultimately defensive and not a good answer to the question “Why be Jewish?”

The Rabbis teach us that Yom Kippur is the most joyous day of the year. Is everybody having fun? If not, maybe we need to take a look at how we understand this day. Yom Kippur could be a day of “oy,” or a day of “joy.” According to the Talmud, the joy of Yom Kippur is equated with the joy of Tu B’Av, the 15th of Av, the day the daughters of Jerusalem would go out in white garments, singing and chanting, to meet the single young men of Jerusalem in order to find their future spouses and build new Jewish families.

Tradition teaches that Yom Kippur was the day of Israel’s greatest sin, the day that they built and worshipped the Golden Calf. But it was also the day that God forgave Israel of this sin and took them back as His covenanted people. Part of that covenantal reconciliation involved a new set of tablets, as Moses had destroyed the first set by smashing them against the Golden Calf. While the first set of tablets were carved and written upon by God, the second set were a joint venture between God and human beings: Moses carved them and God wrote upon them. This began a new partnership, with the Torah as the contract. As a further hint that the day on which these events occurred was Yom Kippur, God proclaimed the thirteen divine attributes, which we recite many times on this day. These attributes are declarations of God’s forgiveness, and their recitation by Jews on Yom Kippur throughout the generations has continued to remind God that this day is not just a day of transgression, but a day of love and reconciliation.

Furthermore, the Hasidic masters taught that Yom Kippur was a joyful day because it is the day when we have the opportunity to be most open with, and to cleave closest to, the Divine. This intimacy with God is the pinnacle of the religious life for the Hasidim. And what could be more joyous than knowing that if you do the internal work, you will atone for your wrongdoings and be forgiven? Yom Kippur is certainly a day of denying our bodies of sustenance and pleasure, but it is also a day of possibility and of looking forward to what we can accomplish as individuals and as a community.

Even in the face of more frequent acts of Antisemitism, we must not let that define us. Just as Moses carved out the tablets of the Torah on this day, may we carve out a space within ourselves for Torah and its three thousand year old tradition, which will afford us the means to establish and develop purpose and meaning in our lives. We must fight Antisemitism, but more importantly, we must, as the Torah implores us, choose life. May we choose Sinai over Auschwitz. On this day of atonement, may we choose “joy” over “oy.”