

Yizkor – 5780
“Where Were You That Day?”
October 9, 2019

I often ask people to try to remember the first event they remember in their lives. Outside of home and family. Older people remember the attack on Pearl Harbor and how the world changed forever. Younger adults know exactly where they were on 9/11. People my age clearly remember the assassination of President Kennedy. The oldest among us remember the stock crash of 1929 and the Depression.

I started teaching our 10th graders this fall and realized that none of them could possibly have any memories of 9/11. They are 15 and 16 years old. The fall of the Twin Towers, the Pentagon on fire, the plane crashing in Shanksville, reside in the fuzzy past of things that happened before they were born. For many of our young people, “before they were born” everything from Vietnam to the Civil War to Egyptian slavery. It is all in a distant past.

But all of us remember what happened on October 27 last year. Young children and Holocaust survivors alike remember where they were that Shabbat morning. Kids remember the worry on their parents’ faces. Adults, especially here in Squirrel Hill, remember panicking as they tried reach family and friends who may have gone to shul that day. Teens’ phones lit up with calls from all over the country. They knew the news as it unfolded before the adults did.

Those same teens remember their neighborhood bubble of security bursting. This neighborhood was supposed to be a garden, a haven of diversity, safety and respect. The shattering of that illusion caused our teens to feel shock, rage and fear. But instead of being paralyzed, though, they organized the first mass gathering that very night at the corner of Forbes and Murray.

The attack itself was brutal. We all know that. Hundreds of bullets fired. Eleven dead and six wounded, including four first responders. Although the assailant, fired bullets, the attack was like a bomb in the Jewish community and we were all in the blast zone.

The emotional shrapnel hit far and wide. It didn’t matter if you were in one of the three congregations or even knew the victims. We were all hit with bomb fragments of guilt, doubt, confusion and fear even if we were miles from the attack.

Many of you know my story. During our Shabbat morning minyan I was holding a baby for her naming around the time of the shooting. That baby is Ella Jane Silver, who I named Yisraela, the name of our people. Thankfully, she is too young to have been scarred. Her parents, however, Jason and Lauren, will always have bittersweet memories of a day which should only have been filled with joy.

When we halted our service and made the decision to send people home, everyone at our minyan wondered if we would be attacked before reaching safety. Although we can't compare our fear to the terror of those in the Tree of Life building, the fear we felt was real. Many of us can close our eyes and it will all come rushing back.

According to my dear friend and chaplain, Rabbi Shira Stern, we still carry the grief, the fear and the shock with us. It is ever present. It is in our bodies, our psyches, our limbs and our organs. We may not be aware of it all the time, but when something triggers our memory of the attack, it comes back hard. It disorients us.

Some have moved through shock and grief with surprising grace. Others are stuck, unable to emotionally move forward. We have all learned the hard way that grief is individual and does not get better in a straight line. I, along with many of our community's leadership, have tried to support those whose sadness has been overwhelming. But we've realized that we can only stand with them, hold them and listen to them. We cannot cure them. We cannot cure anyone.

What has helped you? What has made it possible for you to walk into any synagogue since the shooting? What has helped you get past the fear being attacked while praying on Shabbat, just for being Jewish?

What has helped me is remembering how Pittsburghers of every race and creed stepped forward to our aid and protection. When anti-Semitic attacks occurred in Europe we stood alone, forsaken by neighbors and the authorities. Here, both were at our side in minutes. Despite the very real hatred of Jews in our region, our neighbors stood by us.

Two of those neighbors are here with us today for Yizkor. Rev. John Welch, Dean of students at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, immediately reached out to be at our side. John and I are partners in faith-based social justice work through PIIN, the Pennsylvania Interfaith Impact Network. But when our community was in danger, he leapt to our aid as our friend, not as a cause. At the memorial at Soldiers and Sailors Hall the following night after the attack, he and his wife, Rev. De Neice Welch, held me like a baby while I cried on that stage.

Wasi Muhammed, who has long been a public face of the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh, immediately swung into action. He offered for his community to stand guard at synagogue doors. The ICP raised a tremendous amount of money on our behalf in a matter of hours.

Later, Wasi and I were interviewed by Anderson Cooper of CNN on the ongoing powerful bond between us personally and our communities here in Pittsburgh. That interview has now been viewed more than 3 million times.

Both of them are here today. And although Yizkor on Yom Kippur is intensely personal for us Jews, I want to publicly thank both of them for all of their efforts on our behalf during those dark days.

Wasi, John - You have taught us with your presence and your caring that Jews do not need to fear attacks like 10/27 feeling alone and forsaken. Your presence then and now has been witness to the power of faith in the living God to stand against hatred and violence, especially when launched against those who are different.

This is a two way street. I and our Jewish friends came out to support the Muslim community after the murderous attack in Christchurch. We raised money for that community as well. Many of us, although it could have been more, went to rallies protesting the death of Antwon Rose. We did so to support his family and our African-American friends who face dangers in our city with alarming frequency. I hope that in the future we will support each other, not only in crisis, but in calmer times, as well.

I honor you here in front of our community of faith today, on our holiest day, our most sacred moment of memory, Yizkor. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I am so sad that at this Yizkor service, dedicated to the memory of our beloved dead over the generations, I feel compelled to address the 10/27 attack. No. We should be shedding our tears at this moment for our parents and grandparents, our sisters and brothers, our dear partners and even our children, who died before their time. We should be honoring their lives through our witness at Yizkor today.

Certainly we are honoring them now. We dare to let ourselves remember the tender moments that cause our eyes to brim with tears. We willingly embrace the pain of remembering their lives and their loss. And the genius of the human heart is that it expands to accommodate hallowed memories of those we loved and our more visceral grief we remember last year's attack.

Our tears are saltier for holding both so close here at Yizkor. But we can stand and withstand. We can embrace each other without fear of embarrassment. We are stronger than we knew we could be.

Where were you that day? That is a question for curiosity's sake. Where are you today? You are here, witnesses to pain and love.

Where will you be tomorrow? In some larger sense that is the only question that matters.

I would gently suggest that you come to Shabbat on October 25 en masse, the way you flooded this room on Shabbat following the massacre. I would gently

suggest that you honor your family's dead and our community's dead by living our values of faith, hope, love and justice, the ones they lived by. Then, they will not have died in vain. Our faith in God, shaken by the loss of loved ones, shattered by last year's bullets, will not be broken.

Melissa Kelley, in her touching book on grief, writes, "How we make ultimate sense of trauma [and the ultimate sense of all loss] flows from and depends on how we conceive of God." (Grief, pg. 87).

I believe in a God that does not spare us from suffering, but gives us the capacity to offer each other strength and comfort.

I believe in a God that cannot stop bullets but can drive us into each others' arms.

I believe in a God who begs us to protect each other even we ourselves are frightened and vulnerable.

I believe in a God who gives us the courage to stand with those we do not even know because we see them as God's children.

I believe in a God who wants us to love each other and is delighted in heaven when we do and mortified when we do not.

I believe in a God that guides our hands to dry each other's tears at Yizkor.

May this God lead us to the place of loving, caring, comfort and strength. This God, who is our Shepherd, our Rock, our Redeemer, our Hope, our Strength, our Joy. May this God cause our cups to overflow, with tears of sweet love instead of bitterness. Then we will be blessed to live in the House of the Eternal, for this day, this moment of memory. This blessed, Yizkor moment of love and remembrance. Love and remembrance. Forever.