

The Tree of Life / עץ החיים

The tree of life
sits at the center
of the Garden of Eden.
Next to it,
the tree of knowledge of good and evil.
They are both pleasing to the eyes
and good for food,
perfectly suited to the first human beings,
Adam and Eve.
We know a great deal
about the tree of knowledge of good and evil
from this week’s Torah portion, Bereishit.
We know that God says to Adam:
You can eat from every tree,
except for this one.
If you eat from it,
you will surely die.
We know that Eve takes fruit from the tree,
after the serpent cunningly tricks her.
We know that God, in an angry wrath,
condemns both Adam and Eve
to a life outside of paradise.
But what do we know about the tree of life,
עץ החיים?
Why does it sit
at the center of the Garden of Eden?

Our parsha suggests that the tree of life
has the power to immortalize man.
For when God discovers

what the humans have done,
God speaks to the angels and the animals:
Now that man has become like one of us,
knowing good and bad,
what if he should stretch out his hand
and also take from the tree of life,
and eat, and live forever!
God not only banishes
Adam and Eve from the garden,
but places angelic beings and a fiery sword
to guard the path to the tree of life.¹
The etz chaim has magical powers.

In Midrash, the tree of knowledge
guards the tree of life,
forming a hedge around it.
The tree of life “is so huge
that it would take a man five hundred years
to traverse a distance
equal to the diameter of the trunk,
and no less vast is the space shaded
by its crown of branches.”²
It is larger and more consequential
than we can possibly imagine.

The tree of life
sits at the center of the Garden of Eden,
the center of where human beings were created,
where we got our start in this world.
It is the focal point
of our ancestors’ short-lived experience

¹ Genesis 3:22-24

² Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews, 27

in paradise.

And one year ago,

it became our focal point as well.

On the morning of October 27, 2018,
a 46-year-old man entered the Tree of Life synagogue
in the Pittsburgh Neighborhood of Squirrel Hill
with handguns and a semi-automatic weapon.

As he moved through the synagogue
and into Shabbat morning services,
he fired his weapons
and spewed hate speech.

The Atlantic reports that the gunman
remained in the synagogue for an hour and 20 minutes
until police officers negotiated his exit.

He killed 11 people:

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.

Like the tree of life in the Garden of Eden,
the tragedy from the Tree of Life synagogue
looms over us.

Its branches are heavy
and its trunk is central to our current narrative

as American Jews.

Everything changed for us after Pittsburgh.

During an interfaith vigil

just weeks after the attack,

the rabbi of the Tree of Life synagogue,

Jeffrey Myers,

cried out in pain and then exclaimed to a large crowd:

"We will rebuild to be a stronger tree,

offering a new light,"

"People will come and say,

'Wow, that's how you're supposed

to live your life.'"³

Just weeks after the attack,

the rabbi was able to predict

the immortality of his community,

the same characteristic that makes

the Tree of Life in our parsha so spectacular.

We are here tonight,

on the one-year anniversary of the Tree of Life shooting

to not only mourn those who were killed,

but also to acknowledge

our Jewish community's remarkable resilience.

When I received the notification

from the New York Times app that morning,

I had to reread the words on the screen.

This happened in Pittsburgh?

In Pennsylvania?

Pennsylvania in the United States?

I remember feeling numb most of the day,

not knowing what to do with myself

³ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/02/us/rabbi-myers-profile/index.html>

or how to express my confusion and grief.

My friend texted later that afternoon:

there is going to be a vigil in Union Square for the victims,
do you want to join?

Of course I wanted to be with my community
during this time of immense pain,
but in reality,
I was terrified.

I immediately thought of the 6th grade class
that I would be teaching the next morning
in Brooklyn Heights.

How would I explain this tragedy to them?
Would they understand what had happened?
Would they even show up to the synagogue
the next morning?

I waited that Sunday morning with bated breath,
when finally my students arrived
one by one,
to make up a class of six 12-year-olds
with nervous looks on their faces.
The rabbi and I did our best to comfort them,
and asked them what questions they had for us.
To my surprise, the kids immediately wanted to get involved,
to talk about gun violence prevention
and how to ensure safety
in the spaces they inhabit.
Over time they witnessed the security system
change at the synagogue,
with added guards and required ID badges.
This became the new normal,
and no one questioned it.

According to a recent study published by the American Jewish Committee on American Jewish attitudes towards antisemitism, 84% of people polled believe that antisemitism has increased over the past 5 years in the US.

Additionally, 42% of participants feel that the status of Jews in the US is less secure than a year ago.

A Washington Post article on the study commented on the addition of a question that the AJC has never included in its American surveys before:

“Do you ever avoid certain places, events or situations out of concern for your safety or comfort as a Jew?”⁴
25% of respondents answered yes.

In response to the comment, AJC CEO David Harris clarified:

“Frankly, it’s a question that is regularly asked in surveys of European Jews.

We never thought some of the questions asked in those surveys in Europe might one day be very pertinent to the United States.

There was always the sense that it was there and not here.”⁵

Unsurprisingly, the AJC study suggests that the very identity of American Jews

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<https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/10/23/year-after-pittsburgh-study-finds-almost-jews-sometimes-hide-their-faith/>

⁵ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/10/23/year-after-pittsburgh-study-finds-almost-jews-sometimes-hide-their-faith/>

has changed since October 27, 2018.

The Tree of Life shooting,
in addition to a number of other antisemitic incidents
that have occurred over the past year,
have contributed to this sense of fear and uncertainty
within the American Jewish community.

We are hiring more security guards
for our synagogues and are even thinking twice
about wearing our Star of David necklaces
when we step outside our homes.

I often meditate on what it means
to become a Jewish professional,
to enter the rabbinate,
during such a confusing time.

I would be lying if I said that the Pittsburgh shooting
did not make me question
the career path I have chosen.

However, the Squirrel Hill Jewish community,
still recovering from the tragedy,
has shown resilience above all else.

Just ten days after the attack occurred,
the social-action committee of the congregation met and
decided to “continue the advocacy work
that had always defined the community,”
including their immigrant and refugee support.⁶

Today, three members of the congregation
who scarcely knew one another a year ago
founded their own organization,

⁶ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/09/pittsburgh-politics-violence-gun-reform/598885/>

Squirrel Hill Stands Against Gun Violence.

Their kickoff event, which happened this past April, was a combination of a march, rally, and memorial for the 11 people killed last October.

Rabbi Jeffrey Myers also continues to speak up about the resilience of his community, and in a recent video posted on the synagogue’s website he declares that in the wake of the shooting, people “discovered strength that they didn’t know they had.” He adds that his community, “thrust together by this heinous act continues to find ways to help each other on a healing path.” He has shown the world that his community is indeed stronger than hate.

Most importantly, Pittsburgh has exposed the Jewish community’s ability to show up, even in times of fear. Tonight not only marks one year since the shooting, but it is also demarcates a night that Jews are gathering together around the world to stand against antisemitism and bigotry in all its forms. Last October, the AJC’s Show up for Shabbat campaign engaged 250 million people online, and as a result, hundreds of thousands of people around the world attended synagogue. Tonight, on the second annual Show up for Shabbat, we engage in the same battle. We show up just the same to honor the deceased and to express solidarity with the American Jewish community

that we are proud to be a part of.

The book of Proverbs tells us that God’s teaching
is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it,
and all who hold onto it are happy.⁷

Not only does the tree of life represent immortality and resilience,
but it represents the joy of our tradition.

The Torah sits at the center of our lives as Jews,
and the Tree of life sits at the center
of the Garden of Eden.

So too, the Tree of Life synagogue in Squirrel Hill
sits at the center of our narrative as American Jews.

It defines our current experience,
including our uncanny ability to show up
and exhibit resilience
in the face of fear and uncertainty.

In the words of the American Jewish Committee:

Blessed are you, Adonai our God,
Teach us to banish evil and know good,
our distinction from the beasts,
acquired in the Garden of Eden.

Care for the wounded of body and spirit.

Enable them, us,
to heal and regenerate
as Adam and Eve did

in the face of unbearable loss.

Restore the American Jewish innocence lost,
that America could be different,
that America *will* be different.

Mend our fractured nation.

⁷ Proverbs 3:18

Bless those who did not stand idly by
while their neighbor’s blood was shed,
who ran toward and not away.

Bless those who showed up for Shabbat,
now and then.

Their presence allows the good of the many
to prevail over the evil of the few.⁸

Hazak Hazak V’nithazek, Be strong, be strong, and we will be strengthened.

Amen.

⁸ <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1GeNGMFCEuDjRkqVhxv16pg2VbuLmY67J>