

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5780

Three R's For Rosh Hashanah: Remember, Repair, Renew

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This has been a year of significant anniversaries. The 50th anniversary of the Woodstock music festival, the 40th anniversary of the creation of the game Trivial Pursuit, the 30th anniversary of the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and the 50th anniversary of human beings landing on the moon.

Anniversaries can be anticipated occasions to celebrate. They can also be darker times of the year, days that we know are coming, but do not look forward to. The anniversary of the death of a loved one, September 11th, Yom Hazikaron, Israel's national remembrance day for fallen soldiers.

This year I am especially thinking about October 27th, less than a month from today, the first anniversary of the shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, and the tragic death of eleven Jewish worshippers.

Last year on Shabbat of October 27 was a rare occasion when I was not at Temple Beth David. It was my niece's bat mitzvah, and the Citrin family was celebrating at my sister's congregation. Moments into the celebration following the service we heard the news. Even now, it is hard to wrap my head around the image of eleven souls who were dedicated synagogue members, Shabbat morning regulars, murdered in the midst of prayer.

Last year at this time was a different Jewish world. We celebrated Rosh Hashanah before we became witnesses to the worst attack on the Jewish community on American soil. Tragedy in the Chabad synagogue in San Diego followed. Closer to home, there have been swastikas drawn on the walls of the Westwood high school and middle school. Anti-Semitic rhetoric and violence is on the rise, a symptom of emboldened white supremacy around the world that targets minorities. As I think about these events of the past year, I am distraught, angry, alarmed, saddened, disheartened.

I have been thinking about the emotions in Pittsburgh. What is the Jewish community there feeling as they enter this High Holy Day Season? I decided to call an old Jewish summer camp acquaintance, Jeffrey Finkelstein, the President and CEO of the Jewish Federation in Pittsburgh. Jeff, a long time leader in Pittsburgh, has been instrumental in the response and rebuilding of the Pittsburgh Jewish community this year. He shared with me that after a horrific year of attending nine funeral services, and getting to know the family members of the victims, he is looking forward to some calm and quiet during these High Holidays. "Everyone is a victim here," he said. "Everyone is in need of solidarity and support."

On this eve of 5780, I want to ask this question: Where do we, the Jewish community, go from here? What is our purpose on this New Year? I would like to offer three responses, three R's for this Rosh Hashanah: Remember, Repair, and Renew.

Remember. “*Ki bazchira sod geula* – For in memory is the secret of redemption,” the Hasidic master taught. (Baal Shem Tov) I have always been drawn to the power of memory in Jewish tradition. I think it goes back to growing up with a relative who was a Holocaust survivor. It was ingrained in me from a young age that the Jewish people have suffered terrible tragedies, and that it is incumbent upon us to remember and continue our traditions. I knew my Uncle Harry, who had survived the Lodz ghetto and Auschwitz, as a kind and sweet man. Yet, there was an air of silence and mystery that surrounded him that I could not quite comprehend.

In my young adult years, I delved deeply into Holocaust studies, trying to make some sense of it all. This academic pursuit led me to question the nature of Jewish identity. Can Jewish identity rest upon memory alone? How do we integrate our identity as a people who has suffered, along with the uplifting stories and beautiful rituals that comprise Jewish community, synagogue and home?

Memory runs deep during these High Holy Days. It frames our observance. Rosh Hashanah is *Yom HaZikaron*, the Day of Remembrance, and toward the conclusion Yom Kippur we encounter *Yizkor*, our memorial service. Perhaps we feel it intently, this *mitzvah* to remember, at certain times of the year, because we cannot bear the burden of memory so intensely each day. Or maybe this focus on memory strengthens the core of our being in such a way that it caresses our souls and propels our bodies forward to live our lives more fully throughout our days.

I think that the ways Judaism instructs us to remember is telling. Memory goes hand in hand with *tikkun*, the notion of repair and healing. Ariel Burger in his recent book, *Witness - Lessons from Elie Wiesel's Classroom*, reflects on the lessons he learned as a student of the late professor and Holocaust survivor. He writes, to be a student of Elie Wiesel, “Most of all means remembering the past and understanding the link between past and future. It means choosing to care about others’ lives, their suffering and their joy. It means becoming a witness.” In other words, to remember, in Jewish tradition, is to be a witness. It means to be a witness to suffering and pain, and to healing and happiness. To bear witness implies that we each have some responsibility to help repair the world.

Repair. “It is not upon you alone to finish the work, yet you are not free to remove yourself from it,” the Talmud teaches. (*Pirkei Avot* 2:21) We are all witnesses. I have been especially moved by the memorial gatherings that are being planned in Pittsburgh. The commemorative plans include memorial ceremonies along with Torah study, community service, and counseling. In the wake of tragedy, there has been one common goal: come together.

During our conversation, Jeff Finkelstein shed some light on the strength of the Pittsburgh Jewish community. He shared how the response to the tragic shootings was rooted in the strength of relationships that had existed beforehand. He also notes how this stands in stark contrast to Kristallnacht and other events of World War II. For years, clergy and other Jewish leaders had worked hard at intrafaith and interfaith relationships.

As Wasi Mohamed, the then head of the Islamic center of Pittsburgh, spoke out: “Negative rhetoric against the Jewish community is poison. It’s poison for our democracy, it’s poison for our country, and it’s negative to everybody, not just that community.”

Jeff also described the sad and beautiful image of Orthodox and non-Orthodox members of the *chevra kaddisha*, the traditional Jewish burial society, working together around the clock to care for the bodies of those who had died. It is not often that you see Jews of all streams standing in unison side by side.

Jews across the denominations and diverse religious communities live together in Pittsburgh as close neighbors. This sense of knowing their neighbors helped the community come together in the face of tragedy. “Here,” Jeff said proudly, “we strive for unity not uniformity.”

During the past year, I learned an interesting fact. The iconic Mr. Fred Rogers lived most of his life in Squirrel Hill, just blocks from the Tree of Life synagogue. Among the countless reasons the shooting at the Pittsburgh synagogue sent shock waves in our nation was that it literally took place in Mister Rogers’ neighborhood.

The Jewish enclave of Squirrel Hill served as the home for many years of the familiar children’s television figure and ordained Presbyterian minister who personified kindness and tolerance. On the day of the shooting, the Fred Rogers Center issued this statement, “We’re holding Squirrel Hill in our thoughts today. While we always believe in looking for the helpers, we long for a day when there is no more tragedy born from hatred.”

Mr. Rogers spent his final days at his Squirrel Hill home before he died in 2003. His legend continues to permeate the neighborhood today. Helpers beyond measure have stepped up in the community. With his signature soothing tone, his opening anthem, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” continues to sing and inspire. Mr. Rogers stressed friendship and acceptance across racial and religious difference. He told children, “I like you just the way you are.”

We could all take a few lessons from Mister Roger’s neighborhood today. Repair, or *tikkun*, means reaching across the divides to come together. Repair is The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette putting Hebrew on the front page, and the Pittsburgh Steelers holding a moment of silence and revamping their logo to include a Star of David. Repair is the cards decorated by children at a local church and hand delivered to our temple after the shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue. Repair is the principal of the local schools reaching out to Micah and me for counsel in addressing the swastikas drawn in our public schools. Repair was hundreds of community members gathered here in our sanctuary for an interfaith Thanksgiving service last fall and for a speaker from the Anti-Defamation League last spring. Repair is the many Beth David congregants who have volunteered to be security greeters, to stand at our locked doors and welcome people in. This is the new world we live in. And we could use more volunteers.

Repair is getting to know our neighbors. This takes work. Each time we come together we restore a broken piece.

These acts of repair give me a sense a sense of renewal and hope. In the face of tragedy, humanity has the ability to renew itself. **Renew.** Each Shabbat morning as we return the Torah to the ark, we recite the biblical verses, “*Eitz Chayim Hi* – It is a Tree of Life to all who hold fast to it, and all of its supporters are happy. Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace.” (Proverbs 3:17-18) “*Chadesh yameinu k’kedem* – Renew our days as of old.” (Lamentations 5:21)

Renewal means that we are here. We are here continuing to renew Jewish life each year. You are here because this synagogue is important to you. You are here because your Jewish identity and community are important to you. We are here because of the memory and the joy. For thousands of years, the Jewish people has renewed and reimagined itself. And for all these years, sadness and joy have comingled.

Leonard Bernstein said after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, “This will be our response to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before.” Elie Wiesel added, “People speak of a leap of faith. I believe we require a leap of hope.” (Burger)

I am heartened by the music I hear playing. I am heartened by the vibrancy of Jewish life we are creating here at Temple Beth David. I am heartened by the voices of children running down our hallways, the voices of adults learning, and the voices of the congregation joining with Micah and me as we welcome in Shabbat on Friday evenings.

To be honest I feel a little mixed about the efforts to repeat the “Show Up for Shabbat” campaign on the anniversary weekend of the Tree of Life shootings. Don’t get me wrong. It was wonderful to see a full sanctuary on the first Friday night in November last year, so much so that our dedicated custodian Roberto worked hard to break down the wall that typically separates our sanctuary and Rosen hall, to add more seats, kind of like the High Holy Days. The presence of so many temple and community members was incredibly uplifting. However, we all know that showing up for Shabbat once a year will not really reinvigorate Jewish life. Renewal is mindful and ongoing. Our tradition has much to offer each day, each week, and every year.

The New York Times writer and editor Bari Weiss recently wrote, “Pittsburgh, my hometown, gives me tremendous hope... Our tradition was always renewed by people who made the choice in the face of tragedy that theirs would not be the end of the Jewish story, but the catalyst for writing a new chapter. The long arc of Jewish history makes it clear that the way to fight anti-Semitism is by waging an affirmative battle for who we are. By entering the fray for our values, for our ideas, for our ancestors, for our families, and for the generations that will come after us... In these trying times, our best strategy is to build a Judaism and a Jewish people that are not only safe and resilient but also generative, humane, joyful and life-affirming. A Judaism capable of lighting a fire in

every Jewish soul – and in the souls of everyone who throws in his or her lot with ours.” (“How to Fight Anti-Semitism,” New York Times, September 8, 2019)

We renew Jewish life when we study and teach, when we are present to make up our *minyan* of pray-ers, and when we engage in small or large acts of loving-kindness. We renew Jewish life when we struggle to make meaning of ancient thought and practice, and embrace the aspects that speak to us today. Renewal means being more present in community and being there for others.

In Judaism the Torah is called the Tree of Life, *Eitz Chayim Hi*. Our Torah is a tree and we human beings its fruit. And we sing, “*Chadeish yameinu k’kedem* – Renew our days as of old.” As we stand before the ark, this plea seems appropriate. We are not really asking to return to the past, but rather to be continually renewed. (inspired by Dr. Isa Aron, *The Self Renewing Congregation*) This is our prayer - that we make our tradition more vibrant and relevant every year.

What is our purpose this Rosh Hashanah? I offer these three R’s: Remember, Repair, and Renew. Hold the sacred power of memory close to our hearts. Do our part to be a helper in the work of repair. Renew Jewish life through our presence and involvement. “It is a Tree of Life to all who hold fast to it.” Hold it tight. Its fruit will be our reward.

Sing Eitz Chayim Hi (Portnoy)