

Rabbi Stefan Tiwy



Shalom everybody,

I am writing these lines in the aftermath of the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Many of us are still in shock about the news, pondering how something terrible like that could happen. As we are mourning the senseless loss of life, emotions have been running the gamut from confusion and fear to sorrow and anger. A yearning for being together and healing abounds.

In these difficult times, it has been comforting to see the outpouring of support and solidarity from our community across faith boundaries and political factions. People of very different backgrounds have been coming together and speaking out against violence and hatred. I was

particularly impressed to see the big group of outside guests that joined us in the UJC chapel for our Solidarity Shabbat, including other faith and civic leaders from the greater Danbury area.

In our weekly Torah reading cycle, we lately have been reading the story of our spiritual ancestor Abraham. In Jewish tradition, Abraham is synonymous with the value of chesed, kindness, as exemplified by his hospitality of

welcoming the stranger, no matter where they come from. Abraham's message of tolerance and embracing diversity is more than timely in these dark times where hatred and xenophobia seem to abound.

Keeping an open mind and heart about the stranger has been a time-honored part of our Jewish tradition from the very beginning. In the spirit of Abraham, it was more than timely that we could welcome several special guests at the UJC: Terry Clark Murphy, the author of the children's book "Soulful Sydney," as well as the young Muslim girl who inspired the story, Mariam Azeez, who visited us at the UJC along with her mother, Eman Beshtawii, president of the Al Hedaya Islamic Center in Newtown. During Friday night Shabbat services and Sunday morning religious school, they presented this remarkable book and also taught us about the need for communication across faith and ethnic boundaries: Fear and prejudice can be

most easily overcome when people of different backgrounds actually get to encounter each other and see their shared humanity.

Education is one of the key elements in achieving this goal, a value our tradition has always been stressing. It was therefore a particular joy and honor to get to keep up the memory and impact of a great educator of our congregation, the late Ruth

Gruber, by dedicating the educator's office in her name and celebrating a very special Shabbat for All Ages in October, for which we were joined by several members of the Gruber family, followed by a delicious (dark) chocolate oneg.

As we look ahead, we are about to enter Kislev, the month of Chanukah, and look forward to celebrating this festival season together on Shabbat Chanukah and Chanukah Family Day. But even before

that, you are also welcome to join us for our first catered Shabbat dinner before Friday night services on November 9 at 6 pm (please RSVP to Daryl Bain so that we have a headcount). During the service to follow at 7 pm, we also plan to offer a special blessing for all the new members that have joined the UJC in recent months. Please use that chance to

introduce yourselves and to give them a warm welcome.

Audacious hospitality is one of the central tenets of our Reform Movement, particularly in times where division and

wariness abound. While we acknowledge the need to make smart decisions about the security of our congregation, we also want to be able to keep an open, inviting atmosphere in our community. In the spirit of Abraham, it is my hope for us to find and maintain that delicate balance.

Wishing you an early Happy Thanksgiving and Happy Chanukah, l'shalom,

