

Opening words from the Gathering of Reflection and Response to the
Shooting in Pittsburgh
Tuesday October 30th, 2018

Evil can and will follow us wherever we go
But it cannot overtake us
It cannot crush us unless we bow down.

To those who have come here tonight, we are honored to have you with us. Members of the B'nai Israel Synagogue family, welcome home. For some it took courage to walk through these doors. Time will not erase the safety of sanctuary and sanctity that has been attacked. But those who have come to be with us have come to show us that we are not alone.

To those who have come in solidarity tonight,
Blessed are those who come in God's name,
In the name of peace,
In the name of concern,
In the name of love.

Blessed are you who have come to walk these few steps on our Jewish journey with us. Baruchim Ha Bayim. Blessed are those who come.

When you ask yourself "who were those victims whose lives were cut short?"
- we are all those victims. All of our lives have been struck by this act.

If you want to know what the Jewish victims looked like, look around you. They are the men and women of every Jewish community who stood together, laughed together, disagreed together, mourned each other's losses, and celebrated each other's children. If you want to know what they look like, look around you. They are here.

Many people have asked what they can do to help. We are deeply grateful for your offers of love and support. Here is one small step. Do not call this event a tragedy, or if you do, do not call it a tragedy alone. Call it by its name. This was an act of Anti-Semitism. And history has shown that if we do not call out the pernicious hatred that is Anti-Semitism no matter how well-meaning we might be we strengthen the resolve of those who hold this hatred in their hearts.

Stand with us by naming the evil where it stands.

As we gather for healing, we light a candle as we ask for God's Presence to draw us near and for the ability to know and feel that Presence in our lives.

Light is a central symbol in so many traditions.

But we know the flame

Without it we cease to exist.

Left unchecked it can consume the world.

Like the soul of humanity, it is not the flame itself that calls to us, but what it makes possible. We don't really see the light, light enables us to see. We forget, however, that we only partially see and so much more than that, we perceive. While light is not within our power, perception is, at least so much more so than we want to take responsibility for.

The perpetrator of the hatred which kindled the blaze which brings us here tonight chose to see with a blackened heart. His perception, even as he sits in jail, has not changed.

We might think we cannot allow him to change our perception. To change our willingness to see all that is good around us.

But we have been changed by his heinous act. We have been changed, but although it may not feel that way at this moment, we have not been brought low.

His act rings out to us to waken us into self-reflection. Is there in me even one drop of the darkness that hardened his heart? Is there in me one breath as cold and frozen, callous and unfeeling, as the air which passed in and out of his lungs. How can I find the strength to look at my neighbor with love, at the stranger with compassion, at the other with mercy, and at the

darkened parts of myself with understanding. How can I look into the heart of what is and see there the heart of what I must become.

This is the call of the flame, the light of the soul and the purpose of my being. Even as it stands eclipsed tonight by the sky of this world, blackened by hate. Even as it stands tonight, this is the moment of the flame.

Our children will teach us, if we could but let it be so.

Bravely our students and their parents came to religious school on Sunday. Brave and bright. Committed and wise. We talked about the events that had so crushed the spirit of our community. Like us, the students found the actions of this evil incomprehensible, beyond sense or reason.

They will teach us how to move forward if we will but be guided by them. "His behavior must be guided by mental illness," they said, and while we cannot change who he is or what he did, we can change the world. We must, they told themselves and us, we must make sure that no other person ever comes to be so isolated, so cut off, so full of hate and so broken beyond repair that another man like him could come to be.

So they determined that they would – each of them – reach out to one person in their world. One child at their school who sits alone or doesn't seem to have friends, who has a disability or autism, and so cannot be and do all that they can, "I will sit with that person at lunch," they said. "I will invite them to play."
I will break the isolation.

So no soul ever grows into the dark soul of the abyss that walked into a house of prayer and shattered Shabbat and Shabbat-filled lives.

Our children pledged to make the world what it could be so that it cannot and will not be condemned to be for all time as it is now.

Keyn Yehí Ratzon

May this be God's will

And may God's Presence and strength be with them as with us because the world needs them

And so do we.

Prayer for the Congregation

God and God of our Ancestors
Bless this congregation,
This holy assembly
And those who have come into our midst
On this evening
To share our pain and seek Your guidance and love.

Our community has long served to welcome the stranger,
But this evening we look around us and we see there are no strangers in our
midst.

We are all Your children who have come together tonight in shared
humanity, in hope, in love.

Bless us as we continue our unbroken chain of welcome and hospitality, of
presence in the lives of one another and in the community.

Bless this community and our people, and all humanity
With hope, with wisdom and with love

And let us say

Amen

Pray for our country

Adonai our God,

Bless our country as we sit together on

A day darkened by tragedy, marred by Anti-Semitism, polluted by hate,

A day in which the noblest ideals of our nation have been sullied and tarnished.

Guide us in our commitment to leading our nation to righteousness and justice.

Grant our leaders wisdom, compassion and strength.

Be with us as our nation mourns.

Be with us as our leaders move beyond today into a new chapter,

A moment, we pray, filled with hope and renewal

So that the promise and ideals of our nation,

And the service and commitment of our people,

Can find their fruition in a just and vibrant land.

Bless those who serve and protect our nation

Those who put our well-being before their own,

Those who toil for justice and those who strive to realize our highest ideals.

Be with them and be with us

On this day

As we look for a brighter tomorrow

One nation, blessed with diversity

Unique in all that we can become

And let us say

Amen

We Are Gathered Here This Evening to undertake to make ourselves whole
and to make our world a better Place

We gathered here this evening for so many reasons.

We come here together

To ask for God's healing presence in the lives of those who were injured.

And whose lives were shattered because they tumbled in an instant from
the joy of Shabbat to the Sheol of mourning.

We come here together

To offer gratitude for those who serve

Who protect and place the safety of others above their own.

They are with us this evening and we are truly blessed to have them in our
midst. First responders... First in response, they answered our call.

We come here together

To remember those who died

Those whose lives were stolen.

And to bear witness with their community that mourns.

We come here together

To prepare to take our own first steps however tentative back into the
shattered world.

But before we can do all that

First we must acknowledge that

We have come here together

To be here

Because we must.

Each heart breaks in its own way.
Each pain is a droplet of rain upon a different parched being.
Each of us means and grieves in a different way
Each of us carries and processes
His or her own personal pain
So before we can be here for each other
We must simply be.
Be for ourselves.
And allow ourselves to be here.
To feel the strength, the love, the compassion, the power, the will, the
elegance, the simplicity, the hope, the frustration, the courage, that is in
this room.

And then,
Then we can begin our work of being for one another and of being for
ourselves.
And together we can be for the world.
The unstoppable souls driven to love
Despite the unthinkable tragedy and the terrible times
We can and we will be.
We can and we will.