

**Moving On from Mourning: In Solidarity with Pittsburgh**

***Parashat Chayei Sara***

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As we gather this morning, I must say from the outset that shock, horror and pain have been experienced everywhere in the Jewish Community, and hopefully among good people everywhere. But the losses sustained by the families of the victims, and by the community of Tree of Life synagogue, are far more personal, far more difficult to bear and far more painful than the pain of those who empathize from outside of that community.

In that context, I want to acknowledge that some of our guests, here to celebrate Ethan's becoming a bar mitzvah are from Pittsburgh. Mazal Tov. But we also extend to you our deep and sincere condolences and hope you will be our emissaries, carrying our wishes for healing and support to the Pittsburgh Jewish Community.

It has been only through the process of learning about the killer, and about the eleven individuals murdered, their names and their stories, that we could begin to appreciate both the magnitude of the loss and the pain caused to the Jewish Community of Squirrel Hill and to the larger Jewish Community.

Beyond the sense of loss that permeates Pittsburgh, there has been a process of mourning for those of us who do not have a personal connection to Pittsburgh. We also hurt. We are also bereft. We too are frightened. And we too ask: How could this happen? Why did this happen?

When we learned of the events of last Shabbat, we were all stunned. After all, this is America. This sort of thing doesn't happen in America. This is what happens in Europe. In this country, we are free to believe as we will, free to practice our religion unfettered and safe. We are free to engage in American society without worrying about our acceptance.

And here is the first part of process, as I see it, of grieving and of trying to make sense of this tragedy. The first part of the process is denial. We want so much to believe that this is not about religion *per se*, that something more, something other than anti-Semitism must be involved here, because this doesn't happen in America. America is philo-Semitic. America loves Jews. Something or someone must be blamed. Where did this idea to murder of Jews come from? Where were the seeds planted and how did they germinate? And here we find the denial of home-grown, American anti-Semitism.

The desire to find an answer to the question, “How and why this happened?”, is a natural because we want to know who is to blame. And, to answer that question, there have been numerous suggestions in the media this week. Here are a few.

1. Jews have supported HIAS, **the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society**, the Jewish organization for the settlement of immigrants in this country. Jews are responsible for bringing foreigners into the country and facilitating their absorption and acclimation to American Society. If we stop supporting HIAS, stop bringing “criminal elements” to this country, the killing of Jews will stop.
2. Why did this happen? Maybe it is because we have avoided contact with those who have traditionally hated us. Perhaps it is time to sit with Louis Farrakan or David Dukes, to make alliances with those who admire them?
3. Maybe our mistake was that too many Jews voted “incorrectly” and didn’t support the candidates who would have better protected us
4. Alana Newhouse from Tablet Magazine suggests, tongue in cheek, that: Maybe if we purify ourselves in some way, maybe the next time the attack will go somewhere else, a different synagogue and kill someone else’s grandparents.
5. Or maybe it is because so many Jews denounced Trump and the killing was retribution.

When tragedy strikes, among our first instincts is to figure out who is to blame.

I remember Rabbi Harold Kushner telling the story of a tragedy in his synagogue in Natick, MA. A teenage girl had been killed in a car accident. The rabbi went to console the mother. The grieving mother ran to Rabbi Kushner as soon as he entered the house and said: Rabbi, I know why this happened. It happened because I didn’t fast this year on Yom Kippur.

For this mother, figuring out why her daughter died was essential. She could live with the pain of loss only if she could be sure that there was a reason, that this was not random, but that God had a hand in the accident. Painful as it was, at least she knew that there was a reason. And more than that, if she would fast on Yom Kippur in the future, she reasoned, future tragedies can be averted. Right?

We have also seen this this week in Pittsburgh: the attempt to find the culprit. Where can we place the blame? Who is responsible for the murder? Why the NRA, of course. The NRA and Pres. Trump and all of those gun owners who want guns to remain legal, easily accessible and available to anyone without a history of being a mass murderer.

In the demonstrations in Pittsburgh, along with the show of support and solidarity with the families and the synagogue, was the chorus of condemnation of the gun lobby in general and the President in particular. **He is to blame**: his rhetoric, laced with invectives and accusations, motivating people to act violently. His support of the Second Amendment is to blame. His

divisive and inappropriate charges, his unfounded claims are to blame. Someone, something must be guilty of causing this. Otherwise this would never have happened.

I responded to this on Sunday night, when we hosted a Service of Comfort and Solidarity, when I was heckled by someone who attended. To be fair, I should also point out that after that Sunday evening service, I received many emails about the service, most of which were quite complimentary. But there were angry ones as well. And the anger was over my statement that "This was not Pres. Trump's fault". I answered those emails and I want to address it more thoroughly and explain why I stand by that statement.

I do not want to get the President off the hook here. But, we need to focus on the real culprit. Specifically, this is the fault of Robert Bowers, the gunman. But this is also the fault of pure, unadulterated and unmistakable anti-Semitism. This was the worst anti-Semitic attack on US soil in the history of this country. Last Shabbat in Pittsburgh, there was something present in this country which had not been here before. It is **that** nefarious and dangerous element which is to blame. But, that assumption, I believe, is mistaken and to hold on to that assumption might be even more dangerous. Allow me to explain (and please hold the heckling until I finish 😊).

I agree with those who say that the tone of the President's rhetoric has been incendiary and inappropriate. I agree on the need for stricter gun laws, with greater verification required of those who want to purchase a gun. I agree that urgent and crucial legislative action should have been taken by Congress long ago. But Robert Bowers attacked, not because he owned guns. (Lots of people have guns and don't attack). And if gun laws had been changed, he might still have procured the guns needed to attack Jews. His motivation was a belief that "All Jews must die", a belief that reflects nothing more and nothing less than his virulent anti-Semitism. He attacked because he is an anti-Semite. He told us that explicitly and yet people are not listening.

My friends, independent of President Trump and the NRA, anti-Semitism is real. It has not been relegated to Europe. It was not eradicated when the Nazis lost WWII, when the death camps were destroyed, or when the crematoria were obliterated. Anti-Semitism survived and lives in America. It may be the case that a President, who can describe some neo-Nazis as "good people", must be more disciplined in his speech and more discerning in the causes he seems to support. The President has a **responsibility** to use his pulpit to condemn, to denounce and to delegitimize hate groups in America. He is **responsible for an appropriate, forceful and unwavering condemnation, but the hate is not his fault**. And, by the way, if the President loses his bid for a second term, anti-Semitism will not disappear.

To blame the President as the one who is at fault is to miss a more important point and to divert attention from the real issue here. Anti-Semitism is the real issue. We must recognize it

and stand against it. And we must maintain focus **not** on blaming the President but, first, on holding the President responsible for a strong and unequivocal response. And second, we must hold responsible a society which allows this hate to be publicly expressed, and which ignores the fact that this message of hate is listened to with indifference. To deny or hide the scourge of anti-Semitism from that murderous moment is willful ignorance and indifference to hate.

In response, we need much more monitoring of the in much more monitoring of the internet, swift and more aggressive responses to acts of anti-Semitism. We need to marginalize those who spew hate with impunity, like the republican candidate for Congress in Missouri who openly and unabashedly proclaims his hatred for Jews, gays and others. His own children have gone on the offensive, loudly and forcefully begging voters in that district **not** to vote for their father. Much more scrutiny in our country must be given to incendiary and provocative anti-Semitic speech.

And something else: No one hates **only** Jews and no one else. Those who hate Jews, will find a way to hate others. And whether the hate starts with Jews or with someone else, it will, eventually, get to us. This hatred is here, it has always been here, more prominently in Europe in the past, but now we see the uptick here in the US. And it will always be here. So, we had better get used to fighting this hatred, wherever it rears its ugly head, even if it is not directed against us because, ultimately, eventually, it will spread to Jews.

With all of the pain, the loss, the sense of vulnerability, where do we find hope? Where can we look to imagine a better future? Hope, I believe, comes from a desire to find common ground and support garnered from the larger community. Since last week, I have been contacted by several ministers in the area. They have called to express their horror at the murders in Pittsburgh. They have called to offer their hands to help and their shoulders to support.

I find hope to be embedded in unity. Unity but not uniformity. Those with whom we must stand are not just other Jews. They must be members of the larger community. People of different religions, different heritages, different beliefs. And the reason that we must find safety in a diverse group with which to stand, is that it broadens and strengthen our response and resolve. We stand with the African American community and they stand with us. We stand up for the LGBTQ Community and they stand with us because when hate spews in their direction, we must be there to say “no” to those who hate, and to say yes to the embrace of every person without regard to race, creed, color or sexual orientation. Hate is defeated when we stand together, when we embrace each other’s humanity and when we quote the Torah and say:

*V’ahavta le’re’cha komocha / You must love your neighbor as yourself.*  
**Love your neighbor because they are like you.**

How are they like us? They too face prejudice and hate, they too are attacked. And they too need to know that what enables us to stand together is not a common system of belief or a common religion but a common sense of humanity. And it is that sense of humanity that sense of commonality which provides the foundation for relationships, the foundation of community and of the foundation on which unity can be built.

I was saddened when I saw the angry protests in Pittsburgh. I was saddened when the focus of demonstrations became gun laws. I was saddened by the calls to dis-invite the President and prevent him from paying respects and making a shiva visit. Admittedly, consoler-in-chief is not the President's strong suit. But, the anger I saw in the eyes of some demonstrators made me wonder if, with that tactic, are we not simply creating more anger and more hatred.

The solution to hate and prejudice is found neither in Gun Laws nor and in kinder and gentler Presidential rhetoric. They would help, but in themselves are insufficient. When hate confronts hate, all that can emerge is hate. But hate can be defeated.

Hate is defeated when we come together. Hate is dismantled by a show of unity, by mutual responsibility, by clear and unambiguous pronouncements about unity, friendship and mutual respect. When we stand together, shoulder to shoulder, we will never fall. We will not be toppled.

In speaking of Abraham, the Midrash calls him the first Hebrew *ivri*. The commentary goes on to explain that the word, "*ivri*" is from the root letters which mean "across". When Abraham left his home in *Ur Casdim*, he was unique. His belief in one God, his allegiance to God made him unique in a world of idolaters. Abraham stood, *me'ever /across*. He stood, across, on one side of a river, while the rest of the world stood on the other.

We Jews have always stood apart. Our practices, celebrations, our beliefs are different from those of others. But even though we stand apart because of our differences, we can be and we are anxious to be partners with others. We can find issues and causes which draw us together. What we learn, to be sure, is that "we are better together". And we can join our hearts and our hands to build, to defend and to embrace.

As we pray for our brothers and sisters in Pittsburgh, we pray as well for the US of A, for our leaders to lead in the right direction in response to this tragedy. We are heartened by our generous and principled non-Jewish neighbors who stand with us. And we pray for our People, the Jewish community which continues to thrive and to live in this country, dedicated to **our** mission, to the challenge of Abraham and every subsequent Jewish leader, to make this country and this world better places in which to live.

Finally, by embracing the values upon which this country has been built and with the support of our neighbors we will find not only hope, acceptance and strength.

