

Show Up for Shabbat: In Memory of the Victims of the Pittsburgh Massacre

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Rabbi Neil S. Cooper

There is a poignant scene described in the story of creation which we read this morning. God, you see, placed only one constraint on Adam and Eve in the Garden:

You may eat of any tree in the Garden, but not of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. (Gen. 2:16)

And, of course, with that singular request, with everything else available to them in the Garden, Adam is lured by Eve to eat from the tree (Gen. 3). At that moment, Adam and Eve heard God “moving about in the Garden” and they hid, not knowing how God will punish him for their disobedience. As God approaches, He calls out to Adam, “איכה? / where are you?” This was not God asking for Adam and Eve to come out from the hiding place, as if this was a game of hide and seek. Rather, as explained in a beautiful comment of R. Shneur Zalman, the first Rebbe of Lubavich, God’s question is not a question of Adam’s geographic location. Rather, God asks an existential question. It is a question which each person must ask him/herself at each step along the path of life:

“איכה/Where are you?”: With all that has transpired, for all that you have experienced to this point in your life, where are you now?

This is the question with which I begin: In the year since the massacre of eleven harmless and innocent people at the *Etz Chayyim*/Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, in the year following this attack, the worst anti-Semitic attack in American history. In the year during which we have increased security in synagogues, around this country and even throughout the world, where are we now?

In response to this question, I want to share two thoughts which originate in two *midrashim*, the first in the name of Rabbi Shimon (Gen. Rab. 8:5):

When God was about to create humanity, the ministering angels split into two contending groups. Some said, “Let him be created!” while others cried, “Let him not be created!” The angel representing Mercy said, “Let him be created for he will do merciful deeds.” But the angel of Truth said, “Let him not be created for he will be false.” Righteousness said, “Let him be created for he will perform righteous deeds.” But Peace countered by declaring, “Let him not be created for he will never stop fighting.”

What did the Holy One do? He took Truth and cast it to the ground.”

This is a remarkable parable. It suggests that God wanted to create man but could do so only in the absence of truth. For if truth and truthfulness were considered as pre-requisites for the creation of humanity, if a requirement for our creation was that we must tell the truth, God could not have created us. Only by casting Truth into the grave, only with the death of Truth, could man be created.

Today, reflecting on the events of exactly one year ago (tomorrow), I feel compelled to tell the Truth, despite the acknowledgement by God that truth seems incompatible with humanity. Reflecting on the events of a year ago, and upon those events which have taken place in response to Pittsburgh, the truth that I see is an ugly though familiar one. This truth is unpleasant and not particularly politically correct. The first thing we have learned from the events of a year ago, is that **we can no longer hide from the truth**, uncomfortable as that truth may be to affirm.

That truth begins with the fact that the Jewish People are the most hated people in human history, and that dubious honor (of being #1) has been ours, without a break, almost from the beginning of history. It is neither my intent, nor my nature, to recommend candidates for that dubious distinction of becoming “the world’s most hated” people or nation or religion, but I believe that we can all name other nations or people whose behaviors have been filled with murder, mayhem, torture and a lack of accountability which could easily render that country or those people as pariahs, nations even more worthy than Jews to be identified as the most hated. And yet, that does not occur. It has never occurred and, as it seems today, it will not occur any point in the foreseeable future.

The truth is that the massacre of eleven Jews, preparing to begin their services on that Shabbat morning, was not an isolated event. True it was the most murderous act of anti-Semitism in US history, but it was not an expression of anything that was new, unique or unheard of.

The underlying motivation of this the murderous attack is recognizable to any student of history. It has been packaged a bit differently by our detractors throughout history, given reason which explain why their actions are justified, but the same core sentiments which have motivated the great “Haters of History” to hate the Jewish people are still in play today. Consider the following:

Crusaders pointed to the Jews as infidels and opponents of Christianity.

Torquemada, pointed to our anti-Catholic beliefs.

Nazi Germany credited Jews with being the primary polluters of the rest of humanity. And today,

Iran ascribes all of the world’s ills to the Zionist Entity known as Israel,

without which the rest of the world's problems would be soluble.

What each of these haters share, if we are to unearth the buried truth, is not what they claimed. The Crusaders, Inquisitors, Nazis and the rest, did not believe the reasons **they gave** to justify and motivate their hate. Those reasons were their little more than weak excuses, false rationalizations for what is an unattenuated and **irrational** hatred of **who and what we are**. Beyond obvious differences in belief, beneath their hatred for our physical appearances, intelligence or worldview, hatred of Jews has been internalized, inculcated and transmitted throughout the world as a fully and unambiguously irrational endeavor.

This is the reason that so many books have been written about anti-Semitism. This is the reason that there is currently a six-part series created by Steven Spielberg being broadcast on the Discovery Channel entitled "Why People Hate". If there was a reason which could explain anti-Semitism, we wouldn't need entire books or six-part TV series to explain it. If there was a rational explanation, you could explain it in two sentences. But we have books, movies and other methods of communication all trying to explain rationally what is inexplicable because it is essentially irrational. And here is the point: you cannot refute an irrational belief by approaching it rationally. And so, unrefuted, the irrationality persists, festers and continues to grow.

To make this point, here are few headlines from the news **WITHIN THE LAST FEW DAYS!**

Swastika drawn in sign outside of Jewish Attorney's Office in CA
Prominent DC Synagogue vandalized with "anti-Israel and hate-filled messages".
Michigan State University's Sukkah vandalized and decimated.
Neo-Nazi tries to torch Jewish Center in Budapest.
Former UK Labor MP accused of dual loyalty

And something else: What these criminal acts have in common, beyond their obvious desire to express their hate and disdain for Jews, is the desire to intimidate. It is the intimidation factor coupled with the terrorist mentality of the randomness of the violence, that frightens. It is the fact that these are not acts perpetrated against particular individuals. These are acts which target people simply because they are identified as Jewish. That is what anti-Semitism looks like.

What occurred in Pittsburgh was an act of murder, an act with genocidal roots, an act of unadulterated and irrational hate, perpetrated by a person who was willing to be killed as the price he must pay, wanted to pay and expected to pay necessary to kill Jews. And, to him, as it has been to so many others throughout history, the benefit of killing Jews is a worthwhile act of martyrdom. If I die killing Jews, my life will have been worthwhile. And that is the truth.

And so, we must ask, what is our defense? What is our next move? And for that, I suggest a second midrash for your consideration:

Do you remember the story of the spies which Moses sends into the Land of Canaan to scout out the land where the Children of Israel would live? Moses chooses the head of each tribe, 12 spies, to go into the Land. And he says to them:

See what kind of a country it is. Are the people who dwell in it strong or weak, few or many? Is the country in which they dwell good or bad? Are the towns they live in open or fortified?" (Numbers 13:18-19).

The spies, as you know came back with two reports. 10 of the 12 reported that the Israelites could not prevail. How did they make that observation and recommendation? After all, when they went around the land, they all saw the same things: they saw great cities that were fortified with thick walls. And 10 said, "We will not prevail against them" if we engage them in war. Only two said that the Israelites could and would prevail. Why the total disparity in reports?

A midrash from *Tanhuma*, quoted by Rashi, offers an answer which links the last part of Moses' questions with the first: What is the mark of a strong people? What was Moses looking for? How will the scouts know if the Israelites were strong enough to prevail in battle?

If the cities are open, unwallled, this is a sign that the people are strong since they draw on their own strength. If, however, the cities are fortified, they are weak.
(Rashi on Numbers 13:18)

Every enemy has tried to destroy us using physical might. There is no doubt that we have suffered because of it. We lost 6 million during WWII. And how many more have been murdered throughout history for the crime of being Jewish? How many were tortured and murdered by the Romans for teaching Torah? How many were murdered in pogroms? Strong nations have used their strengths against us. And yet, every one of our murderous enemies have been destroyed. They are no more: No more Romans, no more Crusaders, Inquisitors or Nazis. Why is that?

According to the midrash, strength is not found behind fortified walls. Yes, walls are important to keep us safe, but ultimately, survival depends on much more. The existence of the Jewish People was never assured by fortification, nor by guided missiles, nor by missile defense systems alone. Although, thanks to this country and AIPAC, Israel has such defenses, to defend Israel from attacks of all kind. And here, in response to Pittsburgh's massacre, our synagogue's security, as is the case with most synagogues, has been dramatically improved.

We have multiple layers of security in locked doors, in cameras. We have armed guards and newly installed emergency alert buttons which will bring our police forces to our synagogue within minutes. Doesn't that make you feel safe? Safer? Yes. Fully safe? No.

Fortification can protect those who come here to pray, to study and to celebrate or, at least, provide a bit more peace of mind. But what assures our survival has never been, nor will it ever be a matter of fortification, a matter of armaments or a matter of armies. What has preserved us is the will, the desire, the commitment and the unshakable determination to continue to be Jewish. We must and will continue to defy those who would deny us our religious identity or our national heritage.

If there is a lesson to glean from Pittsburgh and its aftermath it is that, despite the fact that anti-Semitism is on the rise, despite the fact that 88% of Jews in this country feel that anti-Semitism is increasing in this country, we have allies in many more who are not anti-Semites. We will cultivate those relationships and work with others on the larger problems of anti-Semitism and domestic terrorism.

But we will respond as well: we will not cower or shut ourselves off from the world because there are those who hate us. We will not be intimidated to hide who we are. We will not be afraid in our synagogues. After all that we have endured, to be afraid to be Jewish.

According to the midrash with which I began, God buried Truth. But God created us because of the capacity we have to be compassionate, to love, to help others. Truth may be illusive but our determination for tzedakah, for kindness and for an appreciation for the sanctity of all life, these are the values which have guided us and will continue to guide us and define us in the future. These are the values which assure our future. These are the values which give us the strength, commitment and desire to prevail. And prevail we shall.