



A New Haven Tradition since 1892

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What Do You Do After a Massacre at a Synagogue?

A MESSAGE FROM RABBI TILSEN

What do you do after a mass shooting attack at a synagogue? Go ask a Black church leader. Go ask a Sikh clergy person, a JCC executive, a public school principal. Go ask any Israeli.

Conventional pastoral advice when facing tragedy and loss is to respect the “inner circle” of those affected -- the immediate family and close loved-ones. When your co-worker’s spouse dies, that person really does not want to hear about the loss of your aunt twenty years ago. As bad as you feel, it is about them, not you.

When it comes to an attack against members of a synagogue – a Masorti-Conservative congregation like our own – it turns out that many of us feel close to the inner circle of mourners and victims. Some of our members are past members of the Pittsburgh synagogue, and have celebrated and attended services at the targeted congregations, have old and dear friends there, including persons killed, and have relatives and friends in the neighborhood – literally Mr. Rogers’ neighborhood. They are us. Squirrel Hill or Beaver Hill. We were reciting the Shema in sync with them that morning. The eight hundred or more people who attended the vigil at the JCC on Sunday did not attend out of an abstract sense of duty. The Christian clergy, Muslim friends and others who sent messages of support to the BEKI community understand that our Jewish world is closely connected.

Regardless of what happens in the world, “the shul must go on.” Services at BEKI on the following Shabbat were “as

usual” – though attendance was greater thanks to guest speakers and people’s response to the massacre. Our guest darshan had moving words to say about the attack, which related to his theme. During the Torah service, when we said a prayer for healing, we included those congregants and police officers injured in the attack. At the end of Musaf, when we recited mourners’ qaddish, we included eleven more names.

Beyond reaching out to those in Squirrel Hill, we help care for people in our local community most intensely affected, including those whose private trauma is reactivated by this incident. We take whatever prudent safety measures may be indicated, and we try to keep our lives going “new-normally” and productively.

From time to time I am asked to recognize an event liturgically in our services. Generally, I decline to do so. Our liturgy is fixed and lengthy, and we have Divrei Torah and occasional discussions in which we can talk about these matters. There are tragedies that befall the Jewish People, and America and humanity, daily.

That same week, a family of eight Israelis – mother, father, six children – died in a traffic collision on Highway 90 when a cannabis-high driver trying to pass crashed into them. For people who knew them – and for many Israelis in general – that was a lede tragedy in the global Jewish News. In April, ten Jewish students were killed in a flash flood. And there were the Gaza wars. Which of these events are show-stoppers? What you feel most strongly about is subjective, political, and subject to the influence of the media. Your

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feelings and judgment are valid, but they are yours. Some people feel that our Shabbat services should be a forum for the issue of the day, while others believe it should be a day of respite from the troubles of the world. Whatever you think about that, what we have on offer is a chance to be Jewish with people who know you and who care about you, who share your core values and aspirations; that may be what you need most on Shabbat. You are not alone. If you don't need that, come anyway, because I need you to be with me.

Beyond the personal and pastoral response to loss, there are social and political implications. What do we do about the most deadly single attack on Jews in modern America? As disturbing as this mass shooting is, there are other dangers threatening us. I am concerned about the lives and well-being of Jewish youth and adults who among others are facing a renewal of persecution by government agencies in relation to their gender identity, or who are besieged on college campuses due to their Jewish identity or Zionist activism. I am concerned about our moral turpitude in tolerating our government's atrocity of separating children from their families, failing to honor commitments to asylum seekers and refugees, the illegal detention and deportation of US citizens – which have been problems for a long time and have now gained national attention. The talk of revoking citizenship and continuing mass deportations resonates with the Jewish experience of revoked citizenship in Europe. In Europe, it seemed farfetched, until it happened. I am concerned that in America our Jewish community is insufficiently reactive as we have enjoyed the luxury of not being the most despised and vulnerable minority group. These dangers loom larger in my mind than the lone-wolf with a gun, though the root issues are ultimately related.

The odd thing about anti-Semitism is that even though there are plenty of Blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans, along with Queers and other minority groups, people still frequently attack Jews and Jewish institutions. There is something uniquely crazy and evil about anti-Semitism. Our children have had the unusual experience of growing up in a context where they can think of anti-Semitism

as being abnormal, as if it were not part of European and Middle Eastern culture, baked into the cake of civilization in the West and Middle East. Most of our Jewish agencies thoroughly embrace the understanding that all Americans and all humans share the same fate, and that words that incite violence and hatred against anyone are an attack on all of us. Although anti-Semitism is unique, much of the response is the same as for racism and related maladies.

Different for us in the US is that the local police and federal authorities are working to protect

us. Without such protection, or with government-incited or directed violence -- well, we know where that leads. If you can imagine what our lives would be like if we did not believe the local police were here to protect us, you'd begin to get some insight into the predicament of Black people and certain others in much of this country.

The prospect of the continuing erosion of federal protection is alarming.

There is a nexus of anti-Semitism, gun culture, class conflict, incitement from national figures, racism, cultural alienation, and xenophobia at play. We have to work on all of those issues, independently and together. These are deeply-rooted problems that float the White Supremacy boat.

I do not want to distract from the tragedy at hand, or exploit the event to promote "Save the Whales" or some specific cause, platform or party. This is not a fundraising letter. I am pointing out that what we must do in response to this atrocity is what we have been doing all along. We take care of our friends and family most directly affected. We model respectful public discourse, show solidarity and actually help those in need. We train our children to be good Jews and good humans, and we promote science and general education among our neighbors. We adopt prudent safety measures and try to live as freely and normally as we can. We build our Jewish institutions, to project strength, compassion, and progress, in order to carry out our mission in accordance with the Covenant. We build our Jewish commonwealth of Israel and do what we can to make it the best it can be, and we aim to be good citizens and neighbors in New Haven. We don't let hatred or bigotry of any sort stop us. We keep living and loving.

