

This week's Torah portion is framed by death. It opens with the passing of Sarah, mother of our people and ends with the death of her husband Abraham. After Sarah dies, the first thing Abraham does is "mourn and cry" - לִסְפֹּד לְשָׂרָה וּלְבַכָּתָהּ. As we reflect on the slaughter of the "righteous eleven" last Shabbat at that is the first thing due them. In the Torah the letter 'ב' in the word וּלְבַכָּתָהּ "to cry" is smaller than the others. That is what it means to grieve, to be diminished by the loss of a loved one. And that is us this Shabbat as we remember those killed at Congregation *Etz Chaim*, for "all Israel is connected one to the other".

We mourn, however, not only the death of Joyce Fienburg, Richard Gottfried, Rose Mallinger, Jerry Rabinowitz, Cecil Rosenthal, David Rosenthal, Bernice Simon, Sylvan Simon, Daniel Stein, Melvin Wax and Irving Younger. We also cry for the passing of our innocence about our place as Jews in this country. We mourn for an America where mass shootings have become the norm, a land that has become numb to the slaughter of innocents in prayer and the young in their schools. We bewail a politics that excuses those who besmirch what is true and denigrate the dignity of others.

Actually, we should not be surprised that a synagogue was attacked. Gun violence is an epidemic in our land. We teach 2 and 3-year old's to hide in closets, disguising active shooter training as a game. Our students go into their schools to learn what to do should some fellow student turn cafeteria into a slaughterhouse. Hundreds are injured and killed at a concert. At Sandy Hook, Connecticut Kindergarten students and their teachers are butchered. In a Charleston, South Carolina, Black church parishioners studying the Bible are gunned down. There is mass shooting after mass shooting. And we do nothing. Our leaders talk and talk – and the dead pile up in heaps. How can we speak of our greatness as a nation when we allow this to continue? We are morally bankrupt.

After the *Shoah* (the Holocaust) we rose up as Jews and committed ourselves to a new commandment – a 614<sup>th</sup> *mitzvah* – "never again." Living in America as

Jews – safe, secure, confident – we promised not to stand idly by as hate grew. “Never again” we pledged – determined to not allow hate or racism or anti-Semitism to go unanswered. And yet ... and yet. In the past two years the number of anti-Semitic incidents has surged in this country. Anti-Jewish extremism is on the rise. Alongside that is the growing accessibility of the most lethal of weapons. Add to that the anti-immigrant rhetoric that we hear from so many (including our President). It is a dangerous, fatal mix. So - we should be surprised that Jews were targeted, Jews killed specifically because they affirm our Torah's values of welcoming refugees?! We should be shocked that it a synagogue that was attacked?! The real shock should be that it took so long.

*Kristallnacht* was the beginning of the end for the Jews of Germany and of Europe, the move from anti-Jewish legislation to the systemized murder of millions. So, we tremble, recalling the words yelled out as the Jews of Congregation *Etz Chaim* were gunned down: “All Jews must die.”

And it is not us alone. In our understandable focus on our fellow Jews, let us not forget just two days earlier, two others were murdered. The shooter, a white supremacist, tried to enter a Black church just 15 minutes before he went to a nearby supermarket targeting and killing two shoppers - Maurice Stallard and Vickie Lee Jones. Stallard was killed while shopping with his 12-year old grandson for supplies for a school project. Both victims were black. The gunman spared another man, who was white, telling him, “Whites don't kill whites.”

Over a year ago we placed a banner outside our synagogue. On one side is a picture of torch-bearing Nazis at rally around the time of *Kristallnacht*. On the other a photo from the alt-right “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia last summer. Emblazoned on that banner are the two words Never Again – but now a question: Never Again? Our banner is an indictment and a warning, for the “never” is back – and so the need for a major conference on anti-Semitism next month sponsored by the Anti-Defamation League entitled “Never ... is ... Now.”

The effort to intimidate the Jews of Germany on *Kristallnacht* in November 1938 did not appear out of nowhere. It was the result of years of a nation turning aside its morality, excusing the rantings of a leader who brought Germany prosperity and a renewed sense of self-worth. Germans felt good about themselves again. And if the price was roughing up some Jews – or, better yet, getting rid of them, so what? *Kristallnacht* stands as a warning - small acts of hate, unanswered lies and blame of the “other” left unanswered lead inexorably to new and dark reality, the legalization of exclusion and inevitably to an acceptance of violence.

So, is the Pittsburgh of 2018 the Berlin of 1938? Absolutely and unequivocally ... not. America is better than the rantings of neo-Nazis and the murderous acts of those who hate Jews or Blacks or Central Americans or women or ... well, you take your pick. We saw the goodness in the hearts of so many Americans again and again this week. Here are vignettes that are also America:

- Unlike on *Kristallnacht*, when police and firefighters let the rampaging stormtroopers do their dirty work, Pittsburgh's finest came to the defense of our fellow Jews – four of those police officers wounded in the onslaught.
- The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* has, on its website and under the logo on the front page, the Hebrew and Aramaic opening of the Mourners' *Kaddish*: *יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ*, a communal acknowledgment that our Jewish pain is our national pain.
- Tarek El-Messidi, a Chicago-based activist, started up a GoFundMe page for Muslims to give funds to help the victims and their families. In a few days over \$225,000 was raised for the families of those murdered.
- In Washington, DC last Sunday all federal buildings had their flags at half-staff, an official recognition of shared grief; and the President came to Pittsburgh to offer his personal respects. Whether you agreed with him doing so or not (I did, if you are wondering), these both stand in stark contrast to anything we Jews received from governments of the past.
- At a hockey game between the NY Islanders and Pittsburgh Penguins, each players' helmet and jersey had their team logo emblazoned atop a *Magen David* (the Jewish star) with the words “Stronger than hate.” Consider that as you recall Jews who, in living memory, were forced to wear that star as a symbol of humiliation and degradation.

So, no, America in 2018 is not Germany of 1938. But ... we may be the Germany of 1932. We stand at the precipice. Wealthy and employed, we have grown

complacent to where hate can lead. Tighter security – more guards, higher walls, more impenetrable barriers - these are false hopes if our land is not cured of its sickness of hate and acceptance of violence.

Our prophets of old warned us. Woe to a people inured to violence. Woe to a land whose ruler turns truth to lies and affirms lies as true. Woe to a people whose accept elders and leaders who pervert justice for the sake of power. Woe to those who attack as invaders those who simply seek the liberty our own ancestors sought, and we expect. Woe to a land that sacrifices its own children, who put self-interest above the security of all.

For the Jews of Berlin in November 1938 it was too late. But in 1932 Germany might have taken a different path. On this night of remembrance, then, this must be our pledge to those who suffered on Kristallnacht and after. Truly, never again.

If ever there was a time to speak up, to defend our selves as Jews, to speak on behalf of others and be politically involved – it is now. Our State representatives, those who serve on our behalf in Congress, the President of our land - they work for me. They answer to you. Let us, then, not be quiet. We must not stand down. Let us vote as we must, lobby as we can, protest if need be. But let us act, so we not look back with regret for having not done more sooner.

Never again will we allow those who hate stifle our demands for truth, peace and compassion. Never again can we let go unanswered some snide remark or joke or put down of Blacks or women or Muslims or Latinos. Never again will we fail to defend our fellow Jews, for we are *Am Echad*, one people. Never again will we excuse calls of violence as mere political pandering.

Last Shabbat the Jews of Congregation *Etz Chaim* would have read in Torah Jews the section in Torah all Jews around the world read - how *Avraham Avinu*, stood in the heat of the day offered hospitality to strangers. They would have read – as did we - how Abraham spoke up for the innocent and righteous. “Should not the Judge of the Universe be just?” he challenged God – asking that Sodom and

Gomorrah not be destroyed if there were but ten good people there. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the people of Israel as the “seed of Abraham, My (i.e. God’s) lover.” (Isaiah 41:8) That is who we are, the “seed of Abraham” – open to the stranger, defender of the needy, guardians of the truth.

In the face of hate, let us love. In a world of lies, let us affirm the truth. In a land broken and in despair, let us heal. That is what those who died at Congregation *Etz Chaim* believed. It is what we affirm, too – now, even more than ever. And so we close with words to a [song](#) written this week by *Nefesh Mountain*, the bluegrass Jewish group we have had with us in the past:

O sweet spirit hear my prayer  
Help these words heal someone out there  
I am but a voice, just a cry in the air  
But I sing nonetheless in this pain we share  
  
O sweet friends come dry your eyes  
and hold each other by this tree of life  
  
I’m angry and tired of this great divide  
But I sing nonetheless with love on our side.  
O sweet spirit hear my prayer  
Help these words heal someone out there