

**Rabbi Daniel Berman**

**After Pittsburgh, Shabbat November 3, 2018**

The mind and the heart of the American Jewish soul were torn apart last week on Shabbat, with the murder of eleven people at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, serious injuries to many more, and a devastating trauma to an entire Jewish community.

The meeting place of the American Jewish mind and heart is not a quiet, still place - it is full of tension and angst. The heart and mind sometimes seek one another out for a united front, and sometimes they rebel against each other. The Jewish heart is sometimes shocked that the mind can think a particular way, and the mind at times is curious and confused how the heart can be so vulnerable. This week, they have been collapsing into each other, seeking companionship and comfort. It is too hard to endure being alone.

The *mind* is where we try to analyze the presence and prevalence of anti-Semitism in American life, where we ask questions like “has there been an increase in anti-Semitic incidents?” and “is this attack an indication of a larger threat, a trend of hatred targeting Jews in America?” According to organizations paying close attention like the Anti-Defamation League, the answers are “yes, there has been a dramatic increase in explicit, isolated anti-Semitic acts,” and “we’re not sure yet. We’re assessing whether there is a larger, more systemic threat.”

The *heart* is where we feel the resonance of trembling, echoes of traumas, shudderings of grasping not just for freedom, but for life. That is deep in the contemporary Jewish psyche. The Shoah remains an irreparable fracture of relationship not just between Jew and God but between Jew and rest of the world. This fracture continued well after liberation, as Jewish refugees returned home to violent pogroms, or were brought to Displaced Person camps, locked out by the U.S. and European countries, immigration limited, and borders closed. In a December 1945 Gallup poll, after the atrocities of the Shoah came to light, still only 5% of Americans were willing to accept more European immigrants than the nation had prior to the war. Forgive us for not being totally trusting, even in times of great religious freedom and blessing.

But this existential fear is not located in the Shoah alone. Even as we have prospered in unprecedented ways as a people, each generation here in the U.S. has experienced some measure of anti-Semitism, sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit.

Any act – a foolish kid drawing a swastika as an ignorant joke, kids pretending they're Jewish by putting little hats on their heads and speaking gibberish to mimic Hebrew (both of which my son has experienced in Newton middle school) touches a raw, visceral nerve that runs deep. We know that, for the most part, these kids are pushing social boundaries and acting out other kinds of rebellions. We don't want to react too strongly. Teaching them compassion and sensitivity is our best antidote.

But a slaughter at a shul on Shabbat morning? It takes our breath away, our hearts skip beats, it's impossible to let go as we grieve with the families, wishing we could love them as we do our own children, somehow helping to heal their pain.

Anytime we witness prejudice - particularly an act of hatred - we are pained and angry, and we do our best to respond with love and compassion and raise a strong political voice. For generations the Jewish community has been at the forefront of standing together with people of color and people with disabilities and more recently LGBTQ folks in solidarity for civil rights and justice. This March our teacher for our 50th Kallah will be Professor Susannah Heschel. Her father Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel famously marched with Dr. Martin Luther King in numerous civil rights marches including in Selma Alabama in 1965. Together with Dr. King and African American leaders stood Rabbi Heschel carrying a Sefer Torah.

And - we grieve *differently* this week. This tragedy dislocates our sense of identity. It feels shattering, a shooting at a shul on Shabbat morning, with Jews praying shacharit, the morning prayers, calling out "*kulam ahuvim, kulam birurim, kulam giburm,*" we are like the angels, loved by our God, clear of mind, strong. I'm not sure what to do with those words in my own tefila yet, my heart is too compromised.

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Like many of you, I have encountered anti-Semitism. But I have never felt so shaken by it or fearful of its threats that it forced me to dramatically change the course of my life. I never fled to another part of the

country or region of the world, a choice that some members of this community have had to make, that many of our grandparents or parents had to make, and which people are making all over the globe right now.

I grew up in a small, safe community in a coastal town in Maine. It wasn't particularly diverse. My Polish grandparents, Israeli mom and Dorchester Jewish dad represented diversity.

In elementary and early middle school, I was called upon every year on the day before Christmas break to talk to my entire school about Hanukkah and how we get presents too. I'd hand out dreidels, going up and down the aisles in the classroom as kids laughed at the ridiculous-looking spinning tops with Hebrew letters, and I did my best to convince myself they weren't laughing at me.

During a 6<sup>th</sup> grade presentation on Judaism, which I had been giving for years already, my teacher interrupted me, telling me that my people are called Hebrews, not Jews, and that I should begin my presentation again. I remember my excitement to explain the transition historically from Ivrim to Yehudim, from Hebrews to Jews, which I had miraculously managed to learn in Hebrew School. I began to explain. He told me to move on.

This wasn't so impactful. It was just your typical, implicit anti-Semitism, ignorance, discomfort with the "other" - temporarily humiliating but not scarring.

Prejudice often lives in this implied place. It is not usually explicit, until it is.

Most school days on the bus ride home from elementary and middle school, I sat with my dear friend, the only other Jewish kid in my entire grade, talking about the things that make you best friends: we both loved baseball; he was willing to put up with me reading him my recent journal entries and I was willing to put up with him talking all day about rocks. (He's become one of the country's leading geologists by the way).

On one cold winter Maine day, windows of the bus frosted over, kids sitting behind us scratched the frost from the window with their fingernails, writing the word Jew, with an arrow pointing to us. My friend took my hand it squeezed it so tight I developed a little blood blister.

More than once I stood at my bus stop and got thrown to the ground by kids who then yelled, "you think you're better than us?" implying me, not Danny Berman, but me, Jew, reflecting toxic and virulent perceptions of Jews as powerful, needing to be humbled.

How I wished they'd come to my home and spend time with my grandfather who wore the torture of the Shoah on his face in ways that I naively imagined would make them break down in compassion.

I am not so special. These are your stories, too. I was actually very fortunate. I was safe, held gently and lovingly by my family and my friends. What I faced was mostly senseless bullying, kid stuff. But they have an impact, these kinds of experiences. We hold them, and we respond to them, if not overtly and consciously, then in our mysterious emotional lives and subconscious minds.

There are many ways we internalize prejudice.

We may subconsciously harm ourselves, identifying with those who degrade us.

We may protect ourselves by disengaging from community or public life, self-imposing our experience of alienation.

We may fight back, constantly seeing the world through a lens of humiliation, hurt or persecution.

Or we may stand strong, crying out: "your prejudice will not define us," It's hard, perhaps not even possible, to stand that strong when you feel afraid, but it feels like we need this response more than ever right now. "Your hatred will not define us. We get to decide who we are, what we do, what we value, what we stand for."

What's been most comforting and strengthening during this past week is the outpouring of compassion and expressions of solidarity from pastors, ministers, reverends, imams saying, "Rabbi, you are not alone. We have your back. Come, let's be together."

I have received calls and texts, from friends whom I haven't spoken to in years: "Danny, I'm thinking of you." "May you have strength, may you find light and love from within the darkness," one friend wrote. We hadn't been in touch in 20 years.

Here's what I have learned this week, here's what so different now and why we are so blessed: we're not alone anymore. Finally, we all say together: your hate will not define us. We get to decide who we are, what we do, what we value, what we stand for.

Just as we are not alone in support and solidarity, we are not alone as targets of hate. We cannot understand the presence and the impact of anti-Semitism right now in an isolated way. We cannot

disentangle anti-Semitism from anti-immigration sentiments, for example. Hatred against Jews is deeply connected to every other degradation and dehumanization that is unleashed and renewed.

We have a responsibility to make this connection. The prophetic mandate to respond to injustice has come into sharp and tragic focus. The attack in Pittsburgh was motivated in part by the attacker's perverse sentiment that HIAS, formerly the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, is opening doors for and enabling "invaders" to attack Americans. HIAS has worked for well over a century to assist and support refugees fleeing persecution. The organization resettled Jews fleeing Nazi Germany, and currently serves immigrants and refugees of all backgrounds. As the journalist for the New Yorker, Alexandra Schwartz wrote this week: "it is a bitter irony that *that sense of common cause has now been further strengthened*, as the Tree of Life joins Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church, in Charleston, South Carolina, Dar Al-Farooq Islamic Center, in Bloomington, Minnesota, and so many other houses of worship as points on a dark map of an American tragedy."

So now the work begins for us yet again to embrace all people as reflections of the Divine, to stand up for and be radically welcoming to the immigrant and the stranger, to raise our political voices to *support those who will lead with compassion*, to insist on individual rights and liberties for those who are vulnerable or attacked, as mandated by Torah. As HIAS proudly teaches, we assist refugees today not because *they* are Jewish, but because *we* are Jewish. That is how we honor and fulfill the vision of an Etz Hayim, a Tree of Life.

Earlier in the week I listened to a program on the radio about Mr. Rogers' neighborhood. You know that Squirrel Hill, where Tree of Synagogue is located, is the neighborhood where Fred Rogers lived. One woman who was interviewed said the most amazing thing. Implying that it's an impossible task to sweep away hate, this woman suggested: *maybe we can make goodness more attractive*. It made me laugh and listen in awe at the same time. It was totally brilliant and unwieldy at once, but it seems worth a try.

Can we be more generous, more loving, more forgiving, more understanding? Can we listen more deeply, especially to those with whom we disagree. Can we lead with humility and compassion?

Ultimately, this what we will have to offer the families of those who are now burying their loved ones, sitting shiva, soon to get up from their seats on the ground and return to school and work, back to buying

groceries and cooking Shabbat dinner. What we have is our compassion, a shared sense of grief, a gesture that you are not alone.

It is a terrible time but honestly, I feel confident we will be ok.

I brought Mica to an appointment the other day and while I waited, I sat in a cafe drinking tea, eating an Israeli salad and writing my sermon for today.

Sitting at the seat at the counter next to me was a girl, I would say 14 years or 15 old, talking on the phone. She sounded like you would imagine many 14 or 15 year-olds sound: “oh my god, can you believe it, you wouldn’t, did he really say that?” It was just amusing enough to keep me from having to move to a different part of the cafe for a little quiet, so I could focus on writing.

A few minutes went by, a young man walked in and sat down by her. He looked a few years older, but they seemed to know each other well.

She immediately put the phone away, took out a book and opened it to a marked page. He took out a pen and pointed at a word.

“Begin here,” he said.

And she began to read slowly, “shema. Yisrael. Adonai. Eloheynu. Adonai. Echad.’

“Nice,” he said. He pointed to a word lowed on the page.

“ba-barur.”

“Thats a final kaf” he said

“Ah, baruch.”

“Nice.”

I looked at my watch. I was already late to go pick up Mica. I quickly folded up my laptop and headed out.

And as I left the cafe, a cafe I had been to many times, I noticed, for the first time, a mezuzah on the door.

*Yeah, I said to myself, we’re going to be ok.*

May the memories of all those whose lives were lost last Shabbat be a blessing. May those who grieve find healing and peace.

May we all be blessed.

Shabbat shalom.