

“On Sorrow and Joy After The Tragedy at the Tree of Life Synagogue”

November 2, 2018

Judaism has much to teach us about moments of tragedy. Among the many complex questions we face after a devastating communal or personal loss, the question of whether or not there is space for joy while grieving is particularly poignant.

Our tradition asks, for example: how do we celebrate Shabbat during a period personal mourning? To balance sorrow with oneg (delight in) Shabbat, we gesture to both, taking off the clothing we have torn for the ritual of kriyah before a funeral service, while also standing to recite mourners kaddish. A person grieving from the loss of a loved one is likely to feel his or her grief especially on Shabbat, as the dissonance between sorrow and joy can be painful.

We see this tension in Torah all the time. Last Shabbat we read about Sarah's laughter in response to the prophecy that she would have a son in her old age. She laughed "internally," so we don't know the character of that laugh. Was this laughter of joy, of doubt, of anxiety, of fear, of longing, of sadness?

In our parasha this week, Chayei Sarah, Sarah immediately dies. Her beloved son Isaac's genuine joy in finding Rebecca is inseparable from his mourning the loss of his mother Sarah. In Rebecca, he finally feels comfort after the loss of his mother.

And from the story of Jacob, too, we will soon learn what it means to live in the shared worlds of joy, love and sadness. When he first meets his love Rachel, Jacob begins to cry. Why would he cry at this moment of love? Perhaps it's because he has reunited with a family member after all this time apart (they are cousins). Rashi reads Jacob's reaction differently: he cries because he knows at this moment of intense love that he will also need to bury her. Loss and love, sorrow and joy, are forever together. This coming Shabbat and weekend, we will live in all these worlds.

We grieve the loss of our dear friend, Ed Shade. He was a founding member of the shul. As his soul begins its journey to a makom shel shalom (sacred place of peace), we mourn with his family and remember the light, love and humor he brought us all these years.

We grieve the loss of life in the Tree of Life Synagogue shooting and feel the pain of the trauma experienced by the Pittsburgh Jewish community. A large group met Tuesday night at Reyim to consider how we will respond as a community. We stayed for hours, turning ideas into next steps to express

compassion and comfort and to reaffirm one of Judaism's spiritual gifts and religious commitments: we are here; you are not alone. I will soon share the ideas and next steps for our entire community. In the meantime, the Pittsburgh Federation has established a fund that includes support for the medical and psychological needs. And we will come together in celebration. We will daven Kabbalat Shabbat with energy and intention. We will have dinner together and kids will run around and yell. Their voices will remind us what matters, the sounds of life's subtle affirmations that we will continue. We will have a b'nei mitzvah program after dinner and throw candy at the end, rehearsing for that moment of unbridled joy when candy flies as if manna from heaven. We will celebrate the 80th birthdays of our dear friends, the soulful whiskey connoisseur Reb Yaakov (also known as Jack Siegel) and our amazingly vibrant, kind and generous Lynn Siegel. We will enjoy the gift of community Saturday night with our Echoes program.

This Shabbat morning, I will share the names of those who lost their lives in the attack in Pittsburgh. As I do each week, I will read the names of our community's family members for whom we are observing yahrzeit this week. Before I read the names, I invite you to share one memory about the person you are remembering this week. I hope this will be another path to deepening our friendships and standing together.

May the memories of all those we have lost be a blessing and source of strength.