

In Solidarity with Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Synagogue

An Ecumenical Gathering at Temple Shalom Emeth, Burlington, MA ~ November 2, 2018

Remarks by Rabbi Susan Abramson

Last year I received the following letter: Dear Rabbi, I wanted to thank you for leading the monthly Shabbat service at Carleton Willard Village. My mother attends regularly and receives so much joy from participating. Please accept the enclosed check as a token of my gratitude. Sincerely, Jerry Rabinowitz.

When I mentioned this to his mother Sally, she beamed and said, " Oh he's such a good boy. That's just the type of person he is."

Sally Rabinowitz has attended every Shabbat service I have conducted at Carleton Willard for years. She has the special role of being the one to light the Shabbat candles, to bring the light of Shabbat into our worship space. So it was with both tremendous sadness and irony that last Sunday I brought her a different type of candle, an eight day candle to memorialize her beloved son.

The tragedy which occurred at the Tree of Life synagogue last Shabbat was very personal for me. Not only because I am a human being who finds murder repugnant, not only because as an American I ache from the horrifying number of cold-blooded killings in our country, not only because I am a Jew who feels that every member of my people is like a member of my extended family, not only because I saw reflected in the people who were killed in Pittsburgh the same spirited individuals who are active members of our congregation, but because last Sunday I spent an excruciating time with a 93 year old mother who lost her beloved son because he was a Jew. And I later learned, he was murdered not only because he was a Jew, but because he rushed in to help the other victims, not knowing that the gunman was still there.

We have been filled with many raw emotions since last Shabbat. Anger. Horror. Fear. Sadness. Helplessness. I am still in disbelief about all that has happened this past week. Rev. John Gibbons calling me during our Chai Baby Havdallah-ween service last Saturday afternoon, to tell me that there was a good chance that one of the victims was Sally's son. Beginning our Adult Education class on Monday by rising to recite the Kaddish prayer for those who had died.

Hearing the kids in my confirmation class on Tuesday tell me that they have grown up in a world where this sort of violence is such a common occurrence that this tragedy registers as one of many, then listening to them compare what it is like to have ALICE drills at each of their schools. One of them talked about what it feels like to attend a school where swastikas have been appearing on a regular basis, along with notes like "gas the Jews."

Just today I learned that last night three synagogues were vandalized with anti-Semitic graffiti. What? How can this be happening? In our country, in the year 2018?

I cannot seem to fathom that this sort of hatred and assault is happening to us. Not just us, the Jewish community. But us people of faith. Us Americans. This week Maurice Stallard and Vickie Jones, two African Americans, were also murdered at a Kroger grocery store in Kentucky because of the color of their skin when a gunman was thwarted from entering a nearby church. One lesson I learned this week is that there is no such thing as a tragedy happening to others. There are no others. There is only one big us.

The outpouring of love and support this past week has buoyed my spirits and given me hope that the amount of caring and goodwill in our community very far outweighs the hate. Monday night Imam Shakeel of the Islamic Center down the street presented us with the poster, which is adorning our bima this evening, signed by the children of his school.

On Tuesday Rev. Angela Wells-Bean and Rev. Trina Portillo took time out of their busy schedules to spend hours helping to craft this service, during which time a woman suddenly appeared at the door and presented me with a bouquet of 11 white roses.

At the beginning of the week Chief Kent told me that if we didn't want police cars in the parking lot because they might scare the children during religious school, he would come in plain clothes himself and sit in our front hall to make sure we were safe.

Tonight is about mourning the dead. And it is about joining together to provide one another with comfort and support. My minister friends asked what was the best thing they could do for our Jewish community at this difficult moment. My answer was to do exactly what you have done this evening. Being here to show your solidarity. There is no more powerful statement.

Thank you all for helping us reclaim our Jewish sanctuary as a refuge of peace, where people come together in love, in prayer, to reaffirm our values, to give us hope for the future.

In the section of the Torah which Jews around the world read on this Shabbat, our matriarch Sarah dies, is buried and is deeply mourned. Yet the Torah portion is called Chayay Sarah, the Life of Sarah. Why is this section called the life of Sarah instead of the death of Sarah? To teach us that even though a body may die, the spirit lives on. The impact of Sarah's life on others, all the seeds she sowed, in her family, in her community, in her journey through life, live on and continue to blossom.

Eleven children of Sarah have joined our mother Sarah this week. Eleven beautiful souls, each of whose goodness will live on as an inspiration for us all.

We are here to continue their legacy, to stand up to hate, to bear witness to the fact that goodness will prevail. As the memory of Sarah still lives, Am Yisrael chai, the people of Israel lives. Our Jewish Tree of Life, lives. Our values as a people and as a country, live. Love lives. Friendship lives. Compassion lives. The values of our country live. The solidarity of our community, lives.

Thank you all for being here to demonstrate that this tragedy has strengthened our resolve to live out our faith, our principles, our connection with one another.

Joyce Feinberg, 75

Rich Gotfried, 65

Rose Malinger, 97

Jerry Rabinowitz, 66

Cecil Rosenthal, 59

David Rosenthal, 54

Bernice Simon, 84

Sylvan Simon, 86

Daniel Stein, 71

Melvin Wax, 88

Irving Youngner, 69