

After Pittsburgh (November 2, 2018)

By Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch

I know that many of us are afraid – a kind of fear we have not experienced before.

We have a basic concern for our physical wellbeing. Is it safe to be a Jew in New York? Is it safe to go to synagogue? Is it safe to pray in a sanctuary?

I want to reassure you. For several years now, under the leadership of the synagogue's security committee and board of trustees, we have taken unprecedented measures to ensure our safety – some of which you see, many that you do not.

This is not the time to avoid Jewish institutions. To the contrary: the Jewish way is to come together in momentous times. We have always celebrated and grieved together. We gather to find solace and strength in each other and to mourn, as one community, the brutal murder of 11 magnificent, kind and gentle souls.

We gather today in memory, in solidarity, but also in defiance. On some level, to be a Jew is, itself, an act of defiance. We will not cower. We will not cringe. We will not crawl. We have seen your likes before – we have survived worse than anything you can inflict upon us.

We also have a deeper fear beyond our physical wellbeing. It is that innate anxiety unique to our people and recognizable to countless generations of Jews that preceded us – a kind of primal alarm that wells up from the deepest recesses of Jewish memory:

“Oh no. Is it happening again? Here? In America?”

We studied the accounts of yesteryear; we learned the history; we know – in ways Jews always know – that there is a human virus, a plague, we now call “anti-Semitism,” that is ingrained, inveterate, indelible, ineffaceable, and ineradicable.

But America is different. The “Golden Land,” the land of the free, the home of the brave – this big, bountiful beautiful country that took us in when no one else did – breaking the chains of our bondage and freeing our spirit to soar to its highest potential. How could a massacre of Jews occur here? A bloodthirsty rampage singling out Jews for the sole reason of being Jews – in the leafy neighborhood and quiet streets of an American suburb?

And there is yet another fear that our country is entering “a corridor of deepening and darkening danger.” We have seen things we thought we would never see. We have observed hatred, polarization, disunity, incitement, coarseness of action and language that have pervaded every stratum of American society. It is not that these have not risen before in America. But we have

not seen them – not in our lifetimes. We assumed that such internal strife – such hatred for the other – were demons of the past, buried deep below ground, never to reemerge from their dark hideouts and dank caves to becloud the sunshine on the City on a Hill.

We are in mourning this week. It is the Jewish way. When a beloved dies, we take seven days – *shiva* – to step away and to grieve:

David Rosenthal
Cecil Rosenthal
Richard Gottfried
Jerry Rabinowitz
Irving Younger
Daniel Stein
Joyce Fienberg
Bernice Simon
Sylvan Simon
Melvin Wax
Rose Mallinger

They were real people. They were not statistics. They were not pawns in some grand political game. They were mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, children, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, good friends – loyal, productive, contributing citizens – and cherished and committed members of the House of Jacob.

In this week's Torah portion, "*Chaye Sara*," we read of Sarah's death: "*Va'yavo Avraham lisspod le'Sarah u'livkotah.*"

And Abraham mourned over Sarah, and he wept.

This is the first phase of Jewish grief. We mourn and we weep.

And then we read: "*Va'yakom Avraham me'al pnai motto va'yiddaber.*"

And after the period of mourning, Abraham arose from the presence of his dead, and he spoke. This week we mourn. This week we grieve. This week we weep. Next week, we arise from the presence of our dead, and speak. It starts with words. We must speak kind words, gentle words, words of comfort – words that counter, confront and contradict all the hateful language online, offline, in government and the public square.

We must find our prophetic voice again.

The rabbis teach: "In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man." In modern terms: when the atmosphere all around you is brutal, insensitive, degrading, dehumanizing – stand up and speak. Stand for principle. Make a difference.

There is a direct connection between hateful words and hateful deeds. Who knows this better than the Jews? It has been seared into our souls and onto our flesh: How easy it is for authority figures to arouse the passions, the fears, the insecurities and the rage of the populace.

If it is acceptable to speak in offensive and derogatory ways – about a person's appearance, his physical handicaps, her private parts, his sexual orientation, her place of origin. If lies can be uttered with impunity – with no shame, no self-reflection, no cost – then the outer walls protecting society from the worst of human nature weaken and crumble.

Coarseness, intolerance, chauvinism, xenophobia, bigotry are never good for democracy and never good for Jews. We learned again this week – as if we needed to be reminded – that even if we are not the immediate target of prejudice, sooner or later it will come back to the Jews anyway.

Did anyone think that that an atmosphere of intolerance would bypass Jews? Did anyone think that threats against mosques would not eventually lead to threats against synagogues? Did anyone think that the moral rot of disparaging Mexicans or Africans or desperate refugees could be contained to these groups alone? That we can mark the doorposts of our houses, and that the angel of death can pass over us: That the creeping shadows of intolerance can bypass Jews? It is not a question of whether any public figure is anti-Semitic. Rather, the question is: are we, wittingly or not, creating, permitting, or encouraging an atmosphere of intolerance, giving aid and comfort to Jew-haters?

Anti-Semitism is a dagger in the heart of liberty: because it is never only about Jews. Jews are the canary in the mine. We are often the first to suffer but never the last. When the canary dies, it reveals a toxic and lethal atmosphere that no living being can endure. Anti-Semitism is poison; it destroys the living tissues of the body politic.

As anti-Semitic incidents have surged in the past few years, all Americans should stop and reflect. Hatred against Jews never stops with Jews. Bomb threats against Jews; hate speech against Jews; desecration of Jewish cemeteries; internet and social media trolling of Jews lead to murdering Jews – and these are precursors, warnings, that something is rotten in the state.

All Jews are responsible one for the other, teach our sages. When one Jew feels pain, all feel pain. When one Jew suffers, all suffer. We are all pained today. We are all suffering. But after the weeping of this week, get up from the presence of the dead – and speak.

Stand up and be counted. Join our synagogue's anti-Semitism task force – now over a hundred strong. Continue to support all three Stephen Wise task forces so that we can organize optimally as a community. We will be presenting a myriad of new programming and action in the weeks ahead – including strengthening and increasing our partnership with HIAS (the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) that this mass murderer found so objectionable.

Consider a contribution to our Pittsburgh Relief Fund. We will ensure that your contribution does some good where it is most needed.

Vote on Tuesday. Voting is the strongest voice we have as American citizens. Vote. Every political choice we make is fundamentally a moral choice. Every election is a contest for the soul of the nation. “Politics” is not a dirty word. Ultimately, politics is about conscience and character.

Vote for the candidates who reflect your conscience and your character. Vote for those who represent the best of American values: hope over despair, unity over disunity, tolerance over hatred. Vote for sane laws restricting the absurdly easy access to weapons of war and mass killing.

Vote for those who can inspire us to reach our highest potential. Vote for those who remind us to consider the good of others. Vote for those who seek justice, love mercy, and who walk humbly – who encourage us to deal loyally and compassionately with each other. Vote for those who remind us of the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the suffering, and those left behind. Vote for those who seek to soften our hard hearts. Vote for those who lift us up, rather than tear us down. These are the most American of ideals. This is what American patriotism means.

Vote next week, and never stop voting. Every day is a struggle. There is no relaxing, only perpetual vigilance. Social gains are rarely easy and never permanent.

No matter the outcome next week, next year, or next decade, do not lose hope. Do not lose faith in American democracy. We are blessed to live in America. Our Jewish ancestors could not even dream of such a place. We are blessed to fight for American principles and values. Gird your loins and fight. Protest, advocate, lobby, contribute and defend with passion the ideals that define us.

Do not begrudge these years. They can make you better. Nothing inspires us more than the fight for principle. Moral sentiment and grim resolve lift the heart and feed the pure running waters of the wellsprings of life itself. These years may concentrate our minds and force us to think through what we really believe. What are the bedrock principles that guide our actions? These years may deepen our understanding: never to take anything for granted. Everything can change in human affairs.

We get better through struggle. Amidst the challenges of the years ahead lay opportunities for sacrifice and service and ennobling struggle.

Dear congregants:

It is traditional during *shiva* to wish each other *chayim arukim* – “may you live a long life.” I pray for all of us: may we live long lives – lives of honor, kindness, mercy, compassion – meaningful lives – promoting goodness, joy and peace.

And be proud to be a Jew. Never waver, never weary, never falter, never fail. Stand in awe before the scroll of Jewish destiny. You are connected to something special and precious – *Am Yisrael*, the people of Israel – the only Western civilization to have survived ancient days.

There is a stone slab in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. It was carved around the year 1200 B.C. and stands 10 feet tall. Its purpose was to praise the military victories of the Pharaoh Merneptah, the fourth ruler of the 19th dynasty. Scholars call it The Merneptah Stone.

Some call it “The Israel Stone,” because it is the first known reference to the Jewish people in all of human history. We can peel away 3,200 years of civilization and peek into the very origins of Jewish life. The pharaoh mentions us only in passing – in one short phrase. We were almost an afterthought, but there we unmistakably are. The Jewish age is dawning. The seed of Israel has sprouted.

What did the king say about us? What were the first words ever written about the Jewish people? At the bottom of the slab recording the deeds of the “lord of strength, whose name is given to eternity,” as Merneptah described himself, he writes: “Israel is laid waste, its seed is destroyed.” Here ends the first known reference to the Jewish people. We are introduced into recorded history with the boast that we have been destroyed.

A word to all those who dream of a world without Jews: We will outlast you. You will never succeed. We will never give up. We have seen it all. We have survived it all. We are still here, and will remain here – now, and evermore.