

**SHABBAT CHAYEI SARAH
25 CHESHVAN, 5779
NOVEMBER 3, 2018**

This week's Torah portion begins with the first Jewish death and burial. The origins of the funeral and burial rituals and observances that took place this week in Pittsburgh can be traced back to this Genesis narrative.

The sadness and grief felt when one of our loved ones is buried is beyond words. What about when eleven of our people are buried? How do we measure our sadness and grief when each one of these deaths was the result of lies, fear and hate? We cannot.

As soon as Abraham finished burying Sarah, he began to think about the future. He knew he needed to do something to secure the future of his family and the future of what came to be called the Jewish people and Judaism. We must do the same as so many of our people over centuries and centuries had to do in responding to anti-Semitism in their time and place.

Sadly and tragically, this horrific act of hatred deepens our connection with our people who suffered and perished in so many ways, in so many times and in so many places. It allows us to stand with them in Jerusalem when it was destroyed by the Romans, in Germany when the Crusaders stormed through, in Spain and Portugal during the Inquisition and Expulsion, in Poland when the Cossacks ravaged towns and villages and, in the ghettos and camps during the Holocaust. What we are experiencing now helps us embrace the enormity of the fear, suffering, and pain our ancestors suffered. It gives proportion to our fear, sadness, and pain.

This also provides us with the historical context to process what we as the American Jewish community are experiencing today including the hateful graffiti found in the Brooklyn synagogue yesterday morning, less than a week after the slaughter in Pittsburgh. What does this tell us? As in the cover story of the new issue of the Smithsonian, we are once again reminded that even after the Holocaust, the hate of Jews continues and wherever there is hate of Jews there is hate of others. It was there in Nazi Germany and it is here in America today.

How blessed we are to have the support, concern, and compassion of so many of our non-Jewish neighbors and friends including those with us this morning and those in synagogues throughout our city, state, and country this Sabbath morning. I ask all of you here at Adath Israel this morning to please stand. We thank you for your concern, support and solidarity. Our thankfulness for your being here with us is profound. The number of clergy and others who have contacted me is extraordinary and this is happening throughout the American Jewish community and especially, in Pittsburgh.

There is so much to learn from this tragedy, though we would certainly choose other ways to learn. Sadly, human history tells us that we often do not have this choice. I shared with our Sunday School children this past week about all of the solidarity and support pouring forth and told them that they, and we, are not alone. I also shared that we need to be sure as American Jews that we will always be with others when they, when you, need us. Be it in churches or mosques, in schools or at concerts; wherever we need to be, we will be there as so many are here with us now.

A Hasid came to his rabbi and the rebbe could see he was worried, and the rabbi asks: “What weighs on you so heavily?” The Hasid responded: “I want to be sure that when I die, I die as a good Jew.” The rebbe smiles and tells him that is very easy to which the Hasid responds: “How, rebbe, is it possible that this is easy?” The rebbe answers him: “If you want to die as a good Jew, live as a good Jew.”

There is a commandment to sanctify G-d’s name, kiddush HaShem. Understandably but regrettably, this commandment has come to refer to martyrdom, to Jews giving up their lives or having their lives taken from them simply because they were Jews as what happened to the eleven at Etz Hayim Synagogue and so many of our people over millenia—seemingly countless.

Nachmonides of the 13th century tells us that sanctifying G-d’s name may include martyrdom but is by no means limited to it. The commandment of kiddush HaShem is to be done every day by how live our lives, how we talk to and treat people, by being honest and truthful, charitable, compassionate, and by protecting and taking care of anyone and everyone vulnerable and in need.

We, as Jews, certainly have to come together in numbers and strength when tragedy happens as it did this past Shabbat in Pittsburgh. But as I concluded my remarks on Sunday evening at the JCC, we have to learn how to come together to celebrate living as Jews as individuals, families, and communities and publicly affirm the depth and purpose of our Judaism every day by how we live our lives as Jews.

We can learn from this tragedy the importance of doing this and thereby contribute to the future of the Jewish people as Abraham did after his loss and sadness. A tragic irony: many Jews throughout this country are in synagogues this Shabbat to honor the eleven Jews murdered in Pittsburgh. For most of us, this is not what we do very often if at all during the year. These eleven we honor were at shul every week on Shabbat. Shabbat and synagogue were an important, meaningful, and joyful part of their lives. That is why these eleven brothers and sisters of ours were at The Tree of Life Synagogue last Shabbat.

On Sunday evening Rabbi Kamrass drew very strong applause after two of his statements. The first was that we need to finally do something about guns and gun violence in our country. The second comment was when he said we need to hold our elected and appointed officials responsible for not doing anything about the violence wracking our society and, applicable to some, for contributing to it.

In Jewish law speech is equal to action and we are held responsible equally for what we do and what we say. Hateful, fear inducing, derogatory and untruthful, speech is considered by our rabbis to be enormous sins always leading either immediately or ultimately to tragic consequences. Very encouraging was the thirty or more of our high school students sitting on the floor in front of the stage who immediately after both of these comments broke into loud applause, inspired us, and led the way to join them.

We must learn from this tragedy that we are all responsible to vote and responsible to vote the right way. This is not a political statement; it is an ethical statement. It is very concerning how many do not distinguish between the two, especially given how unethical so many politicians are and how unethical so much of politics is. For Jews, this is to have Jewish values and ethics determine how we vote and for whom we vote. For all Americans, voting guided

by the values of justice, compassion, peace, honesty and respect for other human beings, whoever they are, is the right way to vote and a most significant way to sanctify G-d's name in this world we live in.

Who is the most disadvantaged sick person? It is the one who does not know he or she is sick. This is why diseases that do not symptomatically present like pancreatic cancer are so fatal. Next it is the one who receives the diagnosis but refuses to accept it, denying it all together or minimizing it. We Americans, are in significant numbers sick in one of these two scenarios.

I shared Sunday evening at the JCC and as I did the same in more detail on Rosh Hashanah from this pulpit, our society and country are sick. Gun violence, violent crime, gross environmental irresponsibility, mass incarceration, the opioid epidemic, the 30% increase in suicide in the last twenty years and the increase in suicide among our youth and even elementary age children, poverty levels, infant mortality, and all the efforts by politicians to eliminate taking care of these people and their children in the most technologically developed country in the world and the richest country in the history of humankind, violence against GLBTQ folks and women, rampant racism and Islamophobia, fear and hatred of immigrants and refugees, electoral corruption and at the root of so much of our sickness, unbridled greed.

Jewish law requires an individual to take care of one's health and a community to take care of the health of the community. As individuals and a society, we are failing to do this. We must acknowledge we are sick, which is the first step on the road to healing and recovery. As I tell my teenagers in Confirmation class, you are now at an age and stage in your life when there are things you may do that there will not be a second chance. For us as a country and society, we are standing on the precipice. The fact is we have what is required to deal with this sickness and return to a life of health and well-being as a society and country, but we must act now to do so. It cannot and will not happen overnight but it can happen over time, provided we dedicate ourselves to it and quit avoiding the truth and stop denying the reality of our condition.

This is not—as Pittsburgh screams out at us—pancreatic cancer. The symptoms are many and the damage and pain caused from the divisive and hateful rhetoric is not visible, it is empirical, palpable, and we must remember it still

treatable. This is the lesson we need to learn if we are to have a future; and then teach it to, or perhaps better yet, learn it with our children and grandchildren by our side?

One child on Sunday morning asked if it is alright to hate the man who murdered the eleven Jews in Pittsburgh and another said it is good that there is the death penalty. I'm pretty sure that they overheard adults speaking, which, by the way, the experts in talking to children about such tragedies tell us we should be very careful when we do discuss these matters that we do not do so in earshot of children. These discussions with our children must be intimate and nuanced very carefully and thoughtfully.

I told the children that our Torah is emphatic that we should never hate anyone, and we are commanded to love everyone. Neither of these commandments are simple or easy to live by to say the least. I then explained that our Torah and rabbis knew that hate always leads to hate and love always leads to love. The fear and hate—significantly connected—of neo-Nazis, racists, anti-Semites, white supremacists, and others, leads to Pittsburgh, the church in Charleston, South Carolina, the mosque in Quebec City, the Sikh Temple in Milwaukee, the school in Parkland, Florida, the JCC in Kansas City and to everywhere the violence, unprecedented in our country and dramatically unequalled in our world, has occurred.

Our Torah and rabbis knew that the reason G-d commanded us to love others is because love leads to love. The love of G-d leads to the love of G-d's creation, the love our honored guests have for G-d, leads to their love for us, the love we have for life leads to us wanting to do everything possible for the well-being of all people and all of this leads to more love. Hate leads to hate, love leads to love. This is not a cliché or a Pollyannaish view of life. This is an eternal truth that all truly religious people know and do their best to live by. Anyone claiming to be a religious person who does not accept this truth is not a religious person. This also is a truth.

I concluded with our children on Sunday as I will now this Shabbat morning, a week after. I asked, "What is the National Anthem of Israel?" A child raised his hand and said, "HaTikvah." "What does HaTikvah mean?" I asked. Another child responded, "The Hope." Yes," I told them. "We are a people of hope."

Literally for thousands of years with all we have experienced, we have never given up hope and we never will. Jews always have faith in the future and we live our lives positively knowing we can contribute to making our country and the world a better place for everyone. This hope and faith need to be strengthened not just for American Jews but for all Americans. This is not easy, to say the least, but it is absolutely necessary if our country is to have a future any of us would want to be part of, and have our children and grandchildren live in.

We have hope that the time will come when there will be justice and peace for all. We understand that this will not happen by magic or even by prayer; it will only happen by all of us working for justice and peace and living lives of compassion, respect, and love, not for just some people, but for all. This is G-d's will, this is what G-d wants; let it also be our will and what we want.

SHABBAT SHALOM.