

Solidarity Shabbat - November 3, 2018
Sermon Notes by Rabbi Leonardo Bitran

With thanks to Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson and Rabbi Joshua Kullock

I) The right to be a mourner.

If you are outraged at the horrible events of last Shabbat at the Tree of Life congregation, you have every right to be. We are in Shiva, the seven days after a Jewish funeral. We are in mourning. Prior to the beginning of Shiva, during the period between death and burial, called ANINUT, we are exempt from praying, from ritual, from coming to synagogue. Because we are in the middle of a period of the most profound grief we are not even allowed to pray, only to make arrangements for burial. It is only after the burial that mourning begins. That is the period we find ourselves in right now.

Last Monday during Aninut, as details of this horrific Anti-Semitic attack were still reaching our homes, Debbie, our executive director, and I were interviewed by channel 8 news. We were asked, "How do we begin the healing process?" And I was tempted to say to the anchor, Mark, that I couldn't begin healing because I had not begun mourning. Don't ask me for the healing process, because I don't know when that will start. As mourners we have the right to be angry first, to go through this period with emotions of all kinds. We have the right to mourn the Jewish way.

II) Antisemitism

Robert Gregory Bowers couldn't have been any clearer about his intentions last weekend: "I just want to kill Jews," he said.

So it doesn't matter for Robert, or to any of the Anti-Semites like him, who we really are, what we actually do, what we believe in. In his view, and in the view of all Anti-Semites, we represent a danger to society, and therefore must disappear.

Part of their irrational behavior is based on the idea that whatever we do, actions bad or good, is evidence that we somehow continually plot against society.

The term "Anti-Semitism" was actually coined in the 1870s by a German Jew hater, Wilhelm Marr, when the old term 'Jew-hatred' had become obsolete . . . and did not suit the modern pseudo-scientific, nationalistic ideology of a new era. "There was clearly a need to establish a new paradigm for anti-Jewishness which sounded more neutral, objective, 'scientific.' It was called 'Anti-Semitism.' Antisemitism is the hatred for, or the effort to discriminate against, Jews, because they are Jews!"¹

It doesn't really matter who we are, what actions we take. If we are capitalists or socialists. If we lean right-wing or left-wing. If we have one sexual preference or another. It doesn't matter if our ethnic background is Aymara, or Balkars, Circassians, Dutch, Greek, or Hawaiian. It doesn't

¹ Anti-Semitism: The Longest Hatred by, Harvey Belovski <https://jewishaction.com/religion/jewish-thought/anti-semitism-longest-hatred/>

matter if we are successful or not, if we are introverted, extroverted. We are all hated, Anti-Semitism has an all inclusive definition.

It can get very ugly today if you visit a university or colleges campus, where Anti-Semitism often goes hand in hand with Anti Israelism. A new 'modern' and 'objective' way to hate Jews. This increasing hatred against the Jewish people, or the Jewish race, or the Jewish religion, or the Jewish nation-state, extends from the simplest to the most sophisticated houses of knowledge.

III) How do we Respond?

We have already begun to respond to this most recent attack on the Jewish people. Sunday night 3,000 Rochester community members came together to console each other. People came from all walks of life to be with our community in a time of great need. Their presence actually did make us feel comforted. We were embraced by them, as we often are by friends and neighbors, when they visit a Shiva house after a funeral. These friends, and neighbors saw us in pain. They also heard how we respond to hate.

And this is our way. In unity: The Jewish people understand that an act of hate against one community is an act of hate against us all.

People of faith, who know the Bible well will be familiar with Psalm 97. In the psalm we read, "*Ohavei Adonai, sinu ra.* - You, who love God, hate evil."

Here we are presented with the assumption that all of us who love God must hate evil. Is that true? Can we tell that to the world? Can we begin to accept the fact that people who hate other people cannot play in the same sand box as the rest of us? Because the evil they carry puts our very existence is at risk?

We need to turn our energy against this evil that pervades our society. We need to stand up and speak against the rhetoric of hate, because words lead to actions. They led to the kind of anti-Semitism we saw this past Shabbat. We need to say no to that rhetoric. It has to stop and we will have to be a part of that action. It is not acceptable to hear a rhetoric of hate from our politicians, it is not acceptable to hear it from The Media, or Hollywood. It is not acceptable from clergy and community leaders. We need to do something, to take action against hate in its most accepted form, language. We must speak up, join rallies, talk to elected officials. Use our voice when we vote. Our government needs to enact laws that protect all of us. The time to act is now because these kinds of attacks that stem from hate can no longer be allowed to happen so frequently or so easily.

Anti-Semitism is on the rise in America at a rate not seen in decades. This vicious hate crime, perpetrated against innocent people last Shabbat, when a new Jewish life was set to be consecrated and celebrated through the ritual of Brit Milah is but the latest in an escalating scourge of hate-based violence in America.

America might be the land of the free, what it needs to be is the land of peace.

Mass shootings have become a far too common in the United States. Calls for extra security can only accomplish so much when so little is being done to screen gun purchasers and limit the lethality of weapons available for sale. What kind of society have we created that I cannot secure the lives of those who do not bear arms, and never will?

In times of loss “thoughts and prayers” are often offered to those effected. At this time we say, “thank you, thank you for thinking of us.” But true prayer? True prayer means soul searching, it means resolving to change.

Rabbi Joshua Kullock, of Tennessee had this to say about prayer, following the events in Pittsburgh:

“If there’s one eternal message that the biblical prophets have taught us, it is the message claiming that no ritual is meaningful unless it is joined with a passionate commitement to repair the world, that no prayer is useful unless we translate our words into actions, and that no religion achieves its full potential until it becomes a powerful force capable of mobilizing us on behalf of those less fortunate than ourselves.

Until there’s a positive match between actions and words, I would prefer our elected officials, and for those who will be voted in during these

upcoming days, to engage themselves ... in more inspiring deeds. For our sake and for the sake of our children.”²

There is a time and place for prayer. But what we do following a tragedy cannot end there.

IV) What needs to be done?

In my opinion there is a piece currently missing in the intricate puzzle of our society. It’s a call for civility. It’s a call to society at large to understand the implications of multicultural living. There is a need to understand how living in a multicultural society comes with rights and responsibilities. Our Jewish community, proud descendants of refugees who, like all of America's diverse communities, found safety and happiness on America’s shores, will remain steadfast in our commitment that these tragic losses of a week ago will be given meaning by our worthy and courageous actions. To learn to live in a multicultural society, safe and prosperous for everyone, will be our commitment to the fallen. It will be their posthumous blessing to the living.

Ultimately the bigots, Anti-Semites, and racists, and evildoers the world over do not get to set the agenda of what will happen tomorrow. We open that door, we walk through that portal.

² Rabbi Joshua Kullock: I am tired of prayers from politicians.
<https://www.tennessean.com/story/opinion/2018/10/31/rabbi-joshua-kullock-am-tired-prayers-politicians-opinion/1823701002/>

We need to demonstrate that the love and respect within us is stronger than that hate of the few. We need to show our resiliency, we need to show our solidarity, things these assassins do not possess. We need to define the agenda. We need to say what is permissible in our world and what is not. It is not up to the criminals, racists, and Anti-Semites to tell us how to live and how to practice our religion.

Let us display the energy that brings us together and that motivates us to act in harmony with one other across community lines, across community divisions. This solidarity will enable us from here on to establish a stronger and more loving relationship with one another.

Above all, we need to recover all our humanity through repairing the world we live in.

Shabbat Shalom