

Letter on the Tree of Life Synagogue Pogrom/Attack
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FOR DISTRIBUTION:

Just days ago on a quiet Shabbat morning, sanctity was shattered. The shards remain strewn across the floors of the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, across every corner of Jewish life, and across the foundation of the American civic square. There is no other way to say it: This act of extinguishing the light kindled in 11 precious souls was an abomination against the Jewish People and the American Ideal itself. It was no less than an American pogrom, born of hate and the silence that allowed it to bloom.

As people of the world and leaders in our community, we are not blind to the acts of horror carried out in battlefields and along ordinary city streets, in homes and in workplaces, at playgrounds and in hidden places. There is no nationality, religion, gender, ethnicity, group or subgroup that has not suffered in our world. And yet, it is an unchallenged fact that the Jewish People has suffered a disproportionate share of revilement and exile, indignity and destruction.

Let us state the obvious for those who wish to ignore it: This was not an isolated incident. The murderer who entered a holy space to defile it, was a concretized reflection of a dysfunctional family of ideas whose cancer has eaten from the inside numerous societies throughout history to void them of their humanity and their holiness. Even in our great nation, we have fallen prey to division and fear. Good people have given quarter to a dangerous lethargy by not chasing after and depriving oxygen and nourishment to the unGodliness of hate and its tormented sibling, violence.

We must ask ourselves if we are ready to devote ourselves to paying for the price of liberty, not with blood and bravado but with devotion and effort, good will and investment. We cannot be complicit in the diminishment of a single human soul; we must elevate the endeavors of community building and civic pride, lift up and live out the values of our religious institutions and our precious civic creed, and finally, give real, loving, and sustained attention to mental health needs and disabilities that allow individuals, coupled with crippling isolation, often by being neglected by their fellow human beings, to become profoundly damaged and even radicalized as their brokenness is soothed by the act of dehumanizing and destroying others.

In the brief days since this tearing of the fabric of the American promise of freedom to be who we are and to live out our authentic selves to their best ends, I and my colleagues' thoughts and emotions have turned from being stunned to being filled with anger to welling up with sadness and compassion and now, with all of those, being energized with a renewed determination to bring an elevated vibrancy to the Jewish community and to the Jewish practice of lovingkindness.

For members of the South Jersey Board of Rabbis and Cantors, this heinous act was personal on so many levels, not the least of which being that Rabbi Myers was, for many years, our colleague and our friend, remaining devoted to our organization and to the Jewish community. He served our community as he clearly serves his current congregation, out of a love of Judaism, the Jewish People, and a devotion to advance the cause of human decency. We are profoundly sad that he and his family have suffered so.

Rabbi Jeffrey Myers did not deserve this tortured indignity and suffering. His congregants, the fallen and the tormented, did not deserve this. Pittsburgh and its village-like neighborhood of Squirrel Hill did not deserve this. ***And, let us be loud and clear: The Jewish People, the righteous and sinners alike, did NOT deserve this.***

Anti-Semitism is an illness that has not yet found its cure. Perhaps because, in a sense, it is like an opportunistic infection, given succor by more base human pestilence such as fear, inhumanity, isolation, and dependency. We may not find the cure in our lifetime but we can quarantine it. We may not relieve all suffering but we can lessen it in our orbit. We may not be able to blot out brokenness but we can live as if our lives depend upon our healing others, even those seemingly unworthy of our efforts. In the end, our lives do depend upon all of these things as, both in body and spirit, we cannot survive or thrive without devotion to each other and to bringing holiness into our world.

As Jewish spiritual leaders, we are renewed in our devotion to our path of healing. We witness evil and simultaneously work to eclipse it with God's love and a therapeutic spirituality, rooted in tradition yet that also speaks to our time and challenges. We feel others' diminishment and loss and seek to bring harmony into the midst of chaos.

In so doing, we console the bereaved and the traumatized near and far, we teach, we offer words of Torah, and we offer prayers for those who have passed through this life and their loved ones left behind. May all of their lives be remembered for a blessing:

Joyce Fienberg, 75, of Oakland; Richard Gottfried, 65, of Ross; Rose Mallinger, 97, of Squirrel Hill; Jerry Rabinowitz, 66, of Edgewood; Cecil Rosenthal, 59, of Squirrel Hill; David Rosenthal, 54, of Squirrel Hill; Bernice Simon, 84, of Wilkinsburg; Sylvan Simon, 86, of Wilkinsburg; Daniel Stein, 71, of Squirrel Hill; Melvin Wax, 87, of Squirrel Hill; Irving Younger, 69, of Mount Washington;

Also, in need of our prayers and assistance are the wounded:

Andrea Wender, 61; Daniel Leger, 70; and four of the heroic police officers who saved many lives.

We ask for prayers for their families and loved ones so that they may begin the process of healing from this horrific event that has caused so much suffering. Should you wish to help in a tangible way, you may offer financial aid directly to the congregation's fund at <https://www.tolols.org> or, to help Rabbi Myers with meeting more private needs, to his Rabbi's Discretionary Fund.

May the mourners be consoled, may those of broken body or spirit be healed, and may we all be reminded, day by day, moment by moment, how precious is each life and each opportunity for connection, especially those spent in spiritual reflection and in building community.

As Jews, we know all too well the stinging hand of suffering without cause. After the mourning, let us strive, by simple steps and ambitious ones, toward a world defined by goodness and harmony.

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