

After Pittsburgh: A Narrower Bridge, A Net Like Never Before

Rabbi Jon Spira-Savett
Temple Beth Abraham, Nashua NH
November 3, 2018 *Parashat Chayei Sarah 5779*

It is so good to be here together this morning. I know that it is a great comfort to our friends, our sisters and brothers in Pittsburgh, to know that people are gathered in synagogues all over, thinking about them, mourning with them, and doing something to live in the legacy of the eleven people who were killed at Tree of Life Congregation, while they were doing what we are doing. I have been in touch with Jewish professional colleagues in Pittsburgh, and they are exhausted, and also amazing. It means a lot to them that we care and that we are here in our congregations this Shabbat.

We are drawn here *this* Shabbat, at a time when we need to reach beyond ourselves -- for the divine, for each other, and deep into ourselves. I know for me, having Shabbat waiting during a difficult week helps me find my footing -- knowing there will be a chance to take a breath, that precious words will be set up for me to sing with other people and say alone, that we will celebrate. We are drawn to a Bat Mitzvah, so we can be inspired, and I want to acknowledge and thank Lexi and her parents, Matt and Kyle, for being Beth Abraham's partners in this particular Shabbat which suddenly became different from what any of us anticipated.

I want to welcome you who have come for the occasion of Lexi's Bat Mitzvah, and you who have come to be with us because all over America people have decided to join with the Jewish community, in solidarity and in defiance.

I hope all of you know that our synagogue leadership has been focused this week on taking care of you -- thinking about how you can be safe here, being available for you. We have had children and staff and members and guests here from first thing Sunday morning throughout the week. Many people have spent a lot of time going over security decisions and listening to anyone who has reached out and needed to talk on any level. I want to say a thank you to the Nashua Police Department for being so responsive to us from last Saturday onward, even anticipating our needs.

Last Saturday at the Tree of Life Congregation, eleven people were murdered and six were injured by a man who wanted to wipe out Jews, because he believes that we and the other people we stand by are a threat to white America.

And despite what he did, we have seen the unbelievable spirit of the Jewish neighborhood in Squirrel Hill, and the unstoppable force of mitzvah, even in the midst of horror and exhaustion.

The *shomrim* who stay with bodies before a Jewish burial who had to fulfill that responsibility at an active crime scene. The *chevra kadisha* groups who prepare bodies for burial, and the *chevras* from elsewhere who came to help, in case it was too much for the local people to bear to prepare friends whose bodies had been torn by bullets. The Jewish medical staff who treated and stabilized the gunman and even talked with him. Mitzvot are relentless.

I have had to give too many sermons at times like these. I have reread them all in the past few days. I don't want to say the same thing again and again, with just the locations and details changed. I believe we are at a point of tremendous power and risk -- when we could tip into disillusionment, about anti-Semitism and white nationalism in this country -- or when *we* could help fuel a cascade in the other direction, the direction of tikkun. That would take some courage, and an ability to look hard into the darkness in new ways, but I believe the opportunity is there. And to Lexi, to you and to your classmates, I say that being Bat and Bar Mitzvah has never been more important, being a mitzvah person, and we need every single one of you to get to work with us.

I put on the study sheet a teaching from the Mishnah, the first book of Jewish law after the Torah, from about the year 200. Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah said: I am like a man of seventy years, and I did not achieve an understanding of why the Exodus from Egypt is said at night until Ben Zoma explained this verse from the Torah to me: "In order that you will remember the going out from Egypt all the days of your life" (Deuteronomy 16:3) -- "the days of your life" means the days; "*all* the days of your life" means the nights. But the Sages say: "the days of your life" means this world; "*all* the days of your life" means to bring the messianic days. [*Mishnah Berachot 1:5*]

If you have been to a Passover Seder, you might recognize this paragraph -- it's one of the paragraphs you might gloss over with discussion or event skip. But this week the passage called out to me all of a sudden, the way Torah does when we really need it.

The Talmud says Rabbi Elazar wasn't actually old when he taught this teaching -- he was eighteen. But looking out on his world one day, he suddenly felt like he was seventy.

As though there would not be enough time in his life to see the world he was dreaming of. As though he couldn't escape the trauma of the persecutions of Jews before his lifetime. One day at the age of eighteen, all his hair suddenly turned gray.

Rabbi Elazar was thinking about how we recall the story of the Exodus from Egypt. It's is the original story of anti-Semitism, the first violent attack on Jews as a group for being Jews, the first time someone gives a supposed "reason" for that. Rabbi Elazar had seen this story as a story about the day of liberation -- about the march of the Jews into freedom at high noon, with their hands held high. As a story about light -- of a mighty God whose outstretched arm could overpower any worldly oppression.

Ben Zoma taught him that it wouldn't be enough to tell that story that way -- you have to face the story of the night as well. The Exodus is the power of God on the side of the hated -- but it is also a story about that hate. The worry that it is not actually gone but just something we ran away from, that will find its way back to us again.

I used to think that there were two kinds of Jews: those who were obsessed by the darkness, and those who could see light and be inspired by it. And I had no patience once upon a time, for the Jews who chose to look at the darkness so much. But as my own hairs are slowly graying, I think I have started to get what Rabbi Elazar learned from Ben Zoma.

When you are basking in the light of Jewish freedom, don't pretend there is no darkness. And when you are in the darkness, as we have been this week, don't close your eyes to lights that might in fact be growing.

Yesterday, the front page of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette had, across the top, in large Hebrew print the words *יתגדל ויתקדש שמה רבה Yitgadal V'Yitkadesh Sh'may Rabbah*, the opening words of the Mourners' Kaddish. And every single page of the paper's desktop website had those words at the top. The business page, the sports page. Even the page with an article about the downtown Pittsburgh Christmas tree lighting. When has that ever happened?

Our U.S. Senator, Maggie Hassan, made phone calls this week to each one of the rabbis in New Hampshire personally. We are a minority in a small state, but Chuck Schumer and Dianne Feinstein can't do what she did.

It wasn't for a perfunctory conversation. We talked for some 15 minutes, and she asked if there was anything specific we needed. We talked together about how all the different levels of hate and animosity today do or don't interact. She said that I should tell you that tens of thousands of Granite Staters are thinking about us and standing with us.

Some of the most remarkable things have happened when Jews were not even around. I've been carrying with me all week these notes that the Unitarian Universalist Church took time in their service last Sunday to write us, adult words and some scribbles and pictures from children even. This is just one example of all the support sent to me and to us this week.

And at Christ the King Lutheran Church in Nashua, something happened last Sunday, which was a special day in their calendar, the anniversary of the founding of Lutheranism, of the day Martin Luther pinned his theses on the church door.

Pastor Dave said to the congregation that they could not just celebrate all the wisdom and leadership of Luther -- they also had to mention Luther's anti-Semitism, and to mention how Luther's words were later used by the Nazis. They didn't talk about this because he and I had spoken, which we haven't, or because we were there, because none of us were.

This is people who don't know that many Jews being told that they have to reckon with their own religious group's responsibility in the history of anti-Semitism. Not during an educational program, or a joint Holocaust remembrance. When has that happened?

I have long said that we live in a time when Jews have more more allies than ever before. And this week we can see that we are standing in a new daylight, as Jews in this country. This is not the same as what has been before. Somehow, even in the dark, we need to see that.

And yet, Rabbi Elazar learns from Ben Zoma that it is foolish to say this unless we have the honesty to talk about the night and face it. Night represents anti-Semitism lurking where we didn't see it coming and we don't expect it. Night is where the factors that drive anti-Semitism and white nationalism are hard to sort out, where the relationships among them are murky.

I was a person who shut my eyes to extent of American anti-Semitism especially in its white supremacist form, for years. Last week was the anti-Semitism of hate and violence, but there is also an anti-Semitism and a white nationalism of ideas that sound, like the new Pharaoh's words at the start of Exodus, kind of reasonable to enough people.

This predates the president, and I said before the election from this pulpit that if he lost, I feared that we would think we were out of the woods. He is not an anti-Semite personally; the white nationalists revile him for having Jews in his family and his inner circle and his cabinet. And he is in the next room over, so to speak, calling his political opposition people who have "launched an assault... on the safety of every single American," as he said in Texas the week before the shooting. That's talking about born Americans, not even outsiders. It's not surprising if someone who hears that, and already wants to intimidate or harm someone in a minority group, is emboldened. Not when so many people who we wouldn't call white supremacists hear this kind of thing and cheer enthusiastically. In the dark, we don't know how exactly how all of that stirs together, but it does.

I know a lot of you are on the very narrow bridge between hope and disillusionment. This week the bridge seems even narrower, and it takes courage to keep walking. We are in an unstable situation. It takes strength and balance not to fall off. But we have a net below us like we have never had. I no longer believe it's enough to stand pat, just bank the relationships we have and grow them with interest. Now we will have to take some risks. But the chance of reward has never been greater.

Some of us have to risk a venture into the darkness. We have to go where people misunderstand us, or invite people who misunderstand us or haven't thought about us, to come and talk with us. Even people who already have biases or stereotypes about us. [Tomorrow I have a piece in the Nashua Telegraph](#) inviting people to talk to me, to arrange to come to the synagogue or to invite me to speak somewhere, and any question is on the table, no matter how potentially offensive.

And some of us have to take the final step of the Mishnah, the argument that the Sages make against Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah -- that these stories have to impel us toward messianic days.

I ask myself -- when communities and churches were attacked in other places, why have I and why have we not responded with the kind of concern and love that others have shown to us this week? Where were our songs, our flowers, our offers of food? And truthfully, have we even been there this way when Israelis have been victims of terror?

And I remind us: that as tenacious as anti-Semitism and white supremcism have been, they are at least easy to denounce. But doing so does nothing about even more tenacious problems of poverty, suffering, and injustice in our society. Those can't be solved by humanizing the other -- that just gets us, barely, to the starting line.

I do not want to feel old and spent, before I understand all of this.

If I am going to be old about these things, I want to be old like one of our oldest members. Where is Shirley?

Shirley is our fourth oldest member -- born in Europe, a person who knows what that world was that she and her family had to leave. She is 94.

When we had our service on Monday evening, with about 100 people, what Shirley wanted to say into the microphone most of all was this: that in the first day, the Muslim community in Pittsburgh took the initiative to raise tens of thousands of dollars to help the Jewish community. This is the same Shirley, who feels every act of anti-Semitism in the world, and every small bigoted insult about Jews where in the complex where she lives, piercing her inside.

I called her over after the service and remarked on that -- that you Shirley contain in yourself the most finely tuned sensitivity and worry about our place in the world as Jews, and also the ability to see generosity and support and possibility in that same world.

Shirley can tell you that this is a difficult place to live, almost unbearable. But that is precisely where we need to be. That's the message of the Mishnah about Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, Ben Zoma, and the Sages. I say, let's be old like our 94-year-old Shirley, and let's be young like our newest mitzvah-people, like Lexi and all you B'not and B'nai Mitzvah. You young people already have a head start on these challenges of this world. Pull us with you back toward the idealism we need.

This week we have mourned, and we have looked at the darkness, but we can also tell a story of light, and even see to bringing our world toward messianic days. I will not let the gunman or the supremacists take my faith in America from me. I will be ever grateful for all of you here, for those who are with us, and for those who inspire us.

We will talk more and make plans. Anti-Semitism and white supremacism are violent, and they are largely built on words -- words that trick and deceive, words that bully, words on the web and words between people. We will fight it and we will defeat it with our own words -- words that love, words that encourage, words between people and even words on the web. Words that describe the real world and words that describe the world we dream of.

May God and may this gathering of ours bring some comfort to all those mourning those were killed in Pittsburgh, and may our lives make their memories a blessing.

Shabbat Shalom.