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Prayers for America: A Memorial Service for those Massacred in Pittsburgh

The slaughter at the Tree of Life congregation in Pittsburgh
 did not happen in a vacuum.
 It was not simply a bolt out of the blue.

Anti-Semitism, and to be clear about it, that is simply a fancy word for Jew-hatred,
 has been on the rise in this country, and in Europe, in recent years.

But at the same time, it is a very old story.

When times are turbulent or unsettled, people look for someone to blame.

It will rarely, if ever, be themselves.

It is so much better, and so much easier, to create, and hate, a scapegoat.

By the way, according to the Bible, the first people to do this, were Adam and Eve.

In its current incarnation, the hatred has been tied to, and often inspired by,
 supremacist and other extremist movements.

It has also been stoked, we regret to say,

by members of the establishment, again, both here and overseas.

Many of those establishmentarians do not abet these sentiments
 because they believe them.

They are usually smarter than that.

They do it, because, in any given body politic,

it will resonate with some portion of the population.

And there are people who will say anything if they think they can gain from it.

If you've watched any television lately, you know that it takes

approximately one political commercial to prove this point.

But anti-Semitism, of this magnitude, in this country, is new for most of us.

You have to go back to the 1930's, to see anything comparable and
 even then, no one took up the call and
 fired an assault weapon inside a synagogue.

In our lifetimes, it has been pretty much confined to the far fringes.

But today, once again, mainstream leaders, are, explicitly and implicitly,
 making use of anti-Semitic tropes and dog whistles.

This is, unfortunately, undeniable,

And some of the most lost, and therefore the most dangerous among us,
 are hearing them and acting on them.

Pittsburgh was not the first.

We have seen similar at “Mother Emanuel” AME Church in Charleston, SC,
and at the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, TX.

As well as deadly racist and anti-Semitic violence in Charlottesville, VA.

And we have seen other attacks and demonstrations of hate too numerous to mention.
In the streets, in community centers, online, and on walls.

This time, the hate-based violence in Pittsburgh was enough
to snuff out eleven innocent human lives,
and send at least six others,
including members of the police force and the SWAT team, to the hospital.

Anti-Semitism has been likened to the proverbial canary in the coal mine.

When the air becomes noxious and the canary chokes,
it’s the signal to the rest of the miners
that if they don’t get to cleaner air, they’ll be next.

My friends, in the American mine, the canary has choked. It is dead.

And the rest of us had better get to cleaner air—or we’ll be next.

Our Rabbis taught that the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed,
not so much by the Romans, who of course did the actual burning,
but by *sinat hinam*—free-flowing hatred—from within the community.

A community that had once been “indivisible” was ripe for picking by its enemies
because of small-minded, self-centered, all-consuming, internal strife.

The Talmud also says that when the forces of destruction are unleashed,
they do not distinguish between the righteous and wicked.

That is ancient wisdom we would do well to heed.

I would say “Heaven Help Us” but this is not for Heaven to fix.

It is for us. And I believe we can.

Maybe we can each start by reaching out to a lonely person.

They are in every community and they are in ours.

And let’s be honest, they are the ones who seem to be the
most susceptible to hateful speech and wild conspiracy theories.

That is, of course, no excuse.

But if you know a lonely soul, caught up in his/her/their own world, who is stewing and
looking to blame someone else for their frustration, reach out.

Even a small dose of simple human kindness might be enough to give them
the help and strength they need to live, with love, for another day.

Who knows what good we might be doing?

We will certainly do no harm.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav,
 lived in Eastern Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.
 He taught: "*Kol ha olam kulo, gesher tzar m'od*—
 the whole world is like a very narrow bridge.
V'ha-ikar lo l'fakhed klal—the main thing is not to be afraid."

When I first heard this teaching, I thought it was simple enough.
 It's a dangerous world.
 There are bridges we need to cross. Some of them are narrow.
 Don't be afraid.
 Go out and embrace life.
 Because if we are afraid, we'll fall into the abyss and
 living in fear is no way to live.

I recently looked at the teaching in a different way.
 And that is that the boundary between love and fear, is also narrow.
 And when we are afraid of others,
 when we are fearful of them, often for no good reason,
 that fear can morph into hatred, and the hatred, into violence.
 We all walk on this bridge between love and fear. And it is narrow.
 "Don't be afraid" is much easier to say than to do.
 But if our fear is rooted in ignorance, and it often is,
 we may be able to get to the other side.

My daughter in-law grew up in South Florida and was back for a visit a few weeks ago.
 She was having lunch with her parents at a Broward county deli,
 when she overheard three businessmen at the next table
 speaking derisively about members of a particular minority group.
 It is not important which one, but it was not one of which she is a member.

She was upset to the point where she felt she needed to say something, and,
 mustering her gumption, went over to the table and said, quote,
 "When you say things like [that], it is offensive, and you sound ignorant.
 I would encourage you to do research about the community
 and be careful how you speak about something you know nothing about."
 She reported that the "objects of her disaffection" were shocked and embarrassed.
 But everyone went back to lunch—no worse for wear,
 and undoubtedly with more to think about.
 Maybe, just maybe, she helped to turn that battleship around,
 from ignorance and fear, to knowledge and compassion.
 Perhaps not. But she certainly did no harm.

What I did to deserve a daughter in-law like this, I couldn't tell you.
 But the lesson is clear enough.
 With a few well chosen words, we can make a difference
 with our fellow Americans.

If hatred and violence are born of ignorance and fear, as they often are,
 they can be countered with knowledge—which we have.
 They can also be countered with sacred teachings—
 Which we also have:
 To treat one others as we wish to be treated;
 to believe in, and act as if we believe in, the full humanity of all of God's children.

Especially in a small community like ours, we know how much the behavior of each one of us, effects every one around us. Kindness reverberates in a community. Acts of love and understanding have real power. And they are contagious.

Of course, fear is too.
 But Rabbi Nachman is right—
 the main thing is not to be afraid. Because we know where that leads.

I happen to have faith in this community.
 And btw, thanks to your presence here, your overflow, SRO presence,
 from all segments of the community,
 it has never been greater than it is tonight.
 Mindy and I have been playing in the Keys for more than thirty years;
 we've been blessed to have owned homes here for seventeen years and
 we've now lived here full-time for six.
 The people of this community do not live in fear.
 We all know that life is fragile at the water's edge and
 that there are things that are bigger than all of us.
 And in the face of it all we are supportive. We are caring. We are loving.
 We are decent to one another.
 We know that the world is a very narrow bridge.
 Or, down here in the Keys, 42 narrow bridges. ;-)
 And we know that if we live in fear, which leads to hatred and violence,
 we're going to fall in the abyss.
 So we are choosing love and understanding instead.
 And we pray that the rest of America joins with us.

Please congratulate yourselves for being here tonight.
 And for going forward as we have spoken.
 Thank you and *Shalom*.

At the center of our synagogue, at the center of every synagogue,
 is the *Aron Kodesh*, the Holy Ark.
 It holds the Torah scrolls, the Five Books of Moses,
 each one hand written, on parchment, by a trained scribe.
 The Ark is a reminder of the Ark of the Covenant,
 into which Moses placed the original tablets of the Ten Commandments.

The Torah is central to Judaism and the KJCC is the steward of three scrolls. They contain, according to our tradition, 613 commandments. Among them,
 the One God demands justice from all of us;
 we are to love our neighbors as ourselves;
 and that murder is an ultimate sin.

These teachings, and many others, were ultimately adopted by Christianity and Islam and today they are embraced by most of the world.
 We venerate our Torah and consider it holy.
 It is our “Tree of Life.”

One of our scrolls has a particular history.
 Written about 150 years ago in Eastern Europe,
 it belonged to the Jewish Community of Susice, now in the Czech Republic.
 During WWII, most of the Jews of Susice were murdered in Nazi death camps.
 Nazis also murdered Jews in synagogues—we have seen this movie before.

Very few Jews from Susice survived the war,
 but the Torah scroll which is in the center of our Ark, did.
 The Nazis preserved it in a warehouse, along with many others they had stolen,
 perhaps with the intent of using them some day
 as part of a museum to a destroyed people.

History, and the Allies, led by a united America, had other ideas.
 The scrolls were rescued and this one made its way across the ocean to
 the Keys Jewish Community Center in Tavernier, Florida.
 After our service, I will take it from the ark and be happy to show it
 to anyone who would like to see it up close.

During every service, here at the KJCC,
 we say the *Kaddish*, which is our memorial prayer, for the martyrs of Susice,
 who once carried, kissed, danced with and learned from this very scroll.
 We also say it for all who perished in the *Shoah*,
 for all who have given their lives *al Kiddush Hashem*—
 for all who have died as martyrs to the cause of a more just world.
 These include servicemen and women and first responders,
 who have given their lives so that America might continue to be,
 as the people Israel has been called by the Hebrew Prophets to be,
 a light unto the nations.

So I invite you to rise, as we open the Ark,
 and join together in the *Kaddish*.
 It is a prayer that affirms God’s greatness and asks for God’s peace.

Yitgadal...
