Opinion

Guest Voices



Police respond to an active shooter situation at the Tree of Life synagogue on Wildins Avenue in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh on Oct. 27, 2018. (Pam Panchak/Post-Gazette via AP)

Jeffrey Salkin

View Author Profile

Religion News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

October 29, 2018

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

We are shocked, but we are not surprised.

How could we be surprised? The novelist Rebecca West once said that Jews, having suffered so much, have an "unsurprisable mind." Did we think that we, the American Jewish community, could splash blood upon our communal door and thus ward off the twin angels of hatred and death?

When we witnessed the madness in Charlottesville — "The Jews will not replace us!" — could we not have imagined that this could happen?

This Shabbat, American Jews drank from the bitter cup of tears from which other groups have already sipped. Blacks. Blacks praying in churches. Sikhs. Muslims. LGBTQ.

Read this next: Bishops conference president condemns shooting at synagogue, all 'acts of hate'

Anti-Semitism is the oldest hatred in history. It might also be the oldest "ism" in history, the oldest living ideology. It is the only cultural thread that binds our civilization to that of the ancient Egyptians, and the ancient Persians, and the ancient Greeks, and the ancient Romans, and the early Christians, and to medieval Christians, and to Islam, and to modern scientific racist theories. It is the one thing that all of those cultures have in common.

As Gavin Langmuir, in his book "History, Religion, and Antisemitism," writes: "anti-Semitism is the hostility aroused by the irrational thinking about 'Jews.' "

We are shocked — but, if we are surprised, it is because we American Jews have had so little actual experience of lethal anti-Semitism — despite the increase in anti-Semitic acts.

Consider the American Jews who have died — simply because they were Jews.

- Leo Frank, the factory manager in Atlanta, who was falsely accused and lynched for the murder of a young factory girl, in 1915.

- Alan Berg, the Denver talk radio host, killed in 1984 by members of the white nationalist group The Order.
- Yankel Rosenbaum, killed during the Crown Heights riots in 1991.
- Ari Halberstam, 16, riding in a van of Chabad students, shot to death in 1994 on a ramp, which has been renamed in his memory, leading to the Brooklyn Bridge.
- Pamela Waechter, director of the Seattle Federation annual fundraising campaign, who was shot to death in the Seattle Federation offices in 2006.

Yes, there were also non-Jews who died in attacks aimed at Jews, Jewish institutions or places that evoke Jewish memory.

According to my estimate, the total number of Jews killed, before Saturday: five.

Which means — that the death toll in Pittsburgh immediately doubled the number of American victims of lethal anti-Semitism. Saturday was the worst day in American Jewish history.

The victims:

- Joyce Fienberg, 75
- Richard Gottfried, 65
- Rose Mallinger, 97
- Jerry Rabinowitz, 66
- Cecil Rosenthal, 59
- David Rosenthal, 54
- Bernice Simon, 84
- Sylvan Simon, 86
- Daniel Stein, 71
- Melvin Wax, 88
- Irving Younger, 69

Please note, in the midst of our tears and rage:

David and Cecil Rosenthal were brothers.

Bernice and Sylvan Simon were husband and wife.

Rose Mallinger survived to age 97 only to die in a hail of gunfire in shul.

Note, as well, the heroism of the first responders, and the police officers who were injured defending Jewish lives and common decency.

The attack on Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh was not only an attack on Jews. It was not only an attack on Judaism. It was an attack on all that we hold sacred.

Advertisement

First, sacred places. The entire Pittsburgh neighborhood of Squirrel Hill is a sacred place. It is hardly an accident that Fred Rogers located his neighborhood of make-believe in Squirrel Hill, because it is a magical place. It is unique: perhaps the last Jewish shtetl in the United States, a small town in which generations of Jews and Jewish institutions flourish; a neighborhood of such beauty, diversity and dignity that, typically, when Jews became wealthier they did not leave — they simply moved to a different house.

In the words of the TV sitcom "Cheers": "Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name." That is Squirrel Hill. It is the sort of place where you would want to live, because it is a place where your soul would want to live.

And then, of course, Tree of Life Synagogue itself — a place, like many of its neighbors, that has nurtured the spirits of generations of Pittsburgh Jews.

Second, sacred times. The attack happened on Shabbat. If the synagogue is where Jews are, then Shabbat is when Jews are.

No surprise, as well; some of the most prodigious Jew-haters in history deliberately chose Jewish sacred days as the days for attack — the Nazis, who chose Jewish holidays for aktionen; the Arabs, who attacked Israel on Yom Kippur; Palestinian terrorists, who attacked a seder at the Park Hotel in Netanya.

Third, a sacred ritual. The attack on the service coincided with a brit ceremony for an infant boy. A grisly irony: At the moment that a Jewish covenantal life was beginning, Jewish lives — in the midst of fulfilling the covenant — were ending.

Fourth, sacred values. The gunman attacked Tree of Life Synagogue's building of the institution's linkage to HIAS. HIAS began its noble history by taking care of Jewish immigrants; it continues that sacred mission by taking care of all immigrants and

refugees.

The shooter hates immigrants. Therefore, he hates HIAS. Therefore, he hates the Jews who have supported HIAS. He hates the Jews because of our values. He hates the Jews because we are the descendants of Abraham, who kept his desert tent open on all sides.

What do we do? We double down. We lean in. We affirm our values. We affirm the centrality of the synagogue in the lives of Jews. Rather than be afraid of bringing ourselves and our children to synagogue, let us triple our efforts to do so. Maintain your membership in the Jewish community. Your presence is a fist that you shake in the face of the haters.

And, finally: Do not despair. We have many friends.

My dear friend, the Rev. Richard Burnett of Trinity Episcopal Church in Columbus, Ohio, told me that his church would be ringing its bells this morning — 11 times.

Once, for each victim.

I like bells. But, I also like shofars. It is time for us to blow the shofar, again — as a sign of mourning, and of rage, and of warning.

The late David Bowie got it right.

"This is not America."