

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 11/9/18

Chayeh Sarah 2018 - After Pittsburgh

It is so good to be together - to celebrate a Shabbat of simcha, the way it's supposed to be. Unfortunately, this will be long remembered as the week American Jewry collectively sat shiva. The 1200 people who came Sunday night to our synagogue came to find comfort and to comfort one another. The eleven shiva candles that still burn in our chapel have been a daily reminder that this was not an attack against "a" synagogue, but an attack against all synagogues. We are all in this together. This past week I kept coming back to that line we read in the Haggadah, "B'Chol Dor Va'Dor Chayav Adam l'rote et atzmo..." "In every generation a person is obligated to regard himself or herself as if he or she had personally suffered through, and come out of, Egyptian slavery." That sentence is a powerful and timeless reminder of the common thread that connects Jews today to the experiences of all those who came before us, to all of those currently living, and to all of those who will come after as well. Every year, from the time we are little, we are reminded that we are in this together and always have been. That's why this attack has felt so personal to us. I'm not sure if non-Jews can understand it the way we do, but it was as if something horrible happened to members of our own families.

On Tuesday night I taught a group of 20 of our 11th and 12th graders in our Beth El Junior College program. As we sat around a large table and I asked each of them to just say one word, the first word they think of, when they think about what happened at Tree of Life synagogue. You know what word came up most often? "Expected!" Yes. It's a generational thing. To these 16 and 17 year olds, mass shootings are common place. They have had lockdowns in their high schools. They are accustomed to people shooting up theaters and high schools and churches, so why not a synagogue, too? The truth is that every Jew has known for a long time that something like this was bound to happen. Every Shabbat our kids see a man with a gun and a smile greeting them at the front door of our shul. That goes back well more than the 25 years I have been here. To them it was just by random chance that a despicable, evil man ended up attacking a synagogue in Pittsburgh. It could have just as easily happened in New York, or Elkins Park, or Seattle, or Los Angeles, or any other city with a vibrant Jewish community like ours. The kids know this all too well. But we older folks, we sit shiva; not only for the 11 people who were killed, but for the sense of security we once had as American Jews.

So where do we go from here? As always, I turn back to our ancient and timeless traditions, to our Torah. And this week's portion, which ironically talks about the first Jewish funerals during a week when 11 Jewish funerals took place in Pittsburgh, gives us guidance.

In Parshat Chayeh Sarah we find the first Jew, Abraham, an old man, aged 137. He had been through two traumatic events involving the people most precious to him in the world. The first involved the son for whom he had waited for a lifetime, Isaac. But Gd asked him to offer him up as a sacrifice and only stopped him at the very last minute. How does a father, let alone a son, survive a trauma like that? Then came grief. Sarah, Abraham's beloved wife, dies. He loses his constant companion; the woman who shared his life's journey. The woman who not once, but twice she saved Abraham's life by pretending to be his sister.

What does a man of 137 do after such trauma and bereavement? We would not be surprised to find that he spent the rest of his days forlorn, broken with sadness; Abraham had every reason to sit and grieve. Yet he did not. In one of the more extraordinary sequences of words in the Torah, his grief is described in one, simple sentence: "Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her." Sad. But then we immediately read, "And Abraham rose from his grief." What does he do? He buys land and puts down roots. He buries his dead in a safe and protected place, a spot that Rabbi Green and our Federation Mission visited just 10 days or so ago. And after he buys the Cave of Machpaylah and buries his beloved Sarah there, he sets out to find a wife for his son, Isaac, so that new life can come from the loss. How did Abraham overcome the trauma and the grief? How do you survive tragedy and still have the energy to keep going? What gave Abraham his resilience, this ability to survive, his spirit intact?

In our midst, here in shul today, we have people so capable of moving on after unspeakable horror that we call them "Survivors." Judah Samet is one such man. An 80 year old member of Tree of Life, Samet, who was born in Hungary, survived Bergen Belsen as a child. He was four minutes late to services at Tree of Life synagogue on Saturday and narrowly missed being inside when the deadly shooting unfolded. He was there every Shabbos at 9:45 AM, but this week a phone call delayed him. I read his account on line. As a survivor, he said he did not talk about the past until very recently, when he realized how few survivors are left. Instead, he said, he set about creating a new life in a new land. Like Abraham, he learned its language and customs. He found work. He built a career. He married and had children. He looked forward, not back. First he built a future and only then, some fifty years later did he speak about the past. His grief only strengthened his resolve to move forward.

Abraham heard the future calling to him. Sarah had died. Isaac was unmarried. Abraham had neither land nor grandchildren. He did not cry out in anger or anguish to Gd. Instead, he heard the still, small voice saying: "The next step is up to you. You keep moving forward and I will create a future for you." That is how Abraham survived the shock and grief. And now we, too must do the same. This was a loss for our entire Jewish family. But by coming back to shul, by being here today, by doubling down on our commitment to our People and our faith, we are building a stronger future. We have been steeled by adversity. We know what it means to suffer. But we Jews cower to no one. We Jews are made of tough stuff. From grief will come resolve. To create a world where our children will not "expect" random acts of violence. We must resolve to never live in fear, to never let anyone destroy our sense of community, and to continue to bring the Jewish message of hope and healing, optimism and faith, integrity and honesty, love and compassion, to a country and a world desperately in need of our sacred message. Am Yisrael Chai - the Jewish People lives - in you, through you and forever. Let us now rise up in renewed commitment to the Jewish life we hold so dear.