



December 1, 2018

Reflections on Pittsburgh

Reactions come in layers. At least for me.

The first one is the one without words. The reaction when someone at shul whispers the terrible news about Pittsburgh in your ear, in order to prevent a huge panic from spreading.

The second layer is the quick post on social media. Rabbis and community leaders are first responders. Literally. Here is my first post: "Shocked by the massacre in Pittsburgh. Still trying to process what happened. My prayers and thoughts are with the families of the victims and injured. We shall overcome this together."

The third layer is comprised of hundreds of emails and posts about memorials (it is about the victims, after all), gatherings (we build community), vigils (we are alert!), prayers ("I lift my eyes to the mountains, from whence will my help come?"), donations (give a sense of "let's fix what we can fix"), security concerns, security updates, and security upgrades. Fear settles in...

And as fear settles in, the next layer shapes within me. The initial (I can only hope) intelligible thoughts. Paraphrasing Lutheran Pastor Martin Niemöller (1892–1984):

First, they came for the children in Columbine High School, but because I wasn't in high school, I didn't worry.

In 1997 they came for the college students in Virginia Tech, but since I stopped teaching there a year before, I felt safe.

Then they killed 12 people in a movie theater in Colorado, but Colorado is so far away...

They came for the blacks in Charleston, but since I am white, I felt safe.

49 were killed in a gay nightclub in Orlando, but I am straight, so I didn't worry.

Now that 11 people were killed at a Conservative shul in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the madness finally hit home.

I am Jewish. I am a rabbi. I go to shul on Shabbat. My shul is a Conservative shul. It could have been me, my family, my friends!

I like to suggest that we are experiencing an awakening of the American Jewish community. The American Jewish community is awakening not only to an increase of Anti-Semitism, but also to the fact that we are neither the only ones, nor the first

ones, to experience hatred and bigotry. We just became members of the “targeted group,” an increasingly large group which includes both victims of gun violence and discriminatory hatred.

Some of us might be tempted to believe that what happened in Pittsburgh, *to us*, is different; that what happened in Pittsburgh belongs to a different category than the shootings in Charleston, or in Orlando, or in the Kroger grocery store in Kentucky.

It is not.

I believe it would be a mistake to put Pittsburgh in its own category.

Personally, I believe that we should also put Pittsburgh together with Sandy Hook, Columbine, Parkland, and Virginia Tech.

It is time for everybody in the Jewish community, liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, Israel cheerleaders and Israel critics, to understand that the only way for Jews to be safe in America is by making sure that everybody else is safe in America. We are all in the same boat. The sooner we realize it; the sooner we can start standing together with others who are fighting the same fight.

Tighter security in our shuls, while necessary, may keep the threat outside, at least for a while, but it won't make it go away.

We are grateful to the entire faith community, including the Muslim community in Pittsburgh that raised \$190,000 to support the families of the eleven Jewish victims, and to former victims of hatred and bigotry, who reached out to the Jewish community with demonstrations of support and solidarity. We heard from them that our pain is their pain. It is time to show our appreciation by asserting that their pain is our pain too, their battles are our battles, and their concerns are our concerns.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook taught that the righteous do not complain of the dark, but increase the light; they do not complain of evil, but increase justice. We need to fight hateful speech and hateful actions with words of comfort and acts of loving kindness. Let's take this time to hold the victims and their families in our hearts, and to turn our grief into meaningful, long-lasting change.

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