

No Shame in Shema

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Last Monday evening, several of us from Noank attended a community vigil at Temple Emman-el in Waterford in the wake of the shootings at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh a week ago Saturday. Temple Emmanu-el was packed with folks from many different traditions and houses of faith, gathered as we were to remember the victims, express our common sorrow, and respond as we might to the senseless violence that continues to plague our society.

The excruciating irony that such an atrocity could take place in a house of prayer (literally in “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood”) made it clear that no place in America appears to be safe as a sanctuary from the worst evils around us. There was no reason to expect such gutless violence in a setting dedicated to the beauty of life, and in this case to the ceremonial bris of an infant Jewish boy. There truly is nothing sacred to socially and soulfully disturbed people of our society, such as the perpetrator.

As I sat there, I thought about the upcoming election on Tuesday, where we are called not only to vote according to our conscience and political preference, but to do it as an expression of our personal and collective values. What are those values now that our country appears to be unraveling? Republican, Democrat, or Independent—party affiliation doesn’t matter that much when we are forced to address the most fundamental value of respecting and protecting human life.

Whenever political ideology trumps the value of human life, regardless of who it is or where they come from or what they say or believe, then that ideology is inherently dangerous and will likely drive a zealous person to some despicable evil. When it occurs (as it often does), those who

share that ideology cannot distance themselves from the consequences, for provocation aids and abets it in some way—by demagoguery or through silence. Though few will amass an arsenal or pull the trigger as did this white nationalist shooter, such violence is legitimized even in mainstream society by those who target certain people as mortal enemies or who tolerate racist rhetoric or divisive demonization. We all are better than this! America is better than this!

While listening to the opening remarks of Rabbi Marc Ekstrand (who, incidentally, grew up in Pittsburgh a few blocks from that neighborhood), I thought to myself, why does this happen? The victims weren't known by the shooter. It's not as if Jewish people are immune from callous deeds, but on the whole they certainly have suffered in unimaginable, unconscionable ways throughout their history, as have others. We are only a generation away from the Holocaust and yet there are still prominent people in our country who choose to deny it. We are only a generation away from a world war that claimed over 50 million lives (some say upwards of 80 million) and yet we're seeing some of the same rhetoric and policies in Europe and the Americas that brought about the brutal legacy of those years. Why do we even entertain something other the lessons learned from those tragic times—to never let this happen again? What is so appealing about war and fascist, racist nationalism? Must we bear the same regret of previous generations?

I often wonder why it is that Jews have been targeted as scapegoats. Why has history been plagued by antisemitism to the degree it has? This question has been asked many times before, evident in the sardonic joke apparently heard in Nazi concentration camps:

An anti-Semite claimed that the Jews had caused the war.
The reply was: "Yes, the Jews and the bicyclists."

“Why the bicyclists?” asked the one.
“Why the Jews?” asked the other.

Yes, why the Jews? The point being, Jews are scapegoated in many societies for no justifiable reason.

Scapegoating, by definition, means “to bear the blame for others or to suffer in their place.” Ironically, it originates from the ancient Hebrew cult (Leviticus 16), where on Yom Kippur, the High Priest would ritually lay the sins of the people upon the head of a goat, which would then be let go to run off into the wilderness—symbolically expressing their atonement from the past year’s sins. The scapegoat bore the sins of many. Is that why it happens throughout history? Are Jews to bear the sins of the world, assigned the blame, as they are, for humanity’s ills?

Centuries later, the image of the scapegoat became a useful metaphor for early Christians to explain Jesus’ death on the cross as an atonement. Yet, in time, it took on a theological meaning of its own, including the regretful accusation that Jews were anti-Christ, if not villainous Christ-killers. To this day, this infernal judgment is embedded in much of Christian theology and thinking through an underlying assumption that, by rejecting Christ as Messiah, Jews face God’s rejection in turn.

To no surprise, Christendom has been a significant contributor to antisemitism in Western culture over the past 2,000 years. As one commentator put it,

...a certain view of Judaism lies deep in the structure of Western civilization and has helped its intellectuals and polemicists explain Christian heresies, political tyrannies, medieval plagues, capitalist crises, and revolutionary movements. Anti-Judaism is and has long been one of the most powerful theoretical systems “for making sense of the world.” No doubt, Jews sometimes act out the roles that anti-Judaism assigns them—but so do the members of all the other national and

religious groups, and in much greater numbers. [This racist] theory does not depend on the behavior of “real” Jews. ¹

The fact is, if we were to scrub out any evidence of “real” Jews from history or eliminate them in the present, we would lose some of the most brilliant minds and greatest philosophers, scientists, inventors, business and political leaders, humanitarians, philanthropists, artists, writers, musicians, sages and saints this world has ever known. Why in the world would anyone want to do that? So, again, why the Jews?

The French philosopher, Rene Girard, who explored the meaning of “scapegoat” in many of his works wrote:

The victim or victims of unjust violence or discrimination are called scapegoats, especially when they are not punished for “the sins” of others, as most dictionaries assert, but for tensions, conflicts, and difficulties of all kinds...Scapegoating enables persecutors to elude problems that seem intractable. ²

Is that not what we see now, especially among white nationalists and other extremists who are threatened by the loss of White Christian America? It’s not the economy that’s causing all this stress; it’s not the mainstream media that’s provoking it. When the majority culture is undergoing transformation by demographic change, the natural differences between a racial majority and the corresponding minorities (along with social and economic tensions between classes) become magnified, polarizing, and seemingly irreconcilable and intractable problems, pushing the extremes toward civil war.

When candles were lit for each of the Tree of Life victims, with each of their names read and prayed for, I tried to sense the moment their lives ended. I imagined the overwhelming confusion and horror in the slow-

¹Quoted in Robert Berkowitz, “Why the Jews?” www.the-american-interest.com, March 8, 2014.

²Quoted in Manfred Gerstenfeld & Jamie Berk, “Anti-Semitism: 2,000 years of scapegoating the Jews”, *The Jerusalem Post*, May 24, 2015.

moving seconds that passed. Each victim—all who had survived at least half a century (one even through the Holocaust)—could not have known that would be their final breath. They were invited to this sanctuary in celebration of the birth of a newborn son—another generation coming forth from the womb. It was to be a declaration that life is greater than death—for it always comes forth with each passing generation. For all that Jews have suffered down through the ages, from social marginalization and scornful prejudice all the way to political purges and genocide, birth is their form of resistance and persistent claim for life—*l’chaim*—“to life”—one of the first Yiddish terms I ever learned. Jewish love for life is not unique, of course, but given their history, it is a powerful and resilient claim for their existence (often against all odds), rooted in their racial makeup and cultural story.

I think that is why the Jewish community in this country is deeply invested in humanitarian concerns and for human rights. It doesn’t surprise me at all that they were scorned by the shooter for the incredible work of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), because it has a history of doing so much good for any immigrant seeking asylum or a better life. Life is precious but, as it plays out, life is not just or equitable. So it takes social, political, and philanthropic intervention, inspired by an empathetic compassion and merciful commitment to overcome the chronic obstacles that prevent people from living as well as they could. The historical memory within Judaism, along with their spiritual journey as a people, has carried an enduring ethical commitment to serving the poor and refugee, as if their own, for as history knows, it often has been their own.

When the rabbi led the congregation last Monday evening in reciting the customary Mourner’s Kaddish for the dead, nearly half of those

gathered recited it in Hebrew, as if it were a common grace. It is a prayer that one learns, not as a child, but as an adult, especially as it gets recited more frequently in the elder years of life.

However, the prayer universally common to all ages is the Shema, which literally means “hear” or “listen.” It comes from our text for today and serves as the most important prayer in Judaism:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד׃

Shema Yisrael, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad.

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone.”

It is usually followed by the Hebrew recitation of the great commandment:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

Along with the additional admonition:

Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

As tradition would dictate, observant Jews everywhere, of every age, recite the Shema in the morning and in the evening. It is more central to their religious identity and faith than anything else, even the Pesach Haggadah, or Passover. The Shema is the supreme religious declaration for Jewish identity: *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad*. “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone.”

The Shema is not a claim that God will protect Jews from all harm—history, alone, proves that. Rather, it is a grateful affirmation of who gives life, for however long it shall be. It is an acknowledgment of the One who will gather them in times of mourning to receive comfort; it is a prayer to the One who will carry them through all their days (however many there

shall be), inspiring the mind, heart, and human spirit to be the best, individually and collectively. There is no shame in Shema—it is a glorious affirmation of life and that God is good, God is great, and that God will bring forth life even from death.

As I said, it is customary to recite the Shema twice a day; observant Jews do this very thing. It is also customary to recite the Shema in the last breaths of life, usually on a death bed, wherever that may be. If not by the individual, then it would be offered by a rabbi or family as the final testament to a dying life.

For those who lived as long as the victims in the Tree of Life synagogue last weekend, this prayer would have come naturally to their minds and hearts—those who drew their last breaths in the flash of an AR-15 rifle, and for those who survived the harrowing chaos of those desperate moments. Uttered silently or whispered in stuttering shock and sorrow, they—who would be remembered last Monday evening in many vigils and sanctuaries around this country—would have the Shema as their final claim on life. “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone.”

As I sat in silence in the sanctuary of Temple Emmanu-el, I imagined the glories of heaven mercifully surrounding the other sacred setting in Pittsburgh affirming life and celebrating the birth of another generation—defying those who would eliminate Jews and redeeming whatever indignity, horror or shame that had been intended by the soulless, gutless killer, whose own God-given life and breath was sadly wasted and deservedly shamed. For the final word on that tragic day was not one of hate, or sorrow, or fear, or rage, but instead love—life-affirming love—from one generation to another, from one community to another, from one faith to

another—all around this country and all around this world—as that is truly the ultimate act and grace of God.

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