

The Tree of Life and the Apple

By Rabbi Elizabeth Bahar

When I think of my hometown of Pittsburgh, I remember eating pancakes at Pamala's, french fries at Dirty Os, watching the Steelers, Penguins and Pirates play, going to the Carnegie Museum and seeing the huge dinosaurs, Phipps Conservatory and the huge Jewish community in Squirrel Hill. While growing up at Rodef Shalom, as a child I still attended events and programming at most of the other congregations in the city, including Tree of Life.

So it was little surprise that when I returned to Pittsburgh several months ago for my grandmother's funeral I found myself stopping by Tree of Life. It was closed. The front lobby had been turned into a memorial and much of the items that were left outside the building following the shooting had been tastefully turned into a way to memorialize what had transpired there.

I stood there and saw something I never thought I would see in my lifetime.

Growing up in the community I grew up in, the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, I intellectually knew about anti-Semitism. I had thankfully only experienced it through a negative comment once or twice. Perhaps because I grew up in a bubble...I never felt the need to acknowledge it beyond a historical phenomenon or something kept alive by white supremacists.

When we think about even the last 50 years, the American Jewish community by the 1970s was fully integrated within the larger context of the American society. The ADL and FBI still kept statistics, but for the most part, there were relatively few and small incidents.

That changed last year at this time.

At the Tree of Life synagogue, in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania the apple was eaten by the world and we woke up to see that everything was different. That, especially on the heels of Charlottesville.

We read this week about the Tree of Life in parshah Beraisheit, about how Adam ate the apple with Eve and how Adam and Eve looked back after being kicked out of the Garden with sadness.

We too look back with sadness.

Sadness that the world is different.

Sadness that something we had hoped was a historical phenomenon is now back and a reality.

Sadness that America may not be the Garden of Eden we once thought it was.

Then six months to the day after the shooting in Pittsburgh, as we were still processing our sadness - another shooting. This time it was in Poway California. There, Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein was wounded and 60-year-old Lori Gilbert-Kaye died shielding her rabbi from the gunman who was shooting from the lobby.

We see that anti-Semitism takes many forms - some of them come from expected regions - the Alt-Right and white supremacists. Some come from other areas we did not expect - the Left, especially in the form of anti-Israel sentiments.

This past year several books have come out describing anti-Semitism:

Dr. Deborah Lipstadt - *Anti-Semitism Here and Now*

Bari Weiss - *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*

And

Rabbi Evan Moffic - *First the Jews: Combatting the World's Longest-Running Hate Campaign*

All three offer unique insights into this age old problem. They stress how anti-Semitism is a problem of conspiracy theorists.

[it is the] “ever-morphing conspiracy theory”: Regardless of the cultural context, it is a story in which the Jew is “whatever the anti-Semite needs him to be.” Rather than a simple prejudice, it is a “grand unified theory of everything” that serves as a crude substitute for an analysis of power and systemic injustice.¹

“More commonly, anti-Semitism persists in the notion that Jews control the banks and the media, or that Jews are pushy, cheap, rich or simply good with money. It also reveals itself in more subtle ways — as in the “dinner party anti-Semite” (a polite person who casually makes anti-Semitic statements but claims not to be anti-Semitic because of Jewish friends or business associates) and the “clueless anti-Semite” (“an otherwise nice and well-meaning person who is completely unaware that she has internalized anti-Semitic stereotypes and is perpetuating them” by making statements such as “Jews are bargain shoppers”).”²

Whether anti-Semitism comes in different forms and in different locations, our attention is quick to follow incidents of anti-Semitism when they occur from the far-right when we have the “right type of victim and the right type of perpetrators.” Yet other incidents of violence have little coverage outside of the Jewish press, such as the rash of physical assaults against Hasidic

¹ <https://www.thenation.com/article/bari-weiss-how-to-fight-antisemitism-book-review/>

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/why-we-need-to-pay-attention-to-the-rise-of-anti-semitism-in-america-now/2019/02/14/08378e4e-0224-11e9-9122-82e98f91ee6f_story.html

Jews in Brooklyn. Equally painful, anti-Semitism can be demonstrated when one is thinking about Israel.

“Opposition to Israel has increasingly become a necessary precondition for all other progressive commitments. Some groups will only allow Jewish students to participate if they take a ‘disloyalty oath’ and affirm they are opposed to “Israeli racism.” This singling out of Israel, as THE litmus test for Jewish involvement in any social justice cause is antisemitism, plain and simple.”³

Was Pittsburgh a moment of *cri de cœur*, a moment of passionate outcry against a growing amount of anti-Semitism? Were we force-fed the apple? Genesis 3:7 relates that after eating from the tree of knowledge: “then the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked.” Adam and Eve perceived their vulnerability in this world.

At that moment they, like we, could not pretend that anti-Semitism was a thing of the past. We could not learn about the lynching of Leo Frank in 1913 or the bombing of the Temple in Atlanta in 1958 and the other synagogues where bombs were found but did not go off that same year.⁴ We can not look at Henry Ford and the Protocols of Zion as incidents lost in the trash heap of history.

So what, now what; as a mentor of mine would say:

³<https://www.centralsynagogue.org/worship/sermons/detail/yom-teruah-sounding-the-alarm-for-anti-semitism-rosh-hashanah-5779-2018>

⁴ <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/274291/future-pittsburgh-synagogue-massacre>

We read in our psalmist tradition: “Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me...” (Psalms 23:4, KJV)

There is no way *around* the Valley of the Shadow. **The only way out is through**. And when we walk, forward, through, into the Valley of the Shadow, how good it is to know that Thou art with me, O God.”⁵

We have to reacquaint ourselves with anti-Semitism. There are several opportunities to do this:

1. I am leading a special text study on it tomorrow morning
2. We are reading Deborah Lipstadt’s book as a congregation
3. Rabbi Evan Moffic is coming in January to share his latest book with us.

I encourage you to explore the last scholarship regarding anti-Semitism.

The other thing I want to point out is that the average age of synagogue attendees at Tree of Life that Shabbat morning, was 74. 74 years old means we must work harder to reach our young families. They are our future.

If your grandchildren live here, bring them to TIR on Sunday morning. If you know a young family who is Jewishly oriented in their life...find out if they belong somewhere and bring them here.

Lastly, as a congregation this year we are learning more about Israel. We are reading in book club this Tuesday Catch-67, going to AIPAC’s policy conference in 2020 and I am leading with Dr. Kyle Reese and Alan Margolies a Federation trip to Israel.

⁵ <https://rabbiblake.org>

There is Scholarship available for those who want to attend the federation trip - up to \$1,000 for Temple members.

Meanwhile this past year, life continued:

[while] “The fate of Tree of Life's own longtime home remains undecided...congregants say they are committed to worshipping again at the site, discussions over whether to raze the building or renovate it continue. But this year, they...celebrate[d] the High Holidays at Calvary”⁶

Life marches forward. We must learn about anti-Semitism so that we can confront it and nip it in the bud.

There is more to Judaism than just anti-Semitism. We are not the religion of: “They tried to kill us, we survived, let’s eat.”

We are rich in history, culture and spirituality. We are not just a collection of painful near misses toward extinction; we are a vibrant, diverse and creative people.

Last night there were two talks pertaining to the Jewish community - one here sponsored by Dr. Kanter who brought Dr. Marla Brettscheinder and the other at UNF who brought Dr. Jodi Magnes. Both talks stretched the understanding of what Judaism is, who is and who is not and challenged preconceptions about our history.

Tonight we started in darkness, with one candle
We end with an aufruf of Harvey Leven and Julianna Jaffe (Mazel Tov!)

From darkness to light. Pittsburgh was a wake-up call to re-engage.
Please join me in the work to make our community strong!

⁶<https://www.npr.org/2019/09/30/765834514/pittsburgh-synagogue-gets-help-from-neighboring-church-1-year-after-deadly-shoot>