

Rosh Hashanah: Oy to Joy!

Rabbi Michael Schwab - September 29-30, 2019

October 27th, 2018 -- a day you and I will **never** forget. It started like many other Shabbat mornings for me, however in the end it was . . . **anything but**. As usual, I walked to synagogue and was delighted to help lead the service, which included the celebration of a wonderful Bar Mitzvah. As I sat down to listen to the repetition of the Musaf, towards the *end* of the service, a congregant came to the side of the bimah and beckoned me over: “Rabbi,” he said in a hushed and pained voice, “something terrible has happened in Pittsburgh; a synagogue was attacked during the service and people were killed. The details are still coming in”. His words caught me by surprise and hit me hard. Jews? attacked *in* synagogue? while praying on Shabbat morning? in *our* country?! In Pittsburgh?! Not only was this shocking and terrifying to me as a rabbi, as a Jew and as an American, but Pittsburgh is a place I know well. My grandparents lived there for *over forty* happy, peaceful years, including my grandfather who was a rabbi in the community. I

experienced that awful yet familiar human phenomenon that suddenly a tragedy feels even worse, and certainly much more real, when there is a *personal* connection -- and my heart fell. As it turned out the murders occurred at the Tree of Life synagogue in Squirrel Hill, walking distance from my grandparents' former home, where I have *so* many memories and where my mother lived during her teenage years. I could then, and still can, picture the neighborhood on a Shabbat morning: the hills, the trees, the Jews of all kinds going to and from their shuls. It was there, in *that* place, only a short flight or long drive from Chicago, that Joyce Fienberg, Richard Gottfried, Rose Mallinger, Jerry Rabinowitz, Cecil Rosenthal, David Rosenthal, Bernice Simon, Sylvan Simon, Daniel Stein, Melvin Wax, and Irving Younger were all killed. And all I could think about was the loss and sadness suffered by their loved ones, who if they knew where their family members had been that morning *before* disaster struck, they had likely just assumed they were *safe* at shul.

And then the details came out: about the shooter, who saw Jews as pernicious infiltrators into this country and not as fellow Americans, or

apparently even human beings. And the heartbreaking details of David Rosenthal, an incredibly friendly man with special needs who greeted the terrorist with the same smile he greeted everyone each Shabbat, only to be the first person murdered by him. And the husband who tried to save his wife by covering her with his body - they were found dead in each other's arms. On top of that I discovered that my aunt was still friendly with one of the victim's daughters from growing up in the neighborhood and that my mother still had contact with people from the Jewish community in Pittsburgh, all of whom, they said, were shocked and suffering. These personal ties brought home with poignancy the deep hurt and trauma suffered by individual members of that fellow Jewish community and they helped me internalize the reality that we were *all* connected in this tragedy, as Jews and as Americans.

For many people, and I will include myself, especially those in my demographic or younger, Pittsburgh made *very real* the articles, speeches and statistics shared over the previous two years, materiel I had shared with you myself, that had been consistently pointing to a rise in

anti-Semitism and the real danger it could pose - not only for us as Jews but for the notion of tolerance and freedom in **America**. And for many of us, because of this realization, the time after Pittsburgh became a pivotal moment - what should we *do now*? How should we *respond*? Something has clearly changed and something had to be done.

In the days right after, of course, we responded pastorally: communities gathered together in solidarity, often with our non-Jewish neighbors. We prayed, we memorialized those whom we lost and we sent support, emotional and material, to the victims' families and their community. I personally still get emotional watching the video footage of the Pittsburgh Steelers football players, none of them Jewish, attending those memorials, and the scenes of vigils across our country that attracted thousands of people of all faiths, cultures and ethnicities. These moments, for me, restored my hope in the capacity for love, connection and tolerance amongst the American people and in our ability as a *national* community to reclaim the *incredible* culture our country created that *celebrates* pluralism and defends the freedoms of *all*

peoples and *all* religious groups. Those moments reinforce how crucial it is that we continue to cultivate our commitment as Americans to these core values of our nation.

We also responded to Pittsburgh with an understandable and reasonable dose of fear: we wisely and soberly assessed the *security* of our communities. At Beth El I felt fortunate that our leadership had *already* enhanced our security measures and protocols prior to this, but along with Jewish institutions across the country we too looked yet again to the immediate and the practical: how to defend ourselves and secure ourselves even better. Resources were made available by the government (not a small thing to overlook in being grateful for living in this country), as well as by JUF, and we received guidance from consultants, Homeland Security, the FBI and the Police -- and we implemented their recommendations. All around the country Jewish communities re-affirmed that the security and safety of our members are of paramount importance.

Another logical response was that many attempted to identify the causes for this escalation in the volume and violence of anti-Semitism, so that we could **combat** it. As illustrated by Pittsburgh and other incidents, there has been an *alarming* rise in violent attacks against Jewish communities and open calls for ridding the United States of Jews. There has also been a documented increase in the use of hate speech against Jews that is often combined with threatened political action aimed at the de-legitimization of the State of Israel as the home of the Jewish people, and the targeting of American Zionists who support her, *especially* on college campuses. Many note the worrying situation we are presently in: Anti-Semitism is taking the form of old stereotypes about Jewish greed, power and otherness *as well as* in the form of: Jews as purveyors of white privilege, or in the guise of BDS and other delegitimizing anti-Israel philosophies. And all of these acts of anti-Semitism are occurring within a general climate of increasing violence and the rise of hate crimes in America. As you know, churches, mosques, people of color and immigrants have also been targeted.

To grapple with this issue we convened a program this past Spring with our congressman and fellow congregant Brad Schneider, as well as with Daniel Elbaum from AJC, and they gave us great advice about a number of *outward* looking solutions to combat this hatred that essentially fall under the categories of being proactive, seeking allies and standing up for the truth and American values. Those who want to combat anti-Semitism, therefore, should engage in: steady condemnation of anti-Semitic statements and figures from *any* segment of society, lobbying and educating governmental and other thought leaders, writing op-eds, creating educational tools that can be used to teach fellow citizens, and forming alliances with other freedom loving groups -- all with the goal of ensuring that the vast majority of America does not fall prey to the allure of these damaging stereotypes and become radicalized to either participate, or even tolerate, such anti-Semitism or hatred. We cannot let ignorance prevail and we must stand up for justice and freedom! Therefore, I support, and urge you to support, our Federation, JCRCs, AJC, AIPAC, ADL and other community organizations that are doing amazing work in combating anti-Semitism, the de-legitimization

of Israel, hate-speech, and prejudice, in order to spread a message of truth, tolerance, and freedom for *all*, in the great spirit of the founding of our country.

Yet here, sitting in our wonderful synagogue, almost a year after Pittsburgh, on this *Rosh Hashanah*, a day of optimism, as we both look forward to the future, as well as gaze inward in deep reflection, I would like to discuss *another important* way in which we can respond to anti-Semitism and hatred. A method that *complements* the reactions I have already described, a method that doesn't require fighting, and one that serves to strengthen us as a people and as individuals in a way that will be a boon to us in *any* climate, even if there was no anti-Semitism.

The famous scholar and activist Dr. Deborah Lipstadt, whom I was privileged to learn with in a small setting this past summer at the Hartman Institute, recently completed a book called *Anti-Semitism: Here and Now*, dealing with *today's* anti-Semitism. As both a scholar of American History and of the Holocaust, known most famously for her role in refuting popular Holocaust denier, David Irving, who sued her for

libel (I am sure many of you have seen the movie), she is in one of the *best* positions to judge the state of anti-Semitism today. And while the book is an important read, period!, what was most remarkable for me was her very last chapter, whose title says it all: **Oy versus Joy, Rejecting Victimhood!** Her scholarly and very serious position, after outlining in hundreds of pages the modern threat of anti-Semitism in America, is that our goal should be: to not only *combat* the *hatred* of *others* but to simultaneously use this moment as an *inspiration* to *strengthen our own collective and individual Jewish identities*. Not strengthen in terms of force, but in the sense of pouring our energy and resources into making Judaism vibrant, joyous and meaningful. To making our communities *so* vibrant, in fact, *so* compelling and active, that we, and our neighbors, will value our communities so highly that we become that much harder to threaten and harm. As Zeev Maghen wrote: . . . my friends, our story teaches us . . . that those who, rather than appealing and screaming, choose to build, to educate toward cultural and national revival, to defy anti-Semitism . . . with Jewish learning, Jewish

observance, Jewish strength and Jewish achievement- such are those who bring our people survival, salvation, a future.”

And much more than that, by strengthening ourselves *from the inside* in this way, Lipstadt shares, we rise *beyond* victimhood, beyond a people solely defined by how *others* treat us and how we respond to their hatred. By **turning the Oy into Joy** we can *use* the obstacles in front of us as galvanizing forces to rally us to define ourselves as the very **best** of what we know we can be.

Strengthening ourselves *from within*, is accomplished by turning our attention to our powerful and sustaining Jewish values, as well as to our engaging and meaningful traditions that endure beyond the present situation and connect us forward and backward in time, as well as to the spiritual: the meaning that lies *beyond* our individual lives. By turning “Oy” into “joy” our Judaism can inspire us to contribute to our society in the most profound and honorable ways possible. As it says in the Midrash on the Book of Psalms, “God’s presence, sacredness and

holiness does not rest where there is idleness or sadness, or frivolity or empty speech, but only where there is joy.”

And what is more, turning “oy” into joy is not an *onerous* task at all, but is filled with delight, fulfillment and meaning. For joy in Judaism, goes beyond its English definition of pleasure, glee and amusement. *Jewish* joy consists of inspiration: **bringing our ideals, principles, and foundational beliefs to light** in a celebratory fashion. Embracing our Judaism in this way not only makes us stronger, it contributes lasting value to **our own** individual everyday lives.

Perhaps our most famous and powerful Biblical example of turning an oy into joy in this manner is the story of the Exodus. During the time of Joseph, we lived as a well-treated minority in the greatest society of *that* time, Egypt. However, one day, the ruling power turned on us and with no democratic ideal to shield us, we immediately became a persecuted and oppressed people. As it says in the book of Exodus, “*Vayakom Melekh Hadash . . . asher lo yadah et Yosef*” “A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph” and *he* said . . . ‘the Israelite

people are much too numerous for us, let us deal shrewdly with them'. So they set task masters over them to oppress them . . . ruthlessly they made life bitter *for* them." As you all know, after a period of time, God heard our pleas and sent Moses with the power of miracles to save us. And fortunately we marched into the wilderness to freedom in what we now know as the Exodus.

But the key is what happens next. *After* God's help in securing our freedom from oppression what was our *new* vision of power as Jews? What did we *do* with our new-found liberty and independence? Did we take our past persecution as a sign we should turn into a Spartan-like nation, defined by our might and vigilance? Did we use our new power and freedom to oppress *others* or to get revenge? Did we simply stop, at celebrating our freedom, and then move on with life, just as we had before the Egyptian oppression? None of these. We moved from Egypt, **to Sinai**, where we stood together as a people and *together* committed ourselves to a sacred covenant, to shared values, and to a way of life outlined in the Torah and inspired by our partnership

with God. And then *guided* by those values, though surely imperfectly as the Torah narratives relate, **we forged our way through history over thousands of years to this very moment** propelled by our powerful covenant and our meaningful traditions. At times we needed to defend ourselves, for sure, just as the Children of Israel did in confronting Amalek in the desert. And when that need arises, like today, we should do so again! However, *alongside* the necessity for vigilance and security, our tradition is telling us that the *ultimate end goal* and aspiration, is not freedom and safety -- those are crucial *ground-floor* conditions for existence. Rather, the greatest questions remain: freedom *to do what?* Security *to be* what? When we are free and safe what are we going to do with those blessings? Who are we going to be? Rather than be a kingdom like ancient Egypt where the *few* priests and royal family members used their privilege to persecute others, the Torah tells us *we* came together at Mt. Sinai unified by shared values and love, to become a *whole kingdom* of priests, *mamlechet kohanim*, every *one* of us dedicated to justice, kindness, generosity and a spiritual connection to the world and to God, the source of all blessing. While still in the

wilderness struggling to reach the Promised Land, we created a vision of who we wanted to be, both as a way of sustaining us through our perilous journey, and also as a way to ensure that our ultimate goals of living righteous and meaningful lives *always* serve as our northstar.

Thus both the story of the Exodus and the theme of these High Holidays teaches us, that in the face of challenge and obstacle we turn and *re-turn* (*teshuvah*) to our touchstone - the Jewish tradition; and to the curator and power source *of* that tradition, the synagogue. It is *here*, and at synagogues across the country and even the world, where Jewish values are taught and expressed in *every* facet of life, to *every* age. It is *here* where the spark of our Judaism is kindled and re-lit, where we live a Jewish tradition that *inspires* us “to turn Oy into Joy”, and supports us to *become* the “kingdom of priests”, the individual purveyors of righteousness and religious meaning, our covenant adjures us to be.

During Yom Kippur I will include in my words *my* vision for how Beth El is, and can be, this: touchstone, curator, and power source of Jewish tradition for *us*. How *Beth El* will inspire *us* to turn “oy into

joy”. Because as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes: “The Jewish response to trauma is counterintuitive and extraordinary. You defeat fear by joy. You conquer terror by collective celebration.” As with the story of Haman and our eventual triumph, the joy we experience on Purim is not *expressive* joy where we feel happy about what occurred - our people were almost destroyed! Rather it is what Sacks calls *therapeutic joy* -- confronted with perils we dig deep and, in the midst of our hardship, we find strength to rejoice in who we are as a people, and in the aspirational values and actions we are committed to as Jews. We *respond* to the “oy” by bringing to bear the positive-joy of the best of who we are as the Jewish people.

I know, that many of us are concerned or alarmed or afraid of the way people across the world are relating to us as Jews, devastatingly employing stereotypes we thought we had left behind as we entered the 21st Century, and even creating new ones. And few predicted that such violence against Jews and other minorities and religious groups could have manifested in *this* country at *this* point in history. I too am very,

very concerned. I too am sometimes angry and sometimes sad. I too pledge to remain vigilant, to use whatever power I have as a rabbi to keep us safe and to fight anti-Semitism and the climate of intolerance that is creeping in from the extremes of our society.

However, these fears will not consume my Judaism -- my
Judaism *cannot be* only about fighting those who are against us, nor can this be the *raison d'etre* for our *community* if we want Judaism to remain vibrant in the future. We must rise even beyond that. Therefore, I pledge, and urge you to join me, in following Deborah Lipstadt's advice that one of the most important ways to respond is to turn "oy into joy"! To rededicate ourselves to the vibrancy, relevance and pure joy of what it means to be a Jew. Celebrate with us here at the synagogue today, during Sukkot, the holiday of Joy, and during all of the wonderful holidays in our calendar. Join your voices together with us in prayer, connect with others here to perform acts of compassion, *gemilut hasadim*, and learn with us to deepen your understanding of your Judaism, Israel, yourself and the world. My guess is that this is what

those who died in Pittsburgh on that terrible day, Jews committed to embracing our tradition, would want us to do, and I am *convinced* that this is not only what will truly create the brightest and most secure future for the Jewish people but will allow us to best *share* the great gifts of our tradition with our fellow Americans, and the rest of the world, to help bring justice, love, peace and security to all. *Shanah Tovah* to everyone - My blessing for us is that we are inspired to *actively* create for one another: a year of love, a year of compassion, a year of sweetness, a year of peace and a year of **joy** for all. And let us say, Amen!