

“It is on Us”  
November 2, 2018 \* The Shabbat after Pittsburgh  
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Shabbat shalom, everyone. Those may be the most powerful two words in Judaism. Shabbat shalom, have a peaceful Shabbat. We are here because it is Shabbat. Now for many of you this might be your first Shabbat service, or your first Shabbat service in a while, but that is the reason we are gathering together tonight, this night. Throughout our history of exile and persecution, Shabbat has been our constant. After our exile from the land of Israel we sat and wept by the rivers of Babylon--and observed Shabbat. When the Crusades and Blood Libels of the Middle Ages threatened us, we gathered each Friday night in the safety of synagogues to chant the ancient melodies of the Sabbath. When we were exiled from Spain in 1492, the hidden Jews who stayed behind lit Shabbat candles behind closed curtains. When pogroms in Eastern Europe threatened our houses and lives, we still joyfully welcomed in the Shabbat Bride with song. When our ancestors travelled to the shores of this country, refugees in their time, hidden in their ragged packs were Shabbat candlesticks used to mark the Sabbath in their new home. Observing Shabbat throughout generations has kept us together as a people throughout the years of exile and settlement, of tragedy and triumph. The Zionist Ahad Ha'am said, “We can say without exaggeration that more than the Jewish people preserved Shabbat, it is Shabbat that has preserved the Jewish people.” And so here we gather again tonight, as our ancestors have done so many times before, seeking comfort in our day of rest after a week of horror.

This sermon doesn't have a pithy opening quote, a cute story, or a joke. It offers, instead, the stark reality of our lived history. We know we are here tonight not just because it is Shabbat, but because last Shabbat a gunman entered the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh with an AK-47 assault rifle shouting, “Kill all the Jews!” He massacred 11 Jews who were there for Saturday morning services. Only the synagogue regulars are there that early in a service--most of them elderly. He gunned down the bubbies and zadies, the grandparents, the elders, the heart of the community on a day that was supposed to be devoted to naming a new baby. Part of what drove his hatred of Jews was the fact that Jews, through the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, are helping to resettle refugees in this country. In one of his rabid, anti-Semitic social media posts, he linked to a directory of synagogues, including Temple Beth El, that participated in HIAS's National Refugee Shabbat the previous week.

While I was deeply saddened by this horrible attack, I was not surprised. When my mother was growing up, she was keenly aware of the anti-Semitism around her and understood that all Jews would be blamed for the actions of one person. When she heard bad news --an attack, an embezzlement, a scandal--she instinctively thought, “Please don't let it be a Jew that did it!” Because she knew that she and other Jews would suffer the consequences.

I grew up in a different world. I thought we had progressed beyond anti-Semitism, and I rarely worried that I would be blamed for the ‘sins’ of someone who shared my religion. During the past two years, I have come to realize how wrong I was. Anti-Semitism lurked just below the surface of American life, a dormant volcano that has erupted anew. Hate crimes against Jews were up 57% in 2017. 57%. Imagine how we as a nation would react if murders or plane crashes or cancer deaths had increased 57% in a single year. And we are not the only ones who are being targeted. Just a couple days before the Pittsburgh shooting, in an incident that barely even made the news, an armed white man tried to enter an African-American church in Kentucky. When he found it locked, he went to the nearby grocery store and killed two black people who were shopping, one who was there with his grandson, while sparing the life of a white bystander saying, “Whites don't kill whites.” Jews, African

Americans, Muslims, immigrants, . . . minorities of all kinds face increasingly bold attacks, encouraged by the sneering tone and undisguised contempt expressed by many political leaders. What is happening to our country?

During the High Holidays six weeks ago, I spoke about hope. I talked about the beauty we can find in brokenness; I explained how we as a people have dealt with and overcome tragedy; I encouraged us all to periodically step back from the horrors that are happening far away and see how our world is, in many ways, getting better. So, many of you may be asking, how do I feel now, after the deadliest attack on Jews in American history? Do I still see hope? Is there still beauty in the brokenness?

I cannot explain the senselessness of what happened on October 27. I cannot diminish or dismiss the brutality and horror of the attack. I cannot ease the pain and suffering of the family members and friends who lost loved ones.

And yet...I still have hope. I still have hope because when I look out from the bimah tonight, I see God and good at work in the world in the faces of loving, supportive, courageous people of all faiths united against hate. All week long, our non-Jewish friends and neighbors and sometimes complete strangers have reached out to us with phone calls and emails and hugs and meals. They have stood alongside us in prayer, marched with us in solidarity, and passed resolutions in support of the Jewish community. We all stand together against the hatred voiced in words that found deadly aim as bullets shattered a community last Shabbat. Thank you. Your support and compassion are appreciated and valued.

I still have hope because we still have Shabbat, we still have our sacred texts and traditions, passed down to us through the centuries. Each Shabbat we engage with the words of the Torah and listen to the voice of the prophets calling us to create a world overflowing with justice and compassion and taking us to task for missing the mark all too often.

\* We are part of a tradition that values *hachnasat orchim*, welcoming guests. Last week we read of Abraham and Sarah, opening their tent wide to all who passed by on their journeys.

\* We are part of a tradition that believes passionately in debate and disagreement--in reaching a decision but preserving the minority opinion.

\* We are part of a tradition that tells us that all people stood at Sinai to receive God's revelation.

\* We are part of a tradition that has tried through slow and painful steps to make sure everyone has a seat at our Shabbat tables; a tradition that has struggled for too long to find room for the voices of women, the voices of LGBTQ Jews, the voices of Jews of color, the voices of the disabled.

\* We are part of a tradition whose Torah tells us 36 times -- 36 times -- to protect the stranger, the widow and the orphan--those who are on the margins of society.

\* We are part of a people who remember each year our own Exodus from slavery and who therefore fight passionately for those who are oppressed today.

We are told we must pray in a place with windows, for the purpose of our prayers is not only to reach God, but to turn us to our better selves. To give us resolve for the work that still has to be done. We must take our prayers out of this sanctuary and to work for *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world.

All of the work we do for justice comes out of our traditions, our text and our history.

As Mark Hetfield, the president of HIAS, said, "We used to welcome refugees because they were Jewish, now we welcome them because we are Jewish."

And all of you here, who came to show support and stand up against hate, you, too, do this work from a place of deep conviction--from your own religious tradition, from the values taught to you by your ancestors, from your desire to create a beloved community.

And, I'm going to say something perhaps a little controversial here. What you have done so far, what we have all done so far, is not enough. Being here tonight is so important. It is vital for us to come together, to build community and to stand against those who hate.

It is not enough.

We must leave this sanctuary and do more.

*Alenu*, it is on us.

\* It is on us to work to welcome all into our community.

\* It is on us to stand up against hate when we hear it in the aisles of the grocery store or on the playground.

\* It is on us to create schools where children are not left out or bullied because of their religion or race.

\* It is on us to take an active part in our local and state politics.

\* It is on us to do our research and vote for candidates who believe in the values that are dear to us.

\* It is on us to meet people who are different than we are.

It is on us to come together again, and again and again. To have hard conversations. To engage. To disagree. To preserve the minority opinion. To stand publicly every day for a world of justice and compassion and peace.

*Alenu*, it is on us.

If we leave here tonight and feel we have done enough then we have failed. But if we leave here tonight more grounded in our own traditions, with a resolve to actively engage every day until we have created the world of justice envisioned by the prophets, then we will have taken a small step towards success.

Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner writes, "Shabbat sustains the rhythm of Jewish life. It restores the aches of the past, nourishes the present and gives us the ability to prepare for the future."

Shabbat shalom, everyone.

May we have a Shabbat that heals in some way the horrors of the last week.

May we have a Shabbat that nourishes and sustains us today.

May we have a Shabbat that prepares us for the work ahead.

May we have a peaceful Shabbat, a Shabbat of rest.

After Shabbat, we have work to do together.

Shabbat shalom.