

Civility is Not Enough **Rabbi Michael G. Holzman**

Delivered following the shooting at Tree of Life Synagogue in Squirrel Hill, PA

I want to go back in time. I want to be innocent again. To suspend the moments before that horrible morning at the Tree of Life synagogue.

I want to be with the Jews, old Jews, arriving early for services, early for prayer; perhaps out of habit, perhaps compelled by long-remembered German grandparents that insisted everything be on time, or perhaps driven by a desire to serve, to set up, and to greet others. Every church, every mosque, every synagogue has people like this. I want to be with them as they made sure the chairs were straight and the Torah scroll was rolled to the right section, and they put out the cups and the whiskey for the baby naming. (I doubt the churches have that. And I know the mosques don't have that.) I want to see the Jews in their *tallitot*, draped in our tradition, wearing the garment of prayer and hope and obligation and community. I want to see the knots that tied them to each other, the knots that tie them to our people, and to a vision for a repaired world.

Most of all, I want to be with Cecil and David Rosenthal, the two brothers, 54 and 58 years old, the youngest victims, both with intellectual disabilities. I want to be with them as they jump to welcome anyone who enters, ready to hand them a prayer book and tell them the page number.

I want to be with them because they stand in the doorway, and with that we find wisdom. The doorway has always been the place of vulnerability, where the safety of the interior meets the unpredictability of the exterior. Every Jew in that synagogue, every Jew in every synagogue, knows that vulnerability, that fear. Anti-Semitism, hatred of the Jews, is as old as Pharaoh, and in every generation, it rears its spiteful head. Like so many other minoritized groups in America, Jews have been the outsiders, and this terrorist attack disabuses any of us of the illusion that anti-Semitism will disappear in this country.

Earlier this week our teens here at NVHC met to have a conversation about what happened in Pittsburgh. As we looked around the room, 100% said they had experienced anti-Semitism in our public schools. Thank God this is usually not the extreme, violent type of attack, but more latent anti-Semitism, the jokes and comments, the assumptions and reminders, that we are not the norm, and that we are the outsiders.

Over a century ago, the great African American thinker W.E.B. Dubois coined the term "double-consciousness" to describe the need to see one's self simultaneously through our own eyes and through the eyes of the rest of the world.¹ All outsiders, all minoritized groups, feel this way. We are always standing in the doorway, looking at the self that we know, and looking outside to see how they see us. This is a form of survival that we learn when we are young, this second awareness. It is a necessary burden we carry throughout

life. And I wonder if Cecil and David Rosenthal carried that awareness with them every Shabbat morning as they stood in the doorway.

They saw the door as an opportunity, as a place to greet the other. But for some, for some in our society, the doorway is a threat, a place to lock and hide. That is the ideology of the attacker last Saturday. The ideology explains both his fear of immigrants and his fear of Jews. Anti-Semitism always morphs to conform to the fear of the time, and in our moment, in our time, that fear has become the fear of immigrants, the fear of those who lie outside our national doorway. We should not be surprised that he believed a Jewish humanitarian organization—that actually helped my wife’s grandmother escape Germany in 1937 to go to Colombia, South America because the doorway of America was closed—that same organization, he believes, is the main cause behind the waves, the millions of people who want to come to America. (He gives the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society a little too much credit. It is a great organization, but his conspiracy theories are fantasy.) Since he stared with the assumption that all outsiders are dangerous, all diversity a threat, the immigrant, the Jew, and the doorway itself must be destroyed. That is his ideology.

So what accounts for the difference between that attacker, that killer, and Cecil and David Rosenthal? It would be too easy to label him evil and move on. But his actions came in a context, in a world view, a belief that doorways are dangerous. Why was the same place, the same exact place, the doorway, so different for these two groups of people?

We find the answer, as we always do, in the Torah portion this week (what did you expect, I’m a rabbi). Each week, the Jewish people read a different section of the Five Books of Moses. This week we are reading Genesis 23, the story of Sarah’s death and Abraham’s need to find a burial site. How ironic, this is the reading of the week, a week of funerals. This is a moment of his grief and pain and vulnerability. This is a moment every single human being can relate to.

But Abraham is also an outsider. He has to approach the local people, the Hittites, and proclaim, “I am a resident foreigner,” a *ger v’toshav*, an outsider, and please introduce me to Ephron the Hittite, Ephron who owns the Cave of Mahpelah, because I want to purchase the land.

Ephron would rather *give* the cave, and preserve Abraham’s outsider status if he is not landed gentry. These ideas go way back. Abraham persists, they negotiate, and Abraham buys the land.

The story seems simple enough. But this is not how Jews read Torah. This is not how we study. Embedded in our tradition is the awareness that every reader sees a different message in the story. Beginning with the rabbis, who lived around the time of Jesus, Jews created a tradition of argument, questioning, debate, and listening to interpretation of the Torah. In one famous story, the rabbis are arguing so loudly that God intervenes and calls

down with the answers for them. But wait. One of the rabbis points a finger up to heaven and quotes Deuteronomy back to God, saying “*Lo Bashamayim Hee*”—It is not up in Heaven for you to decide. We get to decide.²

So the Jews of the Tree of Life synagogue would have looked at this Torah Portion, and they would have argued. And maybe one of them would have noticed a funny thing. Maybe they would see that in this short story, the Torah that is so economical with every word, the text repeats seven times that Abraham and Ephron spoke, “among the Hittites,” or “in the hearing of the Hittities,” or “all who entered the gate of the town,” or “before the people of the land.” Maybe the members of the Tree of Life Synagogue would remember the number seven is the signifier of important things.

The old joke is that two Jews have three opinions, and so we could debate all night the meaning of this text. I want to offer this possibility.

At the moment when Ephron had to face the outsider, when he stood like Cecil and David, in the doorway, facing the outside, this was no longer a private matter. This was a public debate. Abraham and Ephron met out in the open. They were not doing real estate. They were doing politics.

And I wonder, if I was with those old Jews, draped in their *tallitot*, reading the text, how they would react to my reading. I can picture them, Jews who read Torah week in and week out. I have seen them my entire life. They look deeply into the book. They whisper to each other. They probably interrupt or disagree. They might tilt their heads, raise their gray bushy eyebrows, and mumble in assent. I cannot tell you what they would say in Pittsburgh, but I know that the old Jews would be studying Torah, debating each word, arguing over letters or even just the strange dots written in the scroll itself. And they would be doing this next week and the week after and the week after that, because that is what Jews do. We go back to the Torah.

The synagogue is called “Tree of Life” because the book of Proverbs (3:18) teaches, “[Torah] is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it.” This process of seeking wisdom, of desiring learning, and ideas for their own sake, not for the sake of winning an argument, but for the sake of challenging assumptions. This idea, this is how Jews feel alive, how we grow and we change and we reject stagnancy. We do not become ossified in our ideas, sitting in front of a computer. This is what brings Cecil and David to the doorway, ready to encounter difference.

The shooter, the killer, he had none of that. Instead he had the internet, and he had algorithmically reinforced repetition of ideas already embedded in his head. He was radicalized, just like any terrorist, by sitting in a dark room and reading messages from people who already agree with him.

Torah study does not allow us to do this. Torah study is based on an ethic of listening to people who disagree, an ethic that Judaism will not even let God disturb. “*Lo Bashamayim Hee.*” The answer is not up in heaven. It is with us. We find it together.

Studying text deeply shapes the mind and allows for healthy conversation. And to return to the lesson of Abraham and Ephron standing before the Hittites, doing politics, we see that our politics needs the lesson of Torah as well. All those centuries ago, thousands of years ago, when they disagreed about immigrants, they didn’t kill each other. They did politics instead.

But today politics is a dirty word. Our politics is broken for the same reason our country is so obsessed with immigrants. Because we have forgotten how to disagree. We have forgotten how to raise our eyebrows without raising voices or raising guns. I believe what the military historian Carl Von Clausewitz taught: “war is the continuation of politics by other means”—which means politics is the prevention of war by other means. Politics is how we disagree without killing each other.

All week this week, I have listened to vigils, I have listened to speeches. To hear people say we must heal our politics by embracing civility. I want to say tonight . . . civility is not enough.

Civility is not enough when people are deeply afraid.

Civility is not enough when the internet amplifies fantasy and radicalizes the population.

Civility is not enough when parties and politicians abandon their responsibility and instead pursue power.

Civility is not enough when we do not have the courage to be like Ephron and Abraham and discuss our ideas out in the open. Especially when we disagree.

Civility is wonderful, but it is not enough.

In addition to civility we need habits. We need to be like old Jews who study Torah. Habits that open our souls, that bring us to the doorway of the mind, and retrain our society in how to listen, not just in how to talk; how to disagree and how to compromise. That is why, during the Jewish High Holy Days, a few short weeks ago, we embarked here at NVHC on a project to Rebuild Democracy. We called it “Rebuilding Democracy.” Before Pittsburgh, we had already scheduled that tomorrow morning at 9:00 a.m. we will be studying a different kind of Torah. We will use the same skills I described earlier, the same skills that Jews have used for thousands of years, but the text will be the Declaration of Independence. And next month we will take on Federalist Number 10. After that, maybe Emma Lazarus or Martin Luther King or who knows.

In addition, this entire weekend we will rebuild the most basic principle of democracy. We will rebuild democracy by going with VOICE to get out the vote, to find people who have given up on democracy, the people who do not vote, and remind them that their vote has power and power restores hope. Please join us. Check the VOICE website for more information.

And we will continue to experiment with democracy, this project, all this year and going forward, because I believe that faith communities are in the unique position to become incubators of democracy and academies of citizenship. I ask this question: Who else will do it? Who else in our society can reteach America how to be like Abraham and Ephron and stand before the community and disagree? Who else will teach the habits of devotion, service, deep study, listening, and respect? Who can do this other than us? The habits of study and prayer and deeds of humanity that supersede party or policy? Who else but us?

We would love for everyone to help in this project, which is why you can sign up after services, or use the QR code on the back of your service booklet.

Yes, we must rebuild our politics, and rebuild our democracy, because I fear this week of pipe bombs and Squirrel Hill will be just another step on the road from Orlando to Charleston to Quebec to Charlottesville to Sutherland Springs to Jeffersontown, Kentucky to fill in the blank. Maybe Reston, God Forbid.

Last week the shooter tried to kill Jews, but he also tried to destroy the doorway, to eliminate the place where we see the outsider not as a threat, but as an opportunity. This is why those who challenge fundamentalist hatred online are trolled and bullied and attacked and hated. Because their entire world view, the world view of the haters, depends upon an absolute certainty that outsiders are dangerous.

But we are standing in the doorway. We are looking outward. We are there with Cecil and David, because we seek the diverse ideas and we seek the presence of others.

This is why, when we sat down to plan tonight's service, Cantor Caro, Rabbi Wainer, and I agreed immediately, without a moment of hesitation, that we needed your presence here tonight. We needed to celebrate Shabbat in our Jewish way, and we needed you to be with us. Yes we need your civility, but even more than that, we need you to be different from us.

The Quran teaches that God created us different so that we could learn from one another. We need that difference. And we need you to be here with us.

We need the note that a member of the ADAMS Center, Ibrahim Moiz, taped to our front door Saturday afternoon that reads, "Dear Neighbors: truly sorry for the hateful, cowardly acts of the terrorist in Pittsburgh. You are all in our prayers and we will continue to fight to ensure the safety of all: regardless of race, religion, or ethnicity." We need Rizwan Jaka from ADAMS who came here Sunday with his family, *with his family*, not afraid to be in a

synagogue; and Cathy Hudgins who walked here from St. Thomas á Becket; and all the text messages and calls and emails we immediately received from Rev. Berlin of Floris United Methodist, Revs Smith Cobbs and Messman of Trinity Presbyterian, Rev. Hilary West from Epiphany Episcopal, and Rev. Haffner from UUCR (who also offered her parking lot tonight). We need the support we feel tonight from all the clergy and all the churches who are here:

Rev. Juli Wilson-Black of Fairlington Presbyterian

Pastor Etoria V. Goggins, and Revs. Pauline Johnson and Lillian Moore of First AME Church in Manassas

Rev. Rob Vaughn of Community of Faith United Methodist

Revs. Beth Williams and Marcus Leathers from United Christian Parish here in Reston, Tim Barwick and St. Anne's Episcopal

Rev. Tim Ward from Restoration Church here in Reston

And of course, our neighbors from St. Thomas á Becket, that have been with us our entire history as a congregation.

We also appreciate the strong support from Fairfax County Police, Supervisor Hudgins, Senator Howell, and any other elected officials who might be here.

And we ask all the people I mentioned, and any clergy here, please join us here for our closing song at the end of the service up on the *bima*.

All of you bring us healing, not only because we feel your comfort, but because you affirm a vision of America that brings Muslims, Jews, and Christians, Whites and Blacks, native born and immigrant, Gay and Straight, all of us together as human beings and as Americans. I love this country. Only in this country, only in America, can this kind of thing happen here and at synagogues all across America. Only in this country can this room be a place of prayer for both a Jewish congregation and for a Muslim community, the ADAMS Center, which prays here every Friday afternoon.

We need you in this room. Doing Jewish stuff with us. Stumbling over the Hebrew. Wondering why the book goes backward. We need you meeting strangers.

We want you to see our home, to be in our place and see us as we are. We have nothing to hide. The conspiracy theories are wrong. And we want to come visit you in your home too. Because, with our presence together, we reject the hatred of Jews, and we reject the hatred of closed doors. We want you here with us, because this is how we reject the fundamentalist world view of closed doors and closed minds. This is how we hold fast to the Tree of Life.

¹ DuBois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903, 8

² BT Baba Metzia 59b, quoting Deut 30:12