

Shabbat 11 02 18 Sermon

This weekend, for many of us here, reverberates both personally and in broader circles and wider circles. So much of what we came to realize in the last week since hearing the horrific news and coming to the full realization of what had taken place, and hearing over and over again the impact on so many in such wide reach, the personal, the political, the particularistic, the universal, our community, all communities. That intersection is unique for each and every one of you sitting here tonight, and unique for so many others, of course. For me, it lands this weekend on the axis point of an anniversary. It was ten years ago this weekend that my wife and I stood underneath a chuppah. Right here on this weekend, where year in and year out, we as New Yorkers have come to expect that the streets on Sunday will be filled with so many humans testing their fortitude, their perseverance.

One of the things early on that drew me to Ariel, to my wife, was that she was a successful triathlete. For me, triathlons were waking up, brushing my teeth, or something like that. This test of endurance, this ability to go and see it to the end, to make a commitment and then to falter midway through or three quarters of the way through and then to be present, as I have often been, with our dear friend Robert Gedalia, standing and cheering people on, saying, you can do it.

That was the milieu of our wedding weekend. And so I'm thinking a lot about precedent and unprecedented. I'm thinking a lot about the things that we return to over and over again, and the things that somehow we return to when are completely different. Because we've heard that word, unprecedented, over and over again this week. It was, of course, the worst massacre of Jews, a horrific event. But another repetition for me, another return to where we had been, also coincided with that moment.

Meaning, a mere three weeks ago tonight, I stood on October 12th before this community and said that the building right across the street, a building that we had looked to purchase, a building that would give us our own sanctuary for the first time in our decade of existence, that October 12th evening, 21 days ago tonight, coincided with another event, October 12th, 1958, 60 years ago that night, when in an Atlanta temple, members of the Confederate underground placed a bomb made of 50 sticks of dynamite near the north entrance. And although it caused extensive damage, thankfully no one was hurt. The bombing was a retaliation for the rabbi of that community, Rabbi Jacob Rothschild, who from the earliest days of his tenure criticized segregation and advocated for racial equality.

Ralph McGill, the iconic editor of the Atlanta Constitution newspaper, wrote in response to that horrific event, it is the harvest of defiance of courts and the encouragement of citizens to defy the law on the part of many southern politicians. It will be the acme of irony, for example, he writes, if anyone of four or five southern governors will deplore this bombing, he wrote back in 1958. It will be grimly humorous if certain state attorneys general issue statements of regret, and it will be quite a job for some editors or columnists and commentators who have been saying that our courts have no jurisdiction and that the people should refuse to accept their authority now to deplore this act. He writes, to be sure, none said go bomb a Jewish temple or school. You cannot preach and encourage hate for

the Negro and hope to restrict it to that field, he writes. When the wounds of hate are loosed on one people, no one is safe.

1958, unprecedented, preceded. We come back full circle, and here we are. Surely there are differences, surely I am not making an exact analogy between the events of 1958 and the events of this past week. Surely I am not calling to question and saying that what took place in Pittsburgh is the same as what took place in Pinsk or in Europe. But when we loose hate on one people, we loose hate on all peoples. When hate is unleashed, when leaders say things like, if she gets to pick her judges, nothing you can do folks. Although the second amendment people, maybe there is, I don't know.

Do people remember that? 23 years ago this Sunday, November 4th, 1995. Responding to the rhetoric and responding to the hate that had been unleashed in Israel. Yigal Amir, at a rally in Tel Aviv, murdered Yitzhak Rabin. 23 years ago. Hate had been unleashed. The notion of a Rodef, someone who is coming to kill you. A legal category in Jewish law that if someone comes to hurt you or harm you, you are required, hashkeim lehargal, you are required to preemptively and premeditatively protect yourself. And the Prime Minister of Israel was seen as a Rodef. Someone who was coming to destroy the state of Israel through his peace. And with that sleight of hand, and with the complicity of those who said, well it's just words. Is it just words?

There are some who might hear me saying that there is a causal connection between one leader's spoken words and the actions of a few. Hear what you want. Hear what you want. Hate begets hate begets hate. And what was once thought now is spoken, and what is now spoken becomes acted upon. Tomorrow morning in communities around the world, we'll be reading about our heroes. Men and women with clay feet. Men and women with flaws in their personalities. Men and women who are heroic and unheroic. But we read them, and we ask them to teach us.

And so I'm asking tonight, Abraham and Sarah. Abraham, teach us. Chapter 23 of the book of Genesis will begin with Abraham burying his wife. And it was that Sarah was 127 years old. And she died. And Abraham came to eulogize Sarah and to cry over her. We have been Abraham this week. At every moment we've been trying to ask ourselves, I mean many of you I imagine, should I be angry, should I be sad, should I be confused? I am. How should I feel? And for many, this past week was of course a mourning period. It was a shiva, it was a national shiva. It was a shiva for the families of the 11 victims. It was a shiva for the entire Jewish community. It was a shiva for this country. Our flag was torn. Too soon to learn a lesson. Too soon to give direction. Too soon, too soon. And Abraham, sure. Abraham came to cry and to eulogize for Sarah. November 2nd.

Today is the yahrzeit of the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, Kalonymus Kalman Shapira. And in the Warsaw Ghetto, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, this incredible master who loved children and was a mystic, he wrote, you know, the teaching is that suffering can ennoble someone. And in our tradition, we compare suffering to salt. There was a covenant of salt, says the Talmud, and a covenant around suffering. And just as salt can make the meat sweeter, so does suffering. A little bit of it can make life more meaningful. We have a greater edge. We grow from adversity.

But the Warsaw Ghetto Rebbe, whose yahrzeit, his anniversary of his death is today, said, sometimes we can have too much suffering, too much salt, and it can ruin the meat. And then when Sarah dies here, says the Rebbe, quoting a famous rabbinic folktale, she doesn't die naturally. She dies because she hears of her son Isaac's death. And overwhelmed by suffering, she can't hold it. Sometimes we can't hold it.

How many people here felt that this week? Lifting up the Jewish community, lifting up, seeing what's going on in the African American community and in the Latino community and people of color across this country who have been dealing with this week in and week out for decades, systemic racism, systems of oppression that aren't dismantled yet. And here we are.

I sat with Roz Chast of the New Yorker Magazine, who is a cartoonist, and just for a little bit of humor for a moment, we sat together and the entire conversation on Monday evening this past week was about her book about death and about how she tried to talk to her parents about death, but every time she brought it up, they would say, can we talk about something more pleasant? And she showed us a caption of one of her cartoons where instead of the Wheel of Fortune, she had something called the Wheel of Doom. And she said she grew up in a house where every single thing that happened in the day could actually lead you inexorably immediately to death. Playing an instrument could lead to death. Sneezing could lead to death.

So it's not unlikely that as a people who historically know what this feels like on some level, for us to be thinking, when is the next shoe going to drop? What do we do now? What do we do now? What do we feel now? But Avraham comes to the rescue, Abraham, on verse 3. Abraham finishes crying and then, Abraham rises up. Abraham stands up. And he begins to have a dialogue with this leader. Ephron is his name, he has a plot of land, and Abraham wants that plot of land in order to bury his wife. Now just mind you that Abraham has been promised the land of Israel. And now he finds himself negotiating for a piece of land within the thing he was entitled to, within the place he was privileged. He had a promise. Where's my land? But that's not Abraham.

He begins in a conversation. He knows that some things that are given to us, we have to earn, too. And what's remarkable here, folks, what's remarkable for me, and for all of us as friends in this together tonight, crying, all of us, is that there's one way to read Abraham's dialogue in the ensuing verses. He gets into a back and forth with this gentleman, this non-Jew. And one way to read it is in a very insular, protective way. You know Abraham is hurting. He doesn't trust this guy. He wants to give it to him for free, and Abraham insists on paying for it. If you don't know the story, Abraham insists on paying for the very thing that he's about to be given for free. And one way to read it is Abraham doesn't trust him, so he makes sure that he gets his signature.

But another way to read it is Abraham is struggling, like all of us, with trust. I need you, can I trust you? That great rabbi from Atlanta in 1958, Jacob Rothschild, he said this on the Friday night after the bombing. He said, in a sermon that was titled, None Shall Be Afraid. This despicable act has made brighter the flame of courage and renewed in splendor the fires of determination and dedication. It has reached the hearts of men and women everywhere and roused the conscience of a people united in tzedek, in righteousness. All of us together,

all of us together, shall rear from the bubble of devastation a city and a land in which all human beings are truly brothers and sisters and none shall make them afraid. All of us together. By Jacob, Abraham, Avraham got up and he worked with his fear and his trust and he said, Ephron, will you partner with me? I need help, I have to bury. Will you be a witness with me? I can't be alone now.

I'm going to trust you. I'm going to expose my vulnerability to you and see if you will lift me up. October 12th, 2018, that day that Romemu was gifted with that building was a return to a place that the Jewish people had been before, but on that day I received a letter from Alistair Drummond, the reverend of this community. And in that letter he wrote to me and to all of us here at Romemu, May God bless you all and together may we rise. Together may we rise. Together. Together. Even when the salt is so thick that we can't eat and the suffering is so heavy that we're scared, together may we rise. Even as we place rocks, 13, 11 to commemorate our brothers and sisters in Pittsburgh and two to commemorate the two African American victims of a hate crime into this ark, even as we feel the weight of those rocks together, may we rise. As we're joined tonight by so many and as we collectively hold hands, as we stand and sit and cry and sing, together may we rise.

So it had me thinking again about a marathon and an anniversary. I remember two years ago that this was floating around on Facebook somewhere and I couldn't stop watching it. I don't know if anybody saw this. It was a triathlon. Not my kind, but my wife's kind. And as they came to the finish, they came around the final turn, there was an amazingly strong young man in the lead and then he crumbled. Something came over him. He was exhausted, I can imagine. And he just crumbled. He started... And then from behind, someone who looked exactly like him stopped and took his arm and put it over his shoulder. As the racer that they were ahead of passed them, the two brothers, Johnny Brownlee and his brother Alistair, walked hand in hand, lifting each other up, rising to the finish line. When they crossed the finish line, Alistair, Johnny, they collapsed together. Two brothers seated together on the ground. How good it is when brothers sit together.

This community and communities like it will be lifted up. We know that there's a long road ahead and there's lots to do, there's voting to do next week, there are voices to raise, there are hearts to console, there are actions to undertake. But tonight we remember Cecil and his brother, the Rosenthal brothers, David and Cecil, who stood as brothers to welcome in the Tree of Life synagogue. And we remember that together we rise. Together we rise. May God bless us to remember that we are not alone.

In the ensuing weeks and months ahead, may we open our hearts and our hands to join forces together with those who are standing with us tonight and this week and the weeks to come in a display of solidarity and making it to the finish line because the arc of history is long, but together we rise. May the memory of the righteous be a blessing. May we rise to this moment together.

Please rise.