**Rosh Hashanah Day 5784, Congregation Shir Shalom, Rabbi Alex Lazarus-Klein**

**“Tree of Life: Reflecting Back Five Years Later”**

My maternal grandmother Clara was a real spark plug. The older sister of many brothers, she knew how to mix it up with the best of them. One day, when she was ten-years-old, a girl in her fifth grade class was teasing her mercilessly about being Jewish. Calling her, I imagine, all sorts of names - Heb, Jew, Kike, Christ Killer.

The problem for this girl is that my grandmother knew where she lived. And even more importantly, she knew that where this particular girl lived was just past where Grandma Clara lived in the West End section of Boston, the very same section, as my grandmother often reminded me, where Leonard Nemoy grew up.

So, after school that day, Grandma Clara ran home as fast as she could to her family’s second floor apartment and prepared a bucket full of cold water. She then went out to the balcony and waited. When the other girl went by she poured the bucket out over her, dousing the poor unsuspecting girl with water and letting the girl know exactly what she thought of her.

Grandma Clara would often tell this story with a mischievous smile on her face. “This is how you deal with the Antisemites!” is what she was implicitly telling me.

But, despite the bravado she showed as a ten-year-old, Grandma Clara was indeed afraid of the Goyim. She was conditioned to be. They were the reason her parents had come to the country in the first place, fleeing pogroms in Russia for the safety of America. Everything in her kishkes told her to be on guard. America of the 1920s and 30s - the era she grew up in - was the era of Henry Ford and Charles Lindbergh, was not exactly a hospitable place for Jews.

So, when she heard I started wearing a kippah out openly in eleventh grade, she naturally called my mother hysterical. “Wear a hat over it,” was the instructions I received back.

As a young man, I internalized her fear, watching my back as I walked down the street. For my friend’s and I - those of whom wore kippot - we made sure to follow our grandmas’ instructions, covering our Jewish identities with baseball caps. America, as we had been told many times by family and community, was good to the Jews, but not so good that you could afford to be wary. Antisemitism was always lurking, waiting like my Grandma Clara on her second floor apartment to pour cold water over our poor unsuspecting souls.

Still as time ticked away, as I moved from the 80s to the 90s to the 00s, I became more comfortable. Diversity became a good thing. And, so was having a strong, ethnic identity. Judaism was hip, cool, dope. So, slowly, I began to feel safer. This was America, the land of the free, home of the brave, the place that welcomed in the “tired,” the “poor,” the “huddled masses waiting to breathe free.” America moved from being good for Jews, but… To being good to Jews, no caveat.

And, that is what I thought and continued to think until a fateful day five-years-ago, when an event so large, so horrific, struck our community, it shook the foundation of what it meant to be Jewish, not only in America, but anywhere in the world outside of Israel. That event was, of course, none other than the Tree of Life massacre of late October of 2018, the largest single attack on a Jewish institution in American history. On that day, a 50-year-old “heavy-set, white, male” walked into a synagogue in the Squirrel Hill section of Pittsburgh and opened fire. Bearing a Colt AR-15 semi-automatic rifle and three Glock .357 pistols, murdering eleven innocent, beautiful souls - fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, friends, community members, in cold blood. All just because they were Jewish. In the space of less than twenty minutes, our collective naivety was shattered for good.

When we think of our American Jewish community, we can divide between before Tree of Life and after it. Just to show you the impact it has had on us, let us go over a few facts. Prior to Tree of Life, the only time you might see a security officer in an American Jewish congregation would be now, during our High Holy Days. After Tree of Life, there is barely a synagogue in North America without a police presence during normal Friday night services. Overnight, not just here, but in every corner of America, Canada, and Mexico, from large cities to small college towns, college campuses, Jewish Community Centers, Federations, synagogues, have all been transformed. Cameras have been added, buildings have been surveyed, congregants trained, and sophisticated security networks created, seemingly overnight. You can see the impact in our organizational budgets, in our decision making.

No other community in the world has even attempted such large scale change. The call to action came through and we have responded stupendously. This is a credit to a lot of hard work on the part of a lot of people, many of whom are in the room with us today.

It is also a credit to the generations who came before us, to people like my Grandma Clara with her bucket of cold water, willing to fight back against those who seek us harm. This is not only the new normal, but the old normal as well. As we jokingly tell ourselves when describing our holidays - “they tried to kill us, God saved us, let’s eat.” In this telling, the outside world is dangerous, deadly, and always lurking. In this version of the story, we have to be vigilant. When the time comes, it will be up to us, and only us, to save ourselves.

And, yet, is that the only way we need to tell our story? Is the unascribed “they” always out to kill us? Is God always the only one that saves us? Could the story of Tree of Life, and of Jewish history in general be told differently? Could there be another way to tell our story where outside players also have a more positive role? Where the Jewish community is not alone in our suffering? Perhaps, there is something we have been overlooking all along.

For answers, let us turn to our Torah readings of Rosh Hashanah. Not to the normal stories - the Banishment of Hagar, the Binding of Isaac - the stories we always talk about, but to the one story we never talk about. A story not about family squabbles or inner tribal conflict, but about neighborly cooperation. An alternative Jewish universe where small slights and misunderstandings, do not lead to violence and enmity, but to love and friendship.

This is the story of an obscure Philistine King named Abimelech and his relationship with our patriarch Abraham. Long ago, in the Negev desert, a mighty nation lived. Having arrived from the Aegean Sea some time before, they set up towns, built militias, and created society. The Philistines, as we know from the story of David and Goliath, were a force to be reckoned with in ancient Canaan.

So, when Abraham moved southward after separating from his cousin Lot, he had every reason to be afraid. He led a small contingent of a strange and misunderstood burgeoning faith called monotheism. In Genesis 20, the chapter before the two chapters we focus on during Rosh Hashanah, Abraham is so alarmed that his life is in danger he takes evasive action, pawning Sarah, his wife, off on Abimelech as his sister. Perhaps, seeking an alliance with his new neighbor or for reasons difficult to explain today, this felt like his best option for protecting his brood.

When God comes to Abimelech in a dream and warns him of the danger of consummating his new marriage, the Philistine King has every right to be furious with our ancestral family. But, instead of immediately taking action against these new upstarts, he confronts Abraham, saying: “What have I done to offend you?... What did you see in me that caused you to act in this way?” (Genesis 20:9-10). It turns out Abimelech did not mean Abraham and Sarah harm. He was not the bad guy our ancestors first made him out to be. Instead of leading to conflict and enmity, this first interaction between the two leaders leads to an agreement between the two men in which they pledge their loyalty to one another in a truly beautiful manner: “This is the kindness which you shall show to me, at every place where we shall come, say of me. He is my brother - Achi Hu.” Not my enemy, but my friend.

So, when another confrontation between the two men arises several chapters later at the end of our Rosh Hashanah Torah reading, the foundation of respect has already been laid. In Genesis chapter 22, Abraham has heard a report that Abimelech’s people have taken over one of his people’s wells. Water being precious, this is grounds for war. But, war is not what happens, instead the two men come together again not to break their covenant, but to strengthen it, pledging to continue to work together, not only in that moment, but with their children and grandchildren as well. The chapter ends with the beautiful sentiment, “Abraham lived in the land of Philistine’s for many days.”

This story runs contrary to everything we know about our relations with our neighbors. Instead of “they tried to kill us, God saved us, let’s eat,” we have “they tried to help us, God saved us, and we ate together.”

Let’s look back now at Tree of Life using the story of the two Abes - Abraham and Abimelech - serve as a guide at a new way of looking at the event. When the horrific event happened, the outside world was there for us. They responded to the call for distress and apprehended the suspect within twenty minutes of his entering the building, mitigating what could have been an even worse massacre. That weekend the calls for sympathy came from all directions, from every segment of American society, all faiths and no faiths. They poured into our sanctuaries and gathering places - over five hundred people overfilling the old Temple Beth Tzedek building on Getzville. And, over the months and years that followed, the good will continued all the way through the trial and eventual conviction of Robert Gregory Bowers this past June. Just think of all of the many members of the outside community who have stepped in to assist us here in Buffalo - police officers, clergy members, political leaders. The story of Tree of Life is not only about an increase in Antisemitism - which is now at its highest level since my grandmother’s childhood in the early 1920s - but is also about an increase in Appreciation for Jews in America.

We saw this first hand when members of our congregation visited Pittsburgh in early June. The Tree of Life building in Squirrel Hill which once hosted two Conservative and one Reconstructionist community, now sits empty. Around it is a gate to prevent people from entering. But, around that same gate, artists of all ages and abilities have put up murals. Murals depicting doves, trees, opened and closed hands, and hearts. Murals with words like “You’re Not Alone,” “Pittsburgh Strong,” and “Peace.”

As Tree of Life Rabbi Jeffrey Myers told a local Pittsburgh radio station, the synagogue community has drawn strength from these murals, serving as “an uplift not just to our neighbors, and not just to Pittsburgh, but really to the world that there is far more good in the world than there is evil."

We saw examples of this love and good will extend not just beyond the Jewish community, but in the Jewish community itself. One of the most powerful things we witnessed was the way the neighboring large Reform congregation Rodef Shalom opened their doors to the communities once housed at Tree of Life. Our guide when we visited, sitting in the magnificent synagogue sanctuary, described how the host community willingly gave up their central worship space, when a large event - a B Mitzvah, wedding - was taking place for one of their new friend communities. The central ark at Rodef Shalom housed Torahs from all of the various synagogues, creating a beautiful montage of friendship.

A Tree of Life member, Howard Fienberg, perhaps, put it best when describing the former tenants of his building: “I didn’t understand what Reconstructionism was like. They were those guys down the hall for years.” Adding, “There’s a reason that they were all in the same space,” he said. “And it wasn’t just happenstance. They’re all Jewish, right?” By embracing the other, we also, it turns out, embrace the other in ourselves.

To combat Antisemitism the Robert Kraft foundation (yes, that Robert Kraft!) has launched a blue square Stand up to Hate campaign. The blue squares represent the size of the Jewish population, 2.4 percent, relative to the amount of hate crimes we experience, 55 percent. The campaign is an attempt to bring awareness to the outside world just how severe the threat is to our community relative to our size. Our office has procured hundreds of blue square pins that symbolize this effort, just like the one I am currently wearing. On your way out of the sanctuary we encourage you to pick up one for yourself or for your neighbor.

If she were still alive today, my grandmother would, no doubt, be wearing one of these pins herself. And, hopefully, looking around she would see that we were not alone in this world, but have millions of others standing by our side. In the 1920s and 1930s, we were truly strangers in a strange land, a land that was not always so hospitable to people like us. Now, a century later, we, too, have reason to be on guard. But, today we stand side by side with our neighbors, just like Abraham did with Abimelech in the Negev desert thousands of years ago. We too wish to live out our days in the land of the Philistines, side by side with our friends from other communities, and as Isaiah tells us, knowing, that while hatred of the other is still lurking: love compassion, and kindness are in abundance, an endless well ready to be refilled.

To a good sweet year ahead - A Shanah Tovah U’Metukah