

After Pittsburgh

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1. by *Shalom Carmy* February 2019



One evening in the late 1960s, the students gathered in Yeshiva University's major study hall to learn Talmud were treated instead to a speech by Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, the young director of the advanced graduate rabbinic program. The topic was the struggle of Soviet Jews to emigrate. Unlike any lecturer I heard on the subject before or since, R. Lichtenstein, already known for his relentless analytic method, began by asking what he was supposed to say: Did anyone present, he wondered, believe that suppressing Judaism in the U.S.S.R. was a good thing, that it was right for the regime to prevent dissidents from leaving? Was there anything to argue for, or to argue about?

In the wake of the October 27 Pittsburgh massacre, in which a lone gunman killed eleven Jews at their Sabbath morning worship, non-Jewish and Jewish friends and associates have asked me to comment, and I experienced a similar puzzlement. Do any of us doubt that the shooting was evil? What can I possibly add?

We commemorate the dead by remembering their lives. The newspapers gave the victims' ages—late fifties to late nineties, when most of us contemplate death and try to imagine how it will occur. But eulogy is properly a task for those who knew the deceased, friends, neighbors, and lovers. One Pittsburgh rabbi, Daniel Yolcut, sent me the sermon he delivered the following Sabbath. Appropriately, he spoke about coping with the pain and the grief. A young couple living in Pittsburgh told me about their close relationship with their murdered aunt. What am I to say that they did not?

An attack on Jews in one place, however remote, is an attack on us all. Hence the ubiquitous Jewish response is a summons to Jewish unity and to identification with the victims. Rabbi Yolcut outlined several areas where his Orthodox congregation could strengthen their religious and communal commitments. An advertisement I read, from another community, urged its adherents to seek out eleven new members to replenish those killed in Pittsburgh. All of these are constructive and theologically commendable responses to evil.

At the same time, the reactions that seem to get the most publicity and the most attention tend to emphasize political or ideological themes that go beyond the pain inflicted upon the victims and their communities. As always after a mass shooting, there were the predictable calls for gun control, along with the revelation that the shooter had bought his legally. The question in my mind is not whether greater restrictions on firearms is a good idea but, first of all, whether anyone who was not already in favor of stronger limits on gun ownership would change his position due to this incident. One particular atrocity may indeed be the one that moves individuals or even groups to action or advocacy. When this happens, their thinking has already moved in that direction. So one wonders how much is gained and how much is lost by hitching a political cause to the eleven murder victims.

In normal times, the condolences of the president of the United States and his physical presence at the scene of mourning would have been welcomed as an act of support or, at worst, accepted as a courtesy. In these times, President Trump's overtures to the grieving community became the occasion for further acrimony. To be sure, his is not a normal presidency: He has done his share of controversy-stoking. Yet again, one wonders whether the protests and defenses of his visit to Pittsburgh influence opinions of Trump. By now haven't most of us made up our minds? Again, one asks whether the outsize attention to the president does not distract and detract from the mourning and the sympathy that should be most prominent.

Politicization of grief is not exclusively a strategy of the left. Some have used the Pittsburgh massacre to highlight the threat of anti-Semitism in America today. As they would have it, American Jews are naive to believe that "it can't happen here." Israelis, by contrast, know the score: The world is a dangerous place, especially for Jews; in spite of all precautions, violence is always on the horizon. Journalists pontificate that events like Pittsburgh should bring Jews together. Instead, they observe, the desire to make Pittsburgh a grand lesson for all Jews deepens the gap between Israeli and American Jews.

There is a hard-headed Israeli criticism of the "sheltered" American mentality that shies away from harsh reality. It's a criticism that makes sense to me. I am skeptical about easy assurances of Jewish security in the world as we know it. I fear that Americans are too habituated to our country's native optimism. Nothing in Jewish history (or human history

more broadly) supports this optimism about the elimination of violence. We should seek to do our best to deter and limit the evil men do to one another, but we should also be realistic about our ongoing vulnerability.

I have also learned from Jewish history that Jews have lived tolerably, productively, and even creatively in societies where they experienced ongoing threats of persecution and the kind of routine contempt we can hardly imagine here. For those American Jews who feel rooted and secure in this country, I doubt that one act of a solitary gunman is sufficient to destroy their sense of safety. Here too I must wonder what is achieved by deploying the rhetoric of alarm after Pittsburgh. Here too I fear that polemics and special pleading diminish the human gestures of grief and mourning.

I am resigned to the apparent fact that the professional clergymen, the political leaders, the political advocates, and the journalists all have their obligatory roles to fill. Some provide necessary services and convey messages that are valuable precisely insofar as they are neither original nor startling but stick to the truths of which we need perpetually to be reminded. Some preaching I can do without, not because I am hostile or indifferent to the goals pursued, but because the zeal of militant advocacy threatens to overshadow the individual and communal pain, which needs to be honored on its own terms that are at once far more personal and more universal than today's political issues. Though the agendas of partisans often conflict with each other, they seem to share the conviction that individuals, their suffering, and the evil perpetrated against them become newsworthy and therefore deserve our solicitude primarily through the public causes they illustrate.

I don't recall much about the rest of Rabbi Lichtenstein's discourse about Soviet Jewry. I do remember his last words. He did not end on a specifically Jewish note but with a universal cry of outrage. He quoted Dickens's *Bleak House*, the passage reporting the death by starvation of Jo, where the narrator turns to the reader and addresses him directly:

Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us, every day.

Our public square is too heavily politicized. The inclination to react to events around us in terms of social and political causes is often oppressively dominant. However legitimate these causes might be, God-fearing individuals and communities must also provide the corrective, the small, still insistence that the value of our everyday lives and the nobility of our deaths transcend the public use that can be made of them.

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