

From the Rabbi

### “Age of Anxiety”

On a lovely Shabbat morning last October, someone came into the service and whispered to me the news that a shooting had occurred in a Pittsburgh synagogue.

I decided to announce the news to the congregation at the end of the service, knowing that everyone would find out immediately upon arriving at home if not sooner. I wanted to frame the news in a larger message, which I tried to do:

“Dear friends, there has been a shooting this morning during Shabbat services at a Pittsburgh synagogue. There are dead and wounded. It looks to be an anti-Semitic act. Whatever the outcome, and whatever the details, I will guarantee you that you and I will be right here in this place next week. We will be davening and singing and celebrating the glory of being Jews. We will be luxuriating in the joys of our Shabbat together, and not hiding at home under our beds. We will raise our heads even higher, and we will make our Jewish identity even more prominent and public. Moreover, we will continue to commit ourselves *as Jews* to working for justice for immigrants and all Americans. We will not cancel our plans to work with HIAS to host a family of new Americans from Afghanistan.”

The immigrant hosting project went forward. The congregants kept returning to shul week after week. They kept bringing their children to Hebrew school and children's services and programs. No one shied away. We Jews comported ourselves honorably.

After a year of shootings and violent attacks on houses of worship around the world, and after a year of a noticeable uptick in anti-Semitic activity in America, the Days of Awe are upon us. In a normal year, Jews approach these holy days with anxiety. We're afraid to go to synagogue because we rarely show up, and because we don't consider ourselves exemplary Jews, and because we've forgotten the words and the tunes. Primarily, we fear opening the prayer book and subjecting ourselves to berating judgments about how much we've fallen short as human beings.

Now, added to those "normal" anxieties, we wonder if it's such a good idea to gather with other Jews publicly. Yes, security has been stepped up many notches, but what if?

There is no guarantee that we will be safe, though the odds are overwhelmingly in favor of it. But as I told our congregants on the day of the Pittsburgh shooting, Jews don't respond to threats by cowering. We respond with our best selves, our

loftiest principles, and our proudest actions. We respond with our “A Game.”

And so we shall this Rosh Hashanah.

As for the judgmental language of the liturgy, I urge the following:

Come to shul prepared to sit among your people and meditate on precisely how *good* you are in general; how much you have lived up to the *tzelem Elohim* or “divine image” in yourself; how much you have graced your family, your friends, and your profession with the values of decency that are at the heart of Jewish teaching, *whether or not you did so precisely as a Jew*.

Then, contemplate the ways you could “judge” your actions going forward into the new year, so as to live up to your already-high standard even more than in the past year. Face your natural anxieties about being a *mentsch* by, well, being even more of a *mentsch*!

The liturgy can seem unforgiving, but it’s nonetheless designed to get you to forgive yourself, and then to forgive others, and then to translate anxiety into action. And then, if you have any steam left, to help others to do the same.

To a sweet new year.

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