

# The Tree of Life Synagogue: Our Heartbreak, Bewilderment, and Rage

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Job 42:1-7, 10

Like all of you, I am shocked, outraged, and heartbroken by the mass killing at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. This killing spree of hate; coming on the heels of the deadly packages sent by the crazed pipe bomber; are a chilling reminder that words have consequences.

The rising tide of incendiary political speech that is sweeping our nation has to stop. Decent, God-fearing people have to unite and *make it stop* or at the very least, not reward politicians who indulge in bigotry and hate. This is vital, sacred work that must begin at the polls, even as restraint and kindness permeate our private speech, social media, and public conversation.

It appears the attack on the Tree of Life synagogue, a house of worship at the center of a Jewish enclave in Pittsburgh, was the deadliest anti-Semitic attack in U. S. history. And those attacks are on the rise. According to the Jewish Anti-Defamation league, there were 2,000 incidents of anti-Semitism in our country last year, a rise of 57% in just two years.

The attack on the synagogue in Pittsburgh was perpetrated by a hate-crazed zealot whose social media accounts brimmed with violent anti-Jewish rhetoric. According to news reports, he screamed “all Jews must die” as he gunned down worshipers in their house of prayer. Before his grisly deed was done, eleven of God’s beloved children were dead. Other worshipers and police officers were wounded.

This tragedy sickened and saddened me throughout Saturday. But it was immeasurably deepened late in the day when I learned that a member of our Knollwood family, Adam Neiberg, had family members wounded and killed in the attack. The Tree of Life synagogue is a holy place Adam knows well. As a boy, he went there often with his grandmother and family. His family traveled each year from nearby West Virginia to keep Passover with his family and the Jewish community in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood.

Late yesterday, Adam was reeling at the news that his cousin, Andrea Wedner, was in surgery from a bullet wound. Thank God, Andrea will live, but she has scrap metal in her arm and faces skin grafts on Wednesday. Worse, she was with her 99-year-old mother, Adam’s great Aunt Rose, when shots rang out. They huddled on the floor together, Andrea shielding her mother as best she could, before she was wounded and her mother was killed.

As you might expect, Adam and his family are in shock. And his mother is inconsolable over the murder of her beloved aunt. I told Adam our love and prayers are with them all.

After all this happened, the sermon I prepared for today ended up on the cutting room floor. It was, and still is, a sermon about Job, the perfect focus for a time like this.

Job was left reeling by unspeakable loss: the death of his children, the destruction of his property, and the loss of his health. Before all these mounting, horrific losses, Job was left to wonder where God was when he needed God most. As in the wake of the synagogue attack, and our personal stories of loss and reversal, we are left to wonder if what we have been taught about God’s faithful, loving care is even *remotely* true.

To Job's credit, he refuses to settle for easy answers, even as for thirty chapters of the Bible, he has to contend with so-called "friends" who offer cheap clichés and threadbare platitudes. But Job will have none of it. Instead of settling for a saccharin sweet spirituality that dulls and denies his fury, Job protests and shouts, acts up and acts out, yells and rages. He is angry at God's poor handling of a world where the innocent suffer and God-fearing people are struck down by an assassin's bullets while they pray.

And yet Job's honest rage in acknowledging his bewilderment and abandonment is not his way of *rejecting* God but his way of *holding on* to God. As the holocaust survivor and author, Elie Wiesel, observes, the difference in the pure and the impure, is not that the pure are right and the impure are wrong. The difference is that the pure, the truly righteous, raise their howling protest to the heavens without even knowing if anyone listens! Because, says Wiesel, "Protest itself contains a spark of truth, a spark of holiness, a spark of God."

So if you find yourself, as I do, furious at what hate and gun violence are doing to our country, while God seems so silent and helpless in the heavens, the place to start is not in offering pious clichés. Or even cheap and easy consolations about how we'll all come out better and stronger from this latest bloodbath to soil our nation's soul.

No, the place to start is to immerse yourself in Job's evocative prayers of agony and exasperation. Or in the Bible's many psalms of lamentations that point an angry finger at the heavens and cry, "Hey God, why don't you wake up and do something!" Or sidle up to Jesus on his cross, and let *his* cry become *your* cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Granted, suffering does have the capacity to grow our spirits, steel our resolve, and deepen our life with God. But only when it is faced with the sort of gutsy engagement and howling protests that Job so vigorously models. As God unburdens the agony of the *divine* heart, at the end of the story; "The Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, 'My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.'"

Or as I would say to my friend, Adam Neiberg, and others for whom this latest national sacrilege is a personal tragedy, I have no answers that satisfactorily explain why God lets such atrocities happen. I can only tell you that I share your outrage and heartbreak. And I dare to believe that God does too.

God's outrage explodes in chapter 38 of Job's story. In this pivotal encounter between God and Job, God's own exasperation at being misrepresented and misunderstood, comes rushing to the fore. "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" God erupts at Job, like a prosecuting attorney approaching the witness box. "Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me."

Then in a wild ride of two chapters, God's own struggle to oversee a vast, complex, sprawling creation comes into view. On the one hand, God must respect the freedom of the human creature, while caring for all the other creatures and facets of creation where human beings are *not* the center of the action.

"Where were you," God cries, "when I laid the foundations of the earth and all the morning stars sang together and the heavenly being shouted for joy?" . . . "Are you the one who leads the raven to its prey when its young ones cry for food?" . . . "Have the gates of death been revealed to you . . . or do you know the way to the dwelling of light?" from which all this glory and grandness first burst into view?

Job, it seems, is not the only one with questions. In fact, God peppers Job with far more questions than answers.

No, in this extraordinary encounter between an outraged Job and an outraged God, Job doesn't get answers to his questions. But he does find himself surprised by the mystery of the divine presence and an emerging confidence that his life, and the life of the cosmos, rests in far stronger and more able hands than his.

Etty Hillesum lived in the Netherlands during the rise of the Third Reich, just down the street from another of God's prodigies and embattled Jewish children, Anne Frank. In her letters

and diaries, Hillesum chronicled her own religious awakening as the persecution of the Jewish population in Amsterdam was on the rise. Tragically, in 1943, she was shipped off to Auschwitz where she died.

Of her own wrestling with God in the face of immense evil, she wrote, "Thinking gets you nowhere. It may be a fine and noble aid in academic studies, but you can't think your way out of emotional difficulties. That takes something altogether different. You have to make yourself passive then; and just listen. Re-establish contact with a slice of eternity."

That's what happens when Job encounters God in the whirlwind: he "re-establishes contact with a slice of eternity." In apprehension and awe, he gingerly reaches out to touch the very face of God.

Then, from the bowels of the storm, Job sounds his pivotal confession, the exclamation of confidence and trust that changes everything, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you!" That's when Job meets and is transformed by the God he never knew before: the one who sustains him not with answers to all his questions, as painful and real as they are, but with the strength to keep railing and fighting and trusting, even when the answers are long in coming. And sometimes, maybe often, Job and we must start becoming the very answers we seeks.

First, Job must pray for his so-called "friends" who did him wrong, a nearly impossible expectation which anticipates one of Jesus' hardest teachings: that we must pray for our enemies. For it is only as we pray for our enemies, that we can let them go, and shake their hold on us.

Then in the restoration that is granted Job at the end of the book, there are hints of a new man and a new world. His daughters, who had bit parts early in the drama, are now named and given an inheritance. In a flaunting of ancient rules of property that denied women their due, Job makes his daughters and their brothers' equals. In so doing, he anticipates God's justice and shalom for all the world.

Then a broken-hearted Job is consoled by his brothers and sisters, as he tries to find a path forward in a world where precious children and loved ones die, and there is no replacing them. There is only the promise that the God Job never knew before, is mysteriously, powerfully present, coaxing new life from tragedy and death and ruin.

Recently, I read a meditation penned by Omid Safi, the Director of Islamic Studies at Duke University, reflecting on a visit to the redwood forests of California. Like all guests in that magical forest, Omid was awed by the height and grandeur of thousand-year old trees.

But one mystery in particular caught his eye and snagged his heart. And that was the occasional ring of redwoods arising around a single, shrunken, charred stump of a tree. Clearly, the tree that became the stump was leveled by some terrible fire. And yet all around it, towering new life had sprung up.

Omid drew closer, pondering this marvel, when he came upon a sign: “Hundreds of years ago a single large redwood grew here. Then disaster struck. The trunk of the large redwood was killed, perhaps by repeated and severe wildfire. From here you can see the original tree trunk still standing upright, now a dead and blackened snag.”

“Despite such terrible damage, the tree did not die. Below the ground, its massive root system was full of vitality. Before long, hundreds of young, bright green burl sprouts began to come up around the circle formed by the root crown of the original tree. Some of those sprouts have grown into the full-sized trees that today stand in a circle around the original trunk.”

Dr. Safi writes, “I had to slowly mouth these words, which rang in my heart more and more profoundly with each repetition: ‘*Despite such terrible damage, the tree did not die.*’” Because the trees’ roots; growing in hiddenness beneath all the destruction and ruin, were already birthing new life.

Through the terrible, defining storm that was his life, Job came to believe in a God who could turn even the charred stump of a redwood into a Tree of Life. Even as Christians believe in a God who could turn even the cruel, dead wood of the cross into a Tree of Life. And with our

Jewish neighbors, we believe that God can grow new roots of goodness and promise, justice and love, even from the tragedy to befall the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. Especially if God can find women and men of conscience and faith and courage, like Job, to join in the holy work of rebuilding what a hate-inspired frenzy of violence, hoped to destroy.

Last night, hundreds of shaken residents of all faiths joined in a vigil in the Jewish enclave of Squirrel Hill. While holding their flaming candles with trembling fingers, they sang and wept and prayed together. One of the organizers, 15-year-old Sophia Levin, declared that she was a different Jew that night than she had been the day before. Because the day before, anti-Semitism was something that happened in other times and places; but now she knew anti-Semitism was right here, right now.

My friend Adam Neiberg told me much the same thing. That in light of the tragedy at his family's synagogue in Pittsburgh, the anti-Semitism he had long recognized in principle, was now personal.

Now anti-Semitism is personal for me too. And I hope it is now personal for you.

For if it is, as it is, we can become part of the root system, God is growing even now, to bring a powerful new beginning from what a sick, crazed gunman meant to be the end.

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*Eternal God, words fail us before such unspeakable tragedy and loss. So we offer up only the groanings of our anguish and the bitter cries of our rage, asking that you turn even these into prayers for hope and healing.*

*And turn us into your prayers of hope and healing that from this senseless act of violence and death, new roots of justice and love might grow.*

*In the name of the crucified, yet risen One, we pray. Amen.*