

IDEAS

Pushing Back the Darkness in Pittsburgh

On the first night of Hanukkah, I returned to the synagogue where my husband is a rabbi for the first time since the October shooting.

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People gather outside the Tree of Life synagogue on the first night of Hanukkah, December 2, 2018, in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh. (JEFFREY MYERS / AP)

I was walking somewhere I was afraid to go, even though I had been there many times before. But I had not been to a religious service at the Tree of Life synagogue—where my husband is the rabbi of New Light Congregation—in more than 30 days, since a shooter killed 11 people in that spot.

Though it was not quite 6 o'clock on Sunday evening, the first night of Hanukkah, the winter darkness enveloped my neighborhood. I walked past the shopping district, the dry cleaners, my dentist's office, and the home of my husband's college roommate. All was familiar, yet I was scared to be outside in the open air with a group of Jews. If we had been targeted inside, where our Torah scrolls and prayer books were and where we were not being public about our faith, wouldn't this be a

provocation, a taunt to anti-Semites, wherever they lurk, to come and get us? A therapist told me to use my rational mind and remember that this was the only event of its kind, the only synagogue shooting that had happened in the United States. That is true, but when it happens at your own place of worship, statistics and rationality take a back seat to raw fear.

As I walked down Shady Avenue, approaching the corner of Wilkins, I saw the police barricades at Northumberland Street, a block before the synagogue. I told a police officer that I was glad to see him, and that I was scared to be here. He told me I did not need to be afraid.

That has been the message I have gotten in so many ways over the past few weeks. Three members of New Light were killed; my husband, Jonathan Perlman, survived with two others by hiding in a storage closet. The day of the shooting, one of my husband's former chaplain-field-placement students came to the house—not because she knew that my husband had been in the building that morning, but because she knew he was a rabbi in Squirrel Hill. She was concerned about his well-being and that of his family, whether he had been directly affected or not. Her African-American Baptist-faith tradition includes spontaneous prayer, so she and her uncle stood with me, my husband, and my daughter in a circle. We held hands, and she prayed. It was the most comforting thing the three of us experienced that Shabbat, before we headed off at its conclusion in the darkness to the Jewish Community Center, to be with the families of the dead as they were formally notified of their losses by the FBI.

[Read: The Jews of Pittsburgh bury their dead.]

The outpouring from every segment of Pittsburgh, and from national leaders both religious and political, the next evening at the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall and Museum was beautiful to see. Clergy from every faith tradition stood side by side on the stage, all affirming a shared commitment to proving that “hate has no home here,” as the signs posted on many Pittsburgh lawns read. We were invited to a service at the Rodman Street Missionary Baptist Church that week and to the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh to meet with a group from the mosque in Quebec where a shooter killed six worshippers in 2017. We will be going to the Hindu Jain Temple this coming Sunday.

Friends from every sector of our life, and of every denomination, have expressed condolences. A Quaker friend wrote me that they proclaimed “Jewish lives matter” at their weekly meeting. Before the shooting, I had been preparing to spend a few weeks at a writers’ residency at the ecumenical Collegetown Institute. The other participants sent a card expressing regrets about what had happened and their understanding that I would be unable to leave my family and travel to Minnesota. A Protestant friend who teaches at a prep school in Oregon wrote to tell me that her school had an assembly to discuss what had happened on October 27, and that I would have been so proud of her students. The uplift I gained from these countless gestures has begun to ease my persistent fear.

One of the main directives of Hanukkah is to display the menorah in a public way so that the miracle of the holiday can be proclaimed. It is a time to stand out, to draw attention to our pride in our faith. When I recently wrote about the danger of giving in to fear, I heard from a woman in Durham, North Carolina, who said she had been “feeling scared to put my menorahs in my front bay window this year.” But she does not stand alone. Durham’s most prominent and influential citizen, the Duke University basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski, lit the menorah on the Duke campus this year and then addressed the crowd, endorsing the value of the Jewish people and Jewish religion.

[Read: How will Pittsburgh’s Jews translate tragedy into action?]

Hanukkah is a holiday of spiritual resistance. I was reminded of that this past Shabbat by Francine Green Roston, a rabbi visiting from Whitefish, Montana, whose community has faced its own anti-Semitic threats. Lighting a candle, she said, may seem like a small thing, but a tiny light can illuminate a much larger area. Or, as the Lutheran pastor Andrew Wendle of Montana said at an interfaith service in Whitefish in April, “Light can bind and unify. It can draw us in so we can see what we can illuminate together.”

Outside the synagogue on Sunday night, my husband told a reporter that Hanukkah is a holiday where “hope is always a possibility.” He led the crowd in singing Hanukkah songs, including the Israeli Hanukkah anthem “Banu Choshech,” which includes the line: “Go away darkness, banish the blackness, go away in the face of light.” Then police officers, paramedics, an FBI agent, and survivors of the shooting stepped forward and lit the menorah. Its small, bright

lights pushed aside the gathering darkness, illuminating the hundreds who had gathered with us to celebrate Hanukkah.

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