

Pittsburgh massacre 2018 - sermon

'My eye runs down with rivers of water for the destruction of the daughter of my people. My eye trickles down, and ceases not, without any intermission, until the Eternal One looks down and behold from heaven. My eye affects my heart because of all the people of my city. They hunt me like a bird, those who hate me without cause.' [Eicha 3:48-52].

These verses are from the book of Lamentations. And following the attack in Pittsburgh this time last week, despite the fact these words were written so many years ago, they feel so real and the feelings so raw. And what feels especially painful is that I used this same passage in a sermon in May 2017 following the bombing of the Arena. We return to this book – the book of Lamentations, also known by its Hebrew name, Eicha – year after year when we recite it at Tisha B'Av, one of our days of fasting and mourning. Now we return to it to mark another atrocious attack – not on our city or on our shores this time but against our Jewish family, in one of our homes, our places of worship. The name Eicha is less of a word and more of a sound – a deep belly cry – an exclamation of deep distress and grief. We come together to feel the reverberations of this cry – how? Eicha?!

Following the news which broke hours after we had left our synagogue last week, I am sure that we have all been feelings many different and painful emotions. Anger – it's happened again – why and how? Eichah, the book of Lamentations recognises this emotion and demands of God that God look at the devastation – in one *pasuk* (verse) it states, 'See Adonai and consider...The youth and the old man lie on the ground in the streets...' (2:20). The long poem seeks to make God understand their grief - 'The joy of our heart is ceased; our dance is turned into mourning.' (5:15). We've seen many people turn this anger into action – turning up to vigils and raising money for charities – and many have turned their anger to blame – as they try to seek answers to how this could happen. Another emotion is deep sadness - grief. For whilst we don't know the victims of the attack, as part of our global Jewish family, gathered on a Shabbat morning, we feel as if we know them in our souls. We can imagine them – the *machers* of the community, as they were, turning up every Shabbat for a service – handing out prayer books to the congregation and being pillars of their local community. It's a confusing grief for it is ours and it is not. They are part of our global family but not our immediate one. Another

emotion is fear - deep fear that we are not safe, it could happen here. Our imagination races and it doesn't take long for us to find images of similar scenes here.

It is incredibly important to name and feel these feelings. The book of Eichah teaches us the importance of lamenting, of crying and of expressing our anger and pain. We ignore these feelings at our peril. We see Abraham in our portion today grieving for Sarah, his wife. He weeps. And in so doing, he models for us the importance of being with our emotions and expressing them. Denying them or fighting against them just multiplies their effect and there's the danger the emotions will manifest in more destructive ways. Yet - everything about our Jewish tradition demands that we do not get lost in these emotions. Time after time, as our people have processed acts of violence and hate, we are commanded to choose life - we are told to continue with our lives. We see this with Abraham, straight after he weeps and buries his wife, he looks towards the next generation. Our mourning cycle provides us with a structure for grief - we are slowly but surely accompanied from raw grief towards returning to our everyday lives (lives which have been fundamentally affected but nevertheless go on). It is so easy to get lost in the news - to endlessly read the stories about the horror of that Shabbat - to read the obituaries, to read the articles which seek to point blame or find answers for how it could ever get to this. But we have a duty to look after ourselves. We see this in the Jewish laws for mourning as found in the 16thc law book, the Shulchan Aruch:

'One must not grieve excessively for the dead. Whoever weeps more than the law must be weeping for something else. Rather, let one accept the schedule set down by the sages: three days for weeping, seven days for lamenting, thirty for mourning.' [*Yoreh Deah 394*]

Our duty which arises not despite of, but because of this attack, is to live our lives. To recognise the painful emotions - yes, to mourn - of course, but also - to choose life - to live. To build community. To do good deeds. To love our family and friends. To live and love our Judaism - to be defiantly Jewish. And to fight racism on every front alongside other minorities and allies. And, perhaps, one of the hardest things to do - which enables all of this - is to remember that the world is fundamentally a good place. We are all fundamentally good people. We know this from our creation story as God tells us that God's creation was very good. We have an evil inclination but we are not fundamentally

bad. Many people over the past few months have commented to me how broken the world is – how it is worse than it ever has been. How can we bring children into this world, I’m asked? Things have never been this bad. I fundamentally disagree with this. To help me explain I will turn to one of our ancestors who knew the darkness all too well - Anne Frank. We read this passage again and again here for its wisdom and hopeful message:

That’s the difficulty in these times: ideals, dreams and cherished hopes rise within us, only to meet the horrible truth and be shattered. It’s really a wonder that I haven’t dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because, in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can’t build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever-approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquillity will return again. In the meantime, I must uphold my ideals, for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out.

We can choose to concentrate on the darkness, for there is so much around us – or we can also choose to seek out goodness – the light. There are so many stories from Pittsburgh, and all around the globe, of non-Jewish communities coming together for vigils, supporting the community. One Muslim man, you might have seen, stood up at the Pittsburgh vigil and said to the grieving community – whatever you need we are here – if you need food we will make it, if you need people to stand on security outside the synagogue we will come. Nothing can be more powerful, more good, or more needed. I choose to focus on this – not the hate or the blame. I choose to privilege these stories. Indeed, this week we have received messages from other community leaders to offer their love and solidarity. I choose to focus on those messages.

The Rabbi of the tree of life community went on the news this week with the same message after he had received 100s of messages of support. As the news reporter kept asking him to analyse why hate was so prevalent he said the following:

Hate does not know religion, race, creed, political party...it exists in all people.

The reporter asks, but 'can hate be cultivated?' The Rabbi quotes from the story of Noah when God says, 'man is prone to evil from youth' and the Rabbi continues:

There is the possibility of hate in all people but there is also the possibility of good and good will also win out over hate if we let it in each of us and we have seen such good these past few years. It shows me good will always win out over evil.

Such brave, powerful words. It is an act of resistance – a brave, radical act to choose love and believe in goodness when we hear of such attacks.

The book of Eichah ends with on a fearful note – wondering whether the darkness will continue and get worse. Rashi, the medieval French commentator tells us we cannot end the book with that verse – instead we read the penultimate verse, *Hashiveinu Adonai, Elecha, ve'nashuvah, chadesh yameinu ke-kedem* – 'Adonai, allow us to return to you – repair our days as before – so that we will come back.'

We must end with a message of hope, we cannot be left in this pit of despair – we must realise that goodness can overcome darkness and see the beauty in creation and not only the destruction. As we mourn we say these words as a song of protest, an anthem of hope in the face of terror.

Hashiveinu Adonai, Elecha, ve'nashuvah, chadesh yameinu ke-kedem – 'Adonai, allow us to return to you – repair our days as before – so that we will come back.' Ken Yehi Ratzon – May this be God's will – Amen.

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Rabbi Robyn Ashworth-Steen**