

Facing Tragedy

Parasha Toldot 5779

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This week we are gathered to celebrate a wonderfully happy occasion for our community – the aufruf and upcoming marriage of X, who grew up in our shul and reflects strongly the values we hold dear. But we find ourselves in a strange situation. Two weeks ago around this time, eleven Jews were massacred, not that far from here in Pittsburgh. Many of us had no idea what was going on that day, but we began to hear some news trickling in as we were leaving shul. Last week, we knew full well the horror of what had happened, and there was a pall that settled on our services here. This week, only three weeks later, we have a joyous occasion and the timing seems wrong.

Of course, we are not the first generation to face the issue of how does one celebrate amidst difficulty and loss. Generations of Jews were forced to celebrate their milestones and lifecycle events in the midst of suffering and mourning. One of the comments I keep hearing these past few weeks is people who express surprise that something so violent could have happened in a synagogue – a place devoted to peace – of all places. This is true of American Jewish history, we are not used to this happening in synagogues. But as Jews we are part of a much longer history, and anyone who knows anything of Jewish history knows that massacres constantly happened in synagogues. If you had asked any of our ancestors whether synagogues are dangerous places they would have said “of course.” We are the first generation who forgot how dangerous a synagogue is, and now we are, unfortunately, bitterly, being reminded.

I also keep hearing from people that we must hold vigils and sermons in the synagogue immediately to remember this tragedy, if we wait a few days, they say, people will move on to other events. This too seems to me to be forgetting a basic lesson of Jewish history. We are a people who are still mourning the destruction of the Temple, thousands of years ago, we can remember a brutal massacre which happened close by for longer than a few days. I personally did not connect with the movement to hold a Solidarity Shabbat last week. It was too trendy, too social media focused and focused on the immediate moment. A tragedy such as this one needs some time to process, to reflect on, not a hashtag and facebook profile photo.

And so we find ourselves here this morning, with a massacre on our minds while celebrating the upcoming marriage of a wonderful young couple. Let us then reflect on a remarkable passage from the Talmud, which seems relevant:

It has been taught: R. Ishmael ben Elisha said: Since the day of the destruction of the Temple we should by rights bind ourselves not to eat meat nor drink wine, only we do not lay a hardship on the community unless the majority can endure it. And from the day that a Government has come into power which issues cruel decrees against us and forbids to us the observance of the Torah and the precepts and does not allow us to enter into the ‘week of the son’ (according to another version, ‘the salvation of the son’), we ought by rights to bind ourselves not to marry and beget children, and the seed of Abraham our father would come to an end of itself. However, let Israel go their way: it is better that they should err in ignorance than presumptuously. (Baba Bathra 60b, Soncino trans.)

The Talmud deals with the proper way to respond to and communally mourn the bitter tragedies of Jewish history. It sets up a basic principle: we must not “lay a hardship on the community” which the majority cannot follow. In other words: life must also go on, in the face of destruction. We then read of a surprising development. During the terrible Roman persecution of Judaism, there was a suggestion made to prohibit marriage and childbearing with the express purpose of ending the Jewish people’s existence. (The Tosafot commentary limits this to those who already have a son and daughter.) The Talmud even indicates this would have been the logical course of action. Let the Jewish people determine their end, and not their Roman oppressors.

This of course did not happen, and we are all here today to testify to that. What is the Talmud’s response to this fatalistic approach? The Talmud in fact does not give a real response. It merely retorts that the people would not have listened anyways, and so it is counter productive to make decrees which are then ignored.

But something interesting did happen as a result of this suggestion, a change occurred in the halacha. The commandment to have children is Biblically mandated. As with many commandments, in the times when there was an autonomous Jewish court they would compel recalcitrant people to marry and have children. But the Rema (E.H. 1:3), the preeminent halachic authority of European Jewry, tells us that nowadays even if we were to have an autonomous Jewish court we would no longer compel someone to marry and have a family. The reason for this is that theoretically, as we saw in the Talmud, no one should marry and have children at all, so we are certainly not going to force anyone to do so. (See Beit Shmuel commentary there, Biur Hagra offers a different rationale for this shift.)

The implications of this are profound. The Rema is telling us that marriage and raising a family are no longer communally mandated issues, which we force people to engage in. Halacha acknowledges that we live in a difficult and dangerous world, and therefore we cannot impose marriage on someone who legitimately feels like they cannot bring children into such a painful place. The world can be a dangerous place for Jews, and so we do not force anyone to reproduce. Marrying and raising children in our world comes from a personal decision that each person must make, on their own, as a reflection of their faith in the world and their ability to provide a child with hope for the future.

We don’t compel faith in the future of our world, but we admire every person who makes the choice to raise a family. Every person, who well aware of the potential for violence and sadness in our world, who with open eyes as to the painful reality we live in, chooses to create a home and a family, to build an oasis of love and peace amidst the suffering is a celebration. Building a family has shifted from something the community forces on us, to a reflection of our deeply held values and faith and determination to work towards a better future.

When we celebrate a marriage in today’s world, we celebrate not only the coming together of two wonderful young people, their decision to blend their lives together and the personal happiness we wish them. But we also celebrate that another young couple has taken the challenge to build a family in the face of adversity. We celebrate that as a reflection of their personal values, and the values they learned at home and from their community, they have decided to commit themselves to building a family and facing tragedy by reaffirming their faith in the potential for goodness in our world.

Our celebration today is not a way to forget the loss of lives in Pittsburgh, but to remember it well and to act on the pain. We wish our chattan and kallah a lifetime of joy, and also success in building that home which will serve as another step towards peace and away from violence.