

Nation Shaken in Wake of Multiple Hate Crimes in Less Than a Week, Including Worst Anti-Semitic Attack in U.S. History

The Wired Word for the Week of November 4, 2018

In the News

Helpful. Charismatic. Kind. Witty. Sweet. Friendly. Loving. Giving. Beloved. Welcoming. Caring. Fun. Respected. Extraordinary. Gentle. Lit up the room.

These are just a few of the words mourners used to describe the 11 people who were gunned down by a known anti-Semitic man as they were assembled for a Shabbat bris (Sabbath ceremony for a baby boy) at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on Saturday, October 27. The dead ranged in age from 54 to 97.

Six others were injured in the attack, including four police officers who responded to the 911 alert. In the ensuing battle, the suspect [whose name we will not repeat] was wounded and taken into custody. He is charged with multiple federal and state counts and could face the death penalty, according to U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions.

According to investigators, the 56-year-old alleged murderer shouted "All Jews must die!" during the 20-minute rampage. On a social network often associated with white supremacists and extremists, he used slurs for Jews, asserted that the Holocaust was a hoax and promoted conspiracy theories about Jews destroying the planet, fueling mass migration of "invaders that kill our people," and manipulating the president, whose daughter and son-in-law are Jewish. Shortly before the shooting, he posted online that he couldn't "sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I'm going in."

At 9:54 a.m., a 911 call reported the active shooter. At about 10:30, officers entered the synagogue. The attacker surrendered at 11:08.

On Wednesday, October 24, a 51-year-old armed white man pounded on the locked door of the predominantly black First Baptist Church of Jeffersontown, Kentucky. When he could not gain admittance, he went to a Kroger grocery store, where he allegedly shot and killed two African-Americans. The suspect, who is in custody facing multiple charges, reportedly has a long criminal record of domestic violence and a history of making racist slurs and threats.

Two days before, the nation was shaken by the discovery of the first of at least 15 pipe bombs sent through the mail to two former presidents, a Jewish billionaire philanthropist, prominent Democratic politicians and activists who oppose the policies of the current president of the United States, and media giant CNN.

None of the devices detonated and no one was injured, but authorities say the danger they posed was real.

The alleged perpetrator of the pipe-bomb attacks, who self-identified as a white supremacist, was arrested last Friday.

"There is a growing space in this country for hate speech and hate speech always turns into hate action," Mark Hetfield, president and CEO of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), said.

"We cannot stand by as individuals or organizations or as governments when people spew hatred against Jews, refugees, Latinos, against any group that some see as 'the other.'"

According to the Anti-Defamation League, reports of anti-Semitic incidents in the United States increased 57 percent between 2016 and 2017. Last Saturday's massacre was the worst attack on Jews in America in the history of the United States.

Jewish leaders looked for a path forward in the wake of the tragedy.

"As Jews, we know that when one minority is threatened, we are all threatened," said Gavriela Geller, Executive Director, Jewish Community Relations Bureau/American Jewish Committee of Greater Kansas City. "We are stronger when we stand together against hatred and bigotry wherever we see it, and we reaffirm our commitment to supporting our partners and friends from all faiths, races, and nationalities."

"What do we do?" asked Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin of Temple Solel in Hollywood, Florida. "We double down. We lean in. We affirm our values. We affirm the centrality of the synagogue in the lives of Jews."

"Rather than be afraid of bringing ourselves and our children to synagogue, let us triple our efforts to do so," Salkin urged. "Maintain your membership in the Jewish community. Your presence is a fist that you shake in the face of the haters."

Rabbi Chuck Diamond, a former rabbi of Tree Of Life, told local CBS affiliate KDKA: "There's hate in this world, but ... we just have to try to be tolerant. Because of the hate, we have to fight hate by doing good things."

Dr. Jeff Cohen, a member of Tree of Life, supervised the medical care Allegheny General Hospital provided for the man accused of shooting members of his congregation. Many of the staff who tended to his wounds are also Jewish, Cohen said. "My job isn't to judge him," he added. "My job is to take care of him."

He might have taken a page from the playbook of one of the shooting victims, Jerry Rabinowitz, a primary care physician who, in the early days of the HIV epidemic, reportedly did not judge his HIV patients, nor was he afraid to hold their hands or to embrace them without gloves.

It appears that both physicians were guided by a Hebrew principle in Judaism known as *Tikkun olam*, which means "repair of the world" by acting constructively for the common good, not only for one's own benefit.

The Big Questions

1. "Today we are all Jews," said Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey at the Boston vigil to mourn those who died in the Tree of Life synagogue massacre. What does that mean for Americans to adopt that perspective? What does that mean for Christians?
2. Dr. Cohen said the alleged Pittsburgh synagogue shooter is "just a guy ... some mother's son. And how did he get from that to where he is today? That's going to be a large debate that we have to wrestle with as a society." What does it take for victims of a horrific attack to view their attackers in such human terms? How would you answer Dr. Cohen's question?
3. The late Leonard Bernstein once said, "This will be our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before." How can our faith strengthen us to reply to violence by creating more beauty, with greater passion and devotion?
4. How are you as an individual, a family, or a faith community reaching out to Jewish people impacted by the Tree of Life attack? How can you build loving relationships with Jewish people in your community?
5. How should Christians respond to attacks motivated by hate? What can we do that goes beyond the typical "feel bad for the victims, pray harder" type of response? What can we actually do in the current fearful and hostile environment that might make a real difference?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

John 8:7-11

When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." (For context, read 8:3-11.)

Questions: What was it about Jesus' response that de-escalated the passions of the crowd, passions that could have easily resulted in the violent death of the woman? What can we learn from Jesus' example that can help us turn away wrath and tone down hate speech?

Luke 6:27-28, 31

[Jesus said,] "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ... Do to others as you would have them do to you. (For context, read 6:22-23, 27-36.)

Questions: Who in the news story best exemplifies the actions Jesus commands here? Where have you seen this kind of behavior in people you know? Have you told them how their example has affected you, or in some way acknowledged their influence in your own life? If not, consider offering a word of encouragement and gratitude.

For Further Discussion

1. Consider ways to lament with and express empathy for those who feel more vulnerable and afraid because of these recent events.

2. Brainstorm ways you can build relationships with Jews as individuals, as a group, and as a church. Choose at least one action from your discussion and follow through.

3. Two days after the attack on the synagogue, TWW team member Jim Berger wrote: "Yesterday a young white man about 26 walked into church half an hour early. He wore a Steelers hat and a Penguins jersey. He was solidly built and had a black beard. I'll call him Pete. He said he was pet-sitting for a coworker and our church was a lot closer than his regular congregation. He sat down, but left after a while. Frankly, he made me nervous.

"The service began at 10:00 and I saw him return, walk in, then cross the narthex to the restroom. A few minutes later he came in and sat in the second row from the back. Throughout the service I kept my eye on him. I found out later that I wasn't the only one. Several people, in the choir and in the back, watched him as well.

"All went fine, and afterwards he chatted with me for a minute and stayed for the coffee time. As I talked to other members we agreed it was sad that we think this way, but it reflects the world we live in. At the coffee time one of our widows turned to me and asked, 'Rev Berger, when do we start locking the door during church?' We're working on a protocol for locking the doors and monitoring them to admit latecomers."

You might consider recommendations in *Four Things You Can Do Right Now to Harden Your Place of Worship Against a Shooter* by pastor and self-defense instructor Jeff Sanders.

Have you had similar conversations at your church? How can your church show hospitality while also providing a safe place to worship and express your faith?

Prayer

O God who comforts us in our sorrow, so that we may comfort others in theirs, we grieve the senseless violence that has left so many reeling and bereft in recent days. We pray that the memory of the departed may be a blessing to those who mourn.

Almighty Love, you call upon us to love one another. You have created us for community, diverse according to your will, so that we can only be whole together.

Extinguish our irrational fears of others who are different from us in small ways but like us in every way that really matters.

Do not let our anger divide us now from one another, or turn us aside from the purpose for which you created us: to love you with all our heart, mind and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

May we turn away from hatred toward the light of your unconditional love, so that our lives would not reflect the world's hatred, but your gracious, all-encompassing love for all people everywhere.

May your will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven. For the sake of him who died to take away the sin of the world, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.