

Rabbi Brett Krichiver's Remarks from the Community Memorial Gathering

I would like to welcome you on behalf of the clergy, staff and leadership of Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation, as well as the entire Jewish community, and to thank each of you for your presence here today. There are no words which can adequately describe the feeling of gathering, once again, in response to tragedy. We have held each other up before – for our Muslim and Sikh brothers and sisters, for our Christian neighbors and for many others as our communities have been touched by violence.

History will say that this was the worst attack on the Jewish community in American history. We all knew someone affected, we will hear today from those who carry the memory of their friends in Pittsburgh who died forever in their hearts.

We feel vulnerable. And our vulnerability is only mitigated through the sharing of that feeling with minority groups, religious groups, and caring communities from this great city, and around the country who have reached out to express their support. We grieve with our African American brothers and sisters who mourn as well for two murdered this weekend simply for the color of their skin, and we say we all feel vulnerable. We offer a prayer for those who are wounded from this attack, including four law enforcement officers who placed themselves in the line of fire to protect our community.

We are so thankful to the many who are here to share in that vulnerability and stand in solidarity. To the many community rabbis who join us here today. (stand) Our own Jewish Community Relations Council, which provided a statement which gave word to our communal angst as the tragedy was unfolding. To members of various faith communities, whose clergy are here with us today in friendship and shared grief (stand) To our community leaders who have reached out in every way. (Names, stand). To law enforcement officials who are here with us today, allowing for this incredible gathering to take place, and helping maintain order and keep us safe. Thank you for standing with us.

To the many interfaith groups represented here tonight, too many to mention, representing every denomination and every community of faith. Thank you for being here. May we find comfort and solace in joining our voices together.

In Proverbs, a book shared in many of our faith traditions as a book containing much Wisdom literature, we read (3:13-18) – Happy is the one who finds wisdom, the person who gains understanding. Its value is much greater than silver or gold.

I wish I could say there was wisdom to be gleaned, knowledge that might help us explain the tragedy we experienced this past Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath. But I know that any wisdom we find won't be from news reports or testimonies or trials. That wisdom is not even to be found through our anger nor our tears. My hope and prayer tonight is that we find the wisdom we seek right here in this room.

Every synagogue, every church and mosque, every house of worship is a symbol of our attempts to reach for something greater than ourselves. We gather in these Houses of Worship to bring to life to words of the Prophet Isaiah – my house will be called a house of prayer for all people. (Isa. 56:7) Isaiah's vision could not be clearer tonight. We gather to pray, although we call God by many names, tonight we pray together. We gather to comfort, to seek out a new strength to move our country forward, but also, and tonight most importantly, we gather to mourn. As one of my rabbinic colleagues wrote today, I did not know these specific Jewish worshippers, but I knew them. We all knew them.

This attack was not merely another anti-Semitic incident in a very long line of anti-Semitic rage, violence, graffiti, slurs and threats, it was an attack on every person of faith in this country – people who, like yourselves, desire to be together now, to weep with one another, to embrace one another, to honor the memory of those we have lost, and to remind ourselves that we are not alone in our grief.

What wisdom may come from grief? What wisdom do we seek here tonight?

Part of our wisdom comes from an understanding that the perpetrator of this terrible act carried a deep grudge against the Jewish people, and every other minority and immigrant group. We must always raise up the knowledge that ours is a country which honors and embraces minorities, the rights of the individual, and the immigrant. This is who we are, and who we always have been.

Another part of the wisdom of this experience is the knowledge that we have been given a choice. In our Torah, the Jewish scripture which many here hold sacred we read, "Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses. Therefore choose life that you and your children might live." (Deut. 30:19)

We are a life affirming, and life loving people. But this Biblical quote goes so much farther. It calls us to choose life not only for our communities and others, but for ourselves. It calls us to affirm life by living life and granting others that same freedom to live their lives as well. It challenges us to see before us a real choice – a choice between inclusivity and separation, a choice between progress and stagnation, a choice between equality for all or a country and world of more division, conflict and intolerance.

Proverbs continues – "wisdom might grant us riches, honor and length of days, its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace." The Jewish community has used these lines for centuries in describing the wisdom we find in the study of Torah, our shared scripture.

And the verse continues with these lines –“ Etz Chaim Hi Lamachazikim bah – it is a Tree of Life to them that hold fast to it, and all of it’s supporters are happy. It is a Tree of Life”

I do not know for certain this is where a lovely Pittsburgh synagogue, home on Shabbat to three separate congregations, got its name. We call the Torah a Tree of Life because it connects us to our roots, a sturdy trunk helping us weather every storm, and providing shade, shelter, and even the air we breathe from its diverse branches and many brightly colored leaves. But as people of faith we are well aware that our congregations are our Trees of Life. They sustain us, nurture us, lift us up as only community can. And today we are devastated that the sanctity of our holy Shabbat, and our holy congregation, has been destroyed with violence.

And yet – our mourner’s prayer speaks only of the choice we still have right now, right here, today. The choice to choose life, to choose strength, to choose resilience and healing. To mourn deeply and fully and together, and then to rise, when our time of mourning is finished, to choose life, given to us by the One Who Creates Peace and Fashions All Things, the Creator, to Whom we all address our prayers tonight.

It is a fearful thing to love what death can touch. A fearful thing to love, hope and dream, and to lose. Your life has lived in me. Your laugh once lifted me, your word was gift to me. To remember this brings a painful joy. It is a human thing to love, a holy thing to love what death has touched. (Chaim Stern)