

*Shabbat Chayei Sarah 5779*

*25 Cheshvan 5779*

*Rabbi Peter W. Stein*

*Responding to Hatred and Violence*

“I will sing of the Lord’s steadfast love forever; to all generations I will proclaim Your faithfulness with my mouth. I declare, *olam chesed yibaneh*: Your steadfast love is confirmed forever...” (Psalm 89:2-3)

*Olam chesed yibaneh*: God’s love is forever...but this phrase was beautifully taken by songwriter and social activist Rabbi Menachem Creditor in a different manner: *Olam* is not only the word for “eternal”, but also the word for “world” ...and so, *olam chesed yibaneh* is “We will build the world from love.”

We sang these words together Sunday night, as a beautiful cross section of the community filled this space. We will build this world from love. We will answer acts of hate with love. We will respond to acts of violence with peace.

Ours was not a unique choice: this song was taken up in communities across the country, in city after city, as vigils and prayer services were held to mourn the men and women who died in Pittsburgh.

And now, right on schedule, with another 7 rotations of the earth completed, we are beginning Shabbat. Shabbat is meant to be a day of peace and joy and possibility, but of course, we are inevitably remembering the violence that took over last Shabbat at Tree of Life.

What are we to do now?

*Olam chesed yibaneh*: we must rebuild the world with love.

Many of you know of my personal connections to Pittsburgh, and I have spent a good deal of my week reaching out to family, friends, and colleagues there. We can all reach out, with love, to those who are hurting, regardless of whether there is a personal connection. One opportunity, even if you don't know anyone in Pittsburgh: Jewish Family Service is hosting a session at the JCC on Sunday afternoon from 1 to 4, to write and send condolence notes to the Pittsburgh Jewish community.

11 funerals have taken place, and the eight who were injured have begun their physical healing.

And, here at home, our eager, energetic students continued their learning in religious school and Hebrew school. And our eager, energetic lifelong learners continued their learning in Kollel as well.

Our bar mitzvah finished his preparations to lead us beautifully tomorrow morning.

Tsedakah was given, to the emergency fund set up in Pittsburgh and to other places that hold forth a vision of peace.

And in synagogues around the world, Torah has been studied, prayers have been recited, and life has been affirmed.

*Olam chesed yibaneh*: we will rebuild the world with love.

There is another, more challenging, way that we will do this. It is challenging because it will inevitably make us all uncomfortable, in one way or another.

We must show that we will not rest until the world is filled with love. And, in order to do this, we must work to challenge the norms that have been established.

We have to find ways to listen to those with different opinions.

We have to challenge the culture of violence that has become pervasive. Guns are the tool of destruction, but the underlying culture of violence and the pervasive dehumanization of “the other” are the basis of the crisis we are in.

We have to change the frenzied divisiveness that has splintered our country into so many fragments that we don't see or understand one another.

*Olam chesed yibaneh*: we had a moment on Sunday night where 3000 people stood together filling this space with love. As remarkable as that moment was, it was only the hint of the possibility of a beginning of the hard work that lies ahead.

Three years ago, there was a terrible attack in Charleston, at the Emanuel AME Church. 1 year after that violent tragedy, a reflection was offered, asking “A year after the Charleston church shooting, what has changed?” (Religion News Service, June 8, 2016)

“Blacks and whites cried together in the streets. The Confederate flag came down — for good — from its pole on the Statehouse grounds. White families joined Emanuel AME. The church was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. The city chiseled the names of the dead on libraries and schools. Artists honored them in portraits and murals...

Some had also hoped that Charleston — in ways that Ferguson, Baltimore and other American cities had not been able to — might persuade the nation to rouse itself. Surely these black victims — eight devout Christians and their pastor, murdered in prayer — would open a new chapter on race relations. Surely these martyrs’ witness of faith would appeal to the religious conviction that remains part of the American soul.”

And here we are, sitting shiva for another eleven worshippers, killed in the midst of their prayers.

Where will we be one year from now?

The murders in Charleston and the murders in Pittsburgh are not two isolated incidents. Guns have been fired at innocents over and over again. Racist and anti Semitic and anti Muslim behavior has happened again and again.

So, today has been proclaimed as a “Solidarity Shabbat” with the challenge to demonstrate resilience and continue our commitment to this day of peace that becomes a world of peace.

In that spirit, I am conscious of the concept that Shabbat is a preview of the perfect world to come. Committing to this Solidarity Shabbat is a commitment to the vision of a perfect world – and the work needed to make it so.

The Talmud (Brachot 57b) calls Shabbat “one sixtieth of the world to come.”

In the midrash (Otiot deRabbi Akiva), we read this vivid exchange: “Israel said before the Holy One, Blessed Be He: ‘Master of the world, if we observe the commandments, what reward will we have?’ He said to them, ‘The world-to-come.’ They said to him: ‘Show us its likeness.’ God showed them the Sabbath.”

Last Shabbat, we saw yet another horrific vision of the worst in human behavior. In the days since, we have seen an outpouring of love, a contrast to that horror and a reminder that we have the potential to repair and rebuild the world. This Shabbat, I pray we will see a vision of that repaired, perfect world.

At the close of our service tonight, we will recite the Mourner's Kaddish. We often recite those ancient words without paying particular attention to their meaning.

The beginning of the prayer is a reminder that God created the world (*B'alma di vra chirutei*) and then a bit later includes a plea that God's majesty still needs to be revealed (*Vyamlich malchuteha bechayechon uvyomaychon...*).

So, we are living in the world and God is hidden. And, on days like last Saturday, it may seem that we are very far from God's presence.

But, the plea in Kaddish reminds us that we have the ability to draw close to God and the ability to bring the world closer to God's vision of peace and perfection. We have the ability to build the world with love.

May the memory of those who died stay with us. And may we honor their memory with love. Together, *olam chesed yibaneh*: we will build this world with love.