

My friends, on this *Shabat Achdut*, this Solidarity Shabbat, my talk has two parts. I would like to address the events of last Shabbat. I will do so in reverse chronological order, starting with the event at Bankers Life Field House, and then moving to the tragedy in Pittsburgh.

You may have questions that I am not going to address tonight. Why did I decide to drive on Shabbat? Why did I even answer my telephone? I'm not talking about those things tonight to save time, and because I have already answered those questions in my freshly resurrected blog. If those questions are of interest to you, please visit the blog at RabbiBen.org, and while you are there, why not subscribe so that you will be notified whenever there is a new post.

After the events described there, which took place in my driveway, I was at the Field House in less than a half hour. I'll be coming back to that half hour shortly. It is central to what I want you to understand tonight.

The call I answered was not the emergency I feared, thank God, but a call from the White House asking for a prayer for the victims in Pittsburgh before the President spoke to the national convention of the Future Farmers of America. On the whole, I

was happy with the prayer. I prayed for healing for the wounded and strength and comfort for the families of those who were murdered. I prayed that we would see this as an act of evil; I said that the few evil individuals in America do not define us (I said people, not individuals, which is relevant to what I will share with you). I quoted from Psalms, saying “Those who love God hate evil.” I said we thank God for living in the greatest country on Earth. I ended there abruptly, with an uncharacteristic “Amen.” I’ve never ended my own prayer that way in my life. I also called for Americans to unite in the fight against evil, which is fine, but I prayed we would do so under the leadership of the President, whom, I said, “fights against evil at home and around the world.” If not for that sentence fragment, this talk would only have one part.

I remember many years ago in Florida, the Sisterhood president came into my study to ask for a D’var Torah before a Sisterhood meeting. I agreed and asked when the meeting would be. Her answer was right now. I then reversed course and told her no, that she had given me no time to prepare. She protested that speaking was so easy for me, and anything I said would be great. I told her that if speaking looks easy for me, it is because I

devote an enormous amount of time to preparation. Ironically, one week ago tonight I said that I was going to have to use notes in my talk, and that I had been trying to do more on Friday night what I generally do on Shabbat morning, and that is speak without notes. I said that I am not doing so to ease my workload, because it is much harder to speak without notes than it is to use notes or a prepared text. Never have I spoken unprepared, until last Shabbat.

Please do read my blog to see why I said yes to giving the prayer. Once I did agree, I was put on the phone with someone I understand was with the Secret Service. He told me they needed me at the Meridian Street exit of I-65 as fast as I could get there, and if I had any trouble on the way (like getting pulled over for speeding), I should give the name of a command officer from IMPD. When I pulled off I-65, a county sheriff was waiting for me. I left my car right there and he drove me, with lights and sirens, to the Field House. My heart was pounding, and not from the ride. After ten years in law enforcement, I had gotten used to that. I was terrified because I could not think of how I would articulate my feelings. No words were coming.

We arrived at the Field House. The President shook my hand and said, “Rabbi, my daughter is Jewish. Have you heard that my daughter is Jewish?” I eloquently responded, “Yes, Mr. President.” Then he greeted the pastor who had also been asked to pray, and he prepared to go on stage, where he was to talk about Pittsburgh and then bring out the clergy. Before he went out, his last words to us were, “You’re going to be famous. Get ready.” He was all too correct. And all too soon, we were called out to the stage. I walked out in front of a huge crowd at the Field House right in front of the President of the United States, having absolutely no idea how say what I was going to say. That is why I said “a few evil people.” I was grasping for a word. Individuals would have been better. My prayer ended abruptly because I had no ending for the prayer, but I had been told to be brief, and all that came out to conclude the prayer was “Amen.” And as you well know, the call to fight evil included the hope that we would do so under the leadership of the President, which that might have been fine, had I not said that he fights evil at home and around the world.

My regret over those words is that it made my prayer political. I had no intention, no desire to politicize the event. In

fact, the only clear thought I had was “Remember, this is not about you being invited by the President. This is about Pittsburgh.”

Do I believe my own words? The President had just strongly condemned the attack, and I have never hidden my disdain for the JCPOA, a.k.a. the Iran deal which he ended. Ironically, the phrase “at home and around the world” is one of several phrases I have committed to memory to use in my writing. The irony is that they come from President Kennedy’s Inaugural Address. But I also know well that President Trump is a divisive figure in America. Had I time to prepare, I would have recognized that sentence as political, and would have deleted it. I had no such luxury. This talk is not so much a retraction, but an acknowledgement that it was wrong to bring politics into prayer, and to tell you that I did not accept the invitation with that intent, nor did I imagine that I would end up doing so. Again ironically, I experienced this from a listener’s perspective last Monday at IHC. Two speakers, both working with prepared texts, used the occasion to make political points. One got a standing ovation, but during that ovation, several people walked out of the sanctuary because of the politicization of the event. I

know the feeling. I think that this past week I have been the most honored and the most hated rabbi in America. To those whom I offended, I hope this background at the very least makes clear that I did not intend to politicize my prayer, and if I might respectfully point out the words of Hillel, “Do not judge another until you have stood in his place,” *al tadin et chavercha ad sheh-tagia limkomo.*¹

Let me address one final point: the hug. When I turned around, the President was standing with his arms wide open for a hug. One person said I should have slapped him in the face. I think it was better to hug him.

On to the tragedy in Pittsburgh. What cruel irony to survive the Holocaust only to be killed for being Jewish in the land that Jews have lived in greater safety than even in Israel. How do we respond to this tragedy?

First of all, we harden our target. Corey Freedman has advised the membership of the several steps we are taking to increase security at Shaarey Tefilla, while striking the balance between being secure and being welcoming. Rest assured that

¹ Avot 2:4

you and if applicable, your children will be safe and secure within our Gates of Prayer, which is what Shaarey Tefilla means.

My second response really comes from my son, Sam. He is first year law student, and noticed that although there were many sub-groups at the law school, the Jewish Law Students organization became defunct. He is bringing it back. He also told me that he has started to wear his *kippah* all the time. In short, Sammy's response to the recent incidents of Jew-hatred is to be more openly Jewish, more proudly Jewish. I think that is exactly the right approach, and it is certainly part of the idea of this special Shabbat of solidarity. The loss of eleven souls is the loss of eleven universes, and nothing can make up for that loss. But we can still make this attack a failure. Our brothers and sisters were murdered to the cry of, "All Jews must die!" He is not the first to say it, and he will not be the first to succeed at it. We shall not die, but flourish. We shall not cower in fear, but stand tall with pride. We shall not abandon our identity and heritage, but embrace them with renewed strength and conviction. We shall not isolate ourselves, but stand shoulder to shoulder with good people from all walks of life, ensuring that

America will never be defined by the few who reject our founding principle that all are created equal.

I will conclude with a powerful poem written for the baby boy whose *briss* was at Tree of Life synagogue on that terrible day. All I will add are the meanings of the names:

Little boy, what's your name – do you have one?

Sweet baby, just eight days, what should we call you?

I have heard the sacred circumcision postponed for
jaundiced yellow,

but never before for bloodshed red.

Is your name Shalom? We long for peace in this troubled
world. I hope you are Shalom.

Is your name Nachum? Oh, how we need to be comforted
in our grief. I hope you are Nachum.

Is your name Raphael? Our broken hearts and bleeding
souls need healing. I hope you are Raphael.

You should have been carried high into the congregation on
Shabbat morning – past from loving hands to loving hands – on
a cushioned pillow to receive your Jewish name.

Instead your elders fell and were carried out on stretchers in
plastic bags. Their names on tags.

Is your name Moshe? Our unbearable anguish and rage
demands justice. I hope you are Moshe.

Is your name Ariel? We need the ferocious strength of lions
to protect our people. I hope you are Ariel.

Is your name Barak? We need courageous warriors to
vanquish our enemies. I hope you are Barak.

The blood on Shabbat morning was supposed to be
covenantal not sacrilegious, sacramental not sacrificial, sacred
not unholy. The tears were supposed to be of
boundless joy not bottomless sorrow.

The cries were supposed to be “mazel tov” not the
mourner’s kaddish.

Is your name Simcha? We need an end to sadness by
bringing joy into our world. I hope you are Simcha.

Is your name Yaron? We need an end to mourning by
bringing song into our lives. I hope you are Yaron.

Is your name Matan? We need the gift of children who will
bring a better tomorrow. I hope you are Matan.

So little boy, what's your name? Take them all if you will.
Take a thousand names. Be Peace and Comfort and Healing. Be
Justice and Strength and Courage. Be Joy and Song and a Gift to
the world.

Be every good name and every good thing.

And, sweet baby, take one more name if you will – because
I hope you will be blessed with a long, blissful, beautiful and
meaningful life...

I hope you are Chaim.

Shabbat shalom!