

**Solidarity Shabbat Memorial and Tribute to Victims of the Tree of Life Massacre
Birmingham Temple Congregation for Humanistic Judaism, Farmington Hills, Michigan
Friday, November 2, 2018**

Opening Remarks by Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick

Good evening and Shabbat Shalom.

We come here tonight – to our temple home – united in spirit with millions of Jews in America and throughout the world who, each in their own way, are facing the first Shabbat since last week’s attack on the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh ... the deadliest attack on American Jews in our nation’s history.

We are sorrowful.

In just a few moments we will memorialize the victims. Our hearts ache for those they left behind. Later in tonight’s service – at the appropriate time – we will also extend our well-wishes to the congregants and police officers who were wounded.

We are frightened.

We fear for the state of our country as warped men – always men – with weapons of destruction carry out murder after murder after murder in pursuit of their twisted schemes to rid our nation of people of color, of Muslims, of Sikhs, of LGBTQ people, and ... as always for these monsters ... of Jews.

We have watched for too long in dismay and even a certain amount of unjustified disbelief as antisemites have become more and more emboldened. In 2016 and 2017 the acts of Jew-haters skyrocketed with up to 60% increases in vandalism, personal attacks, and more. This year’s numbers will prove to be worse still.

And, as always, where there is antisemitism in this country there is hatred for other minority communities too. Just days before the attack at Tree of Life, a Kentucky racist killed two Black people in a Kroger store after being denied entrance to a nearby historically Black church where he planned to kill many more.

None of this is new. When attacks such as this occur, our entire nation recalls with still-fresh trauma attacks such as those of the 1958 bombing at the Peachtree Street Temple in Atlanta. Of the 1963 bombing of Birmingham’s 16th Street Baptist Church that took the lives of four young Black women. Of the 1999 murders of Jews and others by members of the neo-Nazi World Church of the Creator on their shooting spree through Indiana and Illinois. Of the 2015 mass murder of Black members of the Charleston, South Carolina AME Church. Of the 2016 attack on Orlando’s Pulse Nightclub. Of the deadly 2017 Portland Train attack on Muslim passengers.

And ... So. Many. More.

The list is too long. And it never stops growing.

So we are also angry.

And that should surprise no one.

Though this small and very partial list is a reminder that none of this is new in our country, there are today many reasons that these attacks are on the rise ... that the deadliest attack on an American Jewish community should take place now.

One of these is the easy availability of weapons of mass death. Haters have existed and frequently flourished in our country. Today, however, they can take their warped ideology into battle against innocent people with weaponry that exists for the sole reason of ending human life *en masse*, resulting in previously unimaginable numbers of dead and wounded.

With due respect and great appreciation to all of those who work diligently to harden and protect our institutions, no security guard, no metal detector, and no "active shooter" plan is going to stop anyone with an AR-15 in hand.

And, horrifyingly, all of this takes place while the gun lobby uses its vast resources and its purchased politicians to preempt even the most reasonable controls on this weaponry while simultaneously spreading its own form of vitriol evoking "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion."

And there is another reason for our anger.

As white supremacy and white nationalism are resurrected, spreading in vast numbers like zombies from the dead, our leadership not only refuses to unequivocally and full-throatedly condemn the hatred and its resulting slaughter ... our leadership is tacitly encouraging it.

When antisemites marched through Charlottesville, Virginia chanting, "Jews will not replace us," we learned that there were some "very fine people" among them.

As our nation observed Holocaust Memorial Day in 2016, our leaders somehow managed to avoid any mention that Jews were its victims.

During rallies in advance of the midterm elections, our headlines have been filled with declarations of support for "nationalism," of repeated dog whistles about "Soros," and "globalists," and "elitists" ... each of these and more taken directly from the wisdom of Goebbels.

As Tuesday's election draws near, we are now witnessing a mass deployment of active-duty troops to prevent a non-existent "invasion" of brown people, supposedly harboring "dangerous middle eastern terrorists," that consists primarily of an ever-decreasing number of destitute women and children.

And in the response to the slaughter in Pittsburgh, we learned that it "would have had a better outcome" had the victims been armed. And we also learned from a top spokesperson that what we *know* to have been an antisemitic attack on Jews because they were Jews – for so the perpetrator said – was *really* motivated by "anti-religiosity" ... a blatant and tone-deaf effort to transform an attack on Jews into more fuel to stoke the white Christian grievance machine.

And, no, blame for the attack on the Tree of Life cannot be attributed to anyone but the murderer ... antisemitism has been with us for thousands of years and people like Bowers would practice its murderous craft with or without the winking encouragement of our current leaders.

However, the sharp spikes in attacks on all minority groups – Jews as always high among them – cannot be uncoupled from the rancorous rhetoric spewed by our leaders. And the accompanying silence of its enablers.

Before I conclude these remarks, I also want to point out that there is still reason for one other reaction, one of gratitude.

In the face of the hatred and of the inexcusably implicit support of our leaders and their enablers, decency has also emerged.

Throughout our nation there have been calls for a return to the ideals for which we stand, those same ideals that spoke to the hearts of every single one of our own Jewish ancestors and so many more when first they saw from the distance a woman with an outstretched torch proclaiming to them that they had, indeed, arrived in a land of liberty.

In our own community, I have received numerous calls of support from the friends and allies with whom we have worked so hard on issues important to Humanists and those who fight for social justice.

Yesterday our friends at Michigan United held a gathering of support that Audrey Pleasant and Sybil Offen ... representing us all ... attended.

From the Sunday Assembly, Nicole Peters wrote to "to express ... support for [our] community and sorrow in the wake of the shooting in Pittsburgh."

From our friends at the Muslim Unity Center came a heartfelt note from their interfaith chairperson Rouzana Hares to help in any way possible in the wake of the attack.

And from our dear friends in Muslimish, the secular and Humanistic group for people of Muslim backgrounds – on whose advisory board I am proud to sit – we received a beautiful letter from its president, my friend Wissam Charrafeddine – here tonight with other members of his group – that read in part:

On behalf of Muslimish, I would like to express our deepest sympathy and offer our condolences for the horrific manifestation of hate and bigotry that unveiled itself on our nation last week.

We stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters within the Jewish community and do find ourselves united with them in being a target for terrorism and bigotry, and for striving to be fighters for pluralism, inclusion, human rights, global empathy, and humanism.

If there is anything that we can do to ease the pain of the families of the victims of this horrendous act, please know that you can count on us to be with you at every step of our united struggle, no matter how long or challenging is its path.

Yours in Humanity...

Responses like this and the thousands upon thousands more received by every Jewish community in this nation are, indeed, a reason for gratitude.

Yet another reason to be grateful is our own resilience and determination to continue to work to advance our goals and beliefs.

When the murderous Jew-hater made his decision to attack Tree of Life, in addition to his many other antisemitic statements, he cited the congregation's support for HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. On the previous Shabbat Tree of Life had joined HIAS and hundreds of synagogues in a "refugee" Shabbat.

Like Tree of Life, our congregation has worked hand-in-hand with HIAS and other groups promoting the cause of refugees and immigrants. Just last year we held an amazing Shabbat evening program in support of immigrants and refugees. We were the first Jewish congregation in Michigan to declare itself a sanctuary. And, of course, we have taken on responsibility for extended assistance to a beautiful family of Syrian refugees.

On the morning of the attack, Tree of Life like many traditional synagogues was preparing to read the Torah's story of how Abraham welcomed the strangers into his tent. This iconic tale is just one of dozens and dozens Torah readings that our rabbis cite as demands for Jews to welcome strangers, provide comfort to newcomers, and "treat the foreign-born as ourselves."

To continue to live up to our values – both as Jews and – in our case – Secular Humanists (who are also detested by too many in our nation) is an act of defiance.

It is our way of saying that antisemitism has never and shall never prevailed.

It is our way of continuing to live by the values that WE hold dear, refusing to have our agenda dictated by hatred or terrorist violence.

And it is our way of remembering that we are all in this together ... every person of color ... every Muslim, Sikh, LGBTQ person ... every single minority that suffers from the deformed beliefs of small, petty haters who express their hostility with threats and violence.

They will not break our spirit.

They will not crush our ideals.

If we are strong and united we can make over our nation and our world.

It is the only fitting tribute to the martyrs of the Tree of Life whom we memorialize tonight.