

What Have We Learned from Colleyville?

This past Shabbat at about 3pm I was about to engage in one of my favorite Shabbat afternoon activities....taking a nap. As I was settling in and starting to get sleepy my husband came flying into the room – “Do you know where Colleyville, Texas is? Do we have a Reform congregation there?” Yes, I responded immediately – “I know we have a congregation there. And then he said the words that sent a wave of fear through my entire being, “I just heard on the news, there is a hostage situation there – in the synagogue.” While some of us were running to turn on CNN and that did happen in my house too, I ran for my computer and into the URJ data base – what could I find out about this congregation in Colleyville? Who was the rabbi? Did I know them? I see the name of the rabbi and recognize it but I don’t know him personally. I have probably seen some of his posts on Facebook in the rabbi’s group I’m part of.....Does Rabbi Rick Jacobs – President of the URJ know what’s happening? There are posts in my URJ email – they know what is happening and will update us, the staff, when they can.

I go to the Reform Rabbis group in Facebook and although it is Shabbat the word is getting out. Many people know Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker, who is being held hostage with members of his congregation. To say that my fellow rabbis are terrified and shocked would be quite an understatement. Everyone is praying, sharing, trying to guess what is happening....terrified. What is not said – but we all understand and are feeling is.....that this could have been any of us. We are all thinking, “it could have been me”.

All week I have read everything written in the press and by my colleagues. I have turned many things that have been said over and over in my mind trying to make sense out of it all, trying to really take in what has happened. I still have many, many questions but I want to share some of where I am at this moment.

The bad news: The unthinkable can happen, even here in America, and we have to be as prepared as we can be. There have been security webinars all week and there are many security trainings scheduled in the coming weeks. Our HT leadership has attended some of these webinars and so have I and we will continue to learn and look at our security very carefully. After the Pittsburgh massacre we all made big changes and updates to our security. It is time to do that again and make sure that we all know what to do if God forbid, the unspeakable happens.

The good news: The world is a very scary place but we are still here after 3,000 years. This is not a small statement. Yesterday was the 80th anniversary of the Wannsee Conference. This was where 15 high-ranking Nazis gathered at a villa to plan how to rid the world of Jews. It took them all of 90 minutes to come up with the plan to massacre millions of Jews. This congregation, built and nurtured by Holocaust survivors and their children knows the story of antisemitism better than many others do. We all know that antisemitism is not a problem, world-wide. Yesterday the UN passed a resolution that condemns those who deny the Holocaust. When I read the headline my first thought was, "Really??? The UN needs to make a resolution to say it is not okay to deny the Holocaust???" But only 80 years after Wannsee and Hitler's plan to destroy us we need a resolution to remind the world that the Holocaust actually happened. According Gilad Erdan, Israel's Ambassador to the UN, only half of the world's

population had even heard of the Holocaust, and that some believe the events were a “complete myth.” (NYT p.A6, 1/21/2022).

And yet, in spite of centuries of antisemitism and hatred, we are a stubborn and resilient people and we are still here. The other piece of good news, from a webinar I was on yesterday with a leader from the ADL is that while antisemitism is clearly on the rise in our country the attack on the synagogue in Texas was an isolated incident. The ADL is monitoring all kinds of threats and he said that the threat assessment today is no worse than it was last week before this incident. It was an isolated incident and not part of a bigger, organized plot that we need be fearful of. Just the usual amount of fear.....not extra fear.

The bad news: Something important that I learned this week was that most people, outside the Jewish community do not understand how this affected ALL of us. By Monday and Tuesday of this week the rabbis in our Facebook group were asking each other if the other clergy in their community had reached out to them with support. The overwhelming answer was, “no”. Many were shocked and hurt. They were active members of their interfaith clergy groups and were so surprised that very few had heard from other clergy with words of support. There was much conjecture about why this would be happening. Covid fatigue, MLK weekend, discomfort with the fact that the attacker was Muslim....and then we came to an uncomfortable answer which is that as Jews we see ourselves as one people, one community. If something bad happens to a Jew anywhere in the world we feel it, we care about it. Most other religious groups do not feel connected to each other in that same way - especially, the white protestant churches. When a rabbi in Massachusetts asked a reporter she knew why the reporter hadn't called to talk to her about this terrorist event the response was painful. The reporter said, “I don't write stories

about things that happen in Texas.” This complete lack of understanding about the Jewish community and its interconnectedness has been painful.

The good news: There have been definite exceptions to what I just said. There has been outreach, especially from the Muslim community. Some important Muslim groups have issued statements condemning the attack. Also, as a Jewish community we have pulled together in an incredibly loving and supportive way. The outpouring of support for Rabbi Charlie and his community has been overwhelming from Jews all over this country and from Israel. A group of Modern Orthodox rabbis wrote a letter to him of support and pride in his leadership. And certainly, all the non-Orthodox movements of Judaism here and abroad have been working together to support him and his congregants and to be sure that the entire Jewish community is safe and protected.

The bad news: We are facing a very difficult dilemma now in the Jewish community for which there are no good answer. This dilemma is: How are we welcoming, open, hospitable and kind....but safe? We have been hearing about synagogues in Europe and how crazy their security is. At many of these synagogues you need a security clearance to come to services if you are not part of the community. We do not want to become that. How do we keep our doors open but locked and bulletproof at the same time? How do we have security and police present without triggering Jews of color in our community? I don't know what the answer is but this is something that we need to wrestle with ourselves and with those congregation that worship in our building, Jewish and Christian. Rabbi Charlie, who is an extraordinary human

being has said that he has opened the door to let many come in who are in need and he will not let the actions of one person stop him from doing that.

The good news: Jews don't shy away from wrestling with conflicting values and we will try and try to get it as right as possible. We are well practiced in holding two conflicting things in our hands at the same time. We came to services tonight with our feelings of fear and sadness because of the events of this past week, not to mention the ongoing battle with Covid, but we also came to sing and celebrate the joy of Shabbat. We are a people who is good at holding the joy and the sorrow together in one hand.....I have no idea right now what the answer is for our congregation but I am confident that together we will work very hard to find that balance between welcoming and safety.

On Saturday afternoon and evening many of us felt so.....helpless. I heard it in the messages of my rabbinic colleagues on Facebook.....how could we help them? What could we do? I want to share the words of Rabbi Charlie himself. A prayer that he wrote before this happened. Words that we need to remember always.....

We are not helpless.

We bring healing with band aids and hugs, a cup of coffee and chicken soup.

We are not helpless.

We bring healing with a text, a call, a card; a response that says, "You are not alone."

We are not helpless.

We bring healing with acceptance, patience, and understanding for ourselves and for others.

We are not helpless.

We bring healing with words of compassion and acts of compassion, reaching out with care and love.

We are not helpless.

We bring healing to heart and mind, body and soul. We bring healing every day.

We are not helpless

(Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker)

We are not helpless.....so now what? I found the answer in the beautiful words of our amazing American poet, Amanda Gorman. In the NYT's this week she talked about the fact that she almost turned down the opportunity to share her poem at the Presidential inauguration last year. Let me share some of her words:

I was scared of failing my people, my poetry. But I was also terrified on a physical level. Covid was still raging, and my age group couldn't get vaccinated yet. Just a few weeks before, domestic terrorists assaulted the U.S. Capitol, the very steps where I would recite. I didn't know then that I'd become famous, but I *did* know at the inauguration I was going to become highly visible — which is a very dangerous thing to be in America, especially if you're Black and outspoken and have no Secret Service.....

Later she says,

I'm a firm believer that often terror is trying to tell us of a force far greater than despair. In this way, I look at fear not as cowardice, but as a call forward, a summons to fight for what we hold dear. And now more than ever, we have every right to be affected, afflicted, affronted. If you're

alive, you're afraid. If you're not afraid, then you're not paying attention. The only thing we have to fear is *having no fear itself* — having no feeling on behalf of whom and what we've lost, whom and what we love.

So after this week there are many, many questions but this is what I know to be true:

1. It is wonderful to be a Jew, it is not an accident that we have survived all these years and we will continue to pass that great legacy to future generations.
2. Hate is not acceptable – period. We must continue to build bridges with those who will join us in not tolerating the hate and harm of any human being in our world.
3. We must continue to build bridges and understanding with others in our country who do not understand how painful this week was so that they can join with us in the battle against hate.
4. We must try, and it isn't easy, to see the good and loving in the people around us and to keep our doors open as wide as we can while keeping everyone safe.
5. We must work with anyone who will join us to make this world a place where the words of the prophet Micah will be true, "But every person shall sit under his grapevine or fig tree and no one will make him afraid."

Ken Y'hi ratzon. May this be God's will.