



Monday, October 29, 2018

As we entered this weekend, the news of the shooting deaths of a man and a woman at a Louisville, KY Kroger was fresh in our minds. The shooter was apparently fueled by racism. Early Saturday, a gunman took the lives of 11 worshippers at The Tree of Life Synagogue in the Squirrel Hill community of Pittsburgh, PA. He was reportedly motivated by a desire to kill all Jews. As we process these events we cannot help but think of the work that remains as we push our society to truly see every life as one worthy of equal value and dignity.

Events like these motivate us to continue to build movements of people dedicated to challenging otherizing narratives that ease our ability to mistreat one another. Collectively, advocates for social change resist a narrative of otherness. They push us to see the humanity in those we might otherwise demonize. They teach us that we must strive to treat every person the way we would want our loved ones treated. When those who are supposed to lead mistreat others, it is easier for us all to mistreat others. We have an obligation to confront the worst instincts of power.

As we return to our work this week, we do so with heavy hearts. These events are not isolated. They are not new. But our founder and President has a special connection to Squirrel Hill and the Tree of Life. He was raised in that community and Bar Mitzvahed at that synagogue. And so we thought it appropriate to share with you his reflections in the wake of this trying weekend.

I woke up yesterday morning to a message from my sister, Alison. In it she concluded:

“Then tomorrow, I am going to wake up and live our Squirrel Hill values, the values of Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood, and I am going to invest in the values I believe in: kindness, community, justice. I am going to pray, and I am going to ACT, and I am going to vote, and I am going to hug. I am going to encourage others and I am going to be inspired by them. I am going to work for communities and people. I am going to hold my friends and family close. I am going to mourn those who lost their lives. And, most importantly, I am going to LOVE.”

I am encouraged by my sister, and all the people I am lucky to know who have dedicated their lives to standing against anti-Semitism, racism, Islamophobia, and homophobia. People who have dedicated their lives to resisting those who would rip a child from their parent and cage them simply because they were born south of the US Border. People who work every day to shake us from an intoxicating narrative that says "we" are deserving and "they" are not, no matter who the "they" may be. People who refuse to accept treatment of any person that we would not tolerate for those we love. People who will not tolerate the criminalization of mental illness or substance abuse or illiteracy or poverty.

The shooting at Tree of Life is not isolated from each of these acts that pull us further from the dream of a society where all lives are valued equally. It is part of a narrative that sees some people as valuable and others as expendable. My heart gets heavy with every daily reminder of the hate in this world.

Usually, those reminders inspire me even more to keep pushing forward. That we have so much work left to do. This one will too.

But, tomorrow.

This tragedy is no more tragic than a shooting at a church in Charleston or a nightclub in Orlando. These events are connected. If we do not allow each to motivate us to fight harder for the world we deserve, we will fall short of that vision.

But, it is a little harder to push forward from a tragedy that strikes so close to home. Squirrel Hill is a close knit community. People know one another and care for one another. The people who defined my childhood grew up there. Its schools welcomed children from across Pittsburgh who became my closest friends. Its community, with outstretched arms, introduced me to a wonderful network of families who will always shape my worldview. We all will almost certainly have one-degree of separation, at most, from those killed or injured yesterday.

So today, I need to step away from the work of resisting injustice, and be with my Pittsburgh family. Through whatever medium is available. Tomorrow, back to work.

Squirrel Hill is where I learned the Hebrew phrase Tikkun Olam. Its literal meaning is "world repair." It is the obligation our community places on social action and social justice. It is the idea that those who have suffered have an obligation to ease suffering. Those who have been oppressed must dedicate themselves to fighting oppression. Those who have not been tolerated in the past must resist intolerance everywhere.

Squirrel Hill taught me that. I owe my life's work to this community. It shaped my sister, and the work she does every day for those who are struggling. It connects me to so many of my childhood friends who have spread across this country - and many who remain in my beloved city - who do their part to ease suffering.

It is a special community. I owe my life to it. My heart breaks for Squirrel Hill. Tikkun Olam reminds me that when our community experiences this kind of hatred we must harness our energy to fight against similar hatred wherever it crops up.

Tomorrow.

#SquirrelHill

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jonathan Rapping". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jonathan Rapping, President of Gideon's Promise

