

A Reading Group Discussion Guide for

Bound in the Bond of Life

Pittsburgh Writers Reflect on the Tree of Life Tragedy

Edited by Beth Kissileff and Eric Lidji

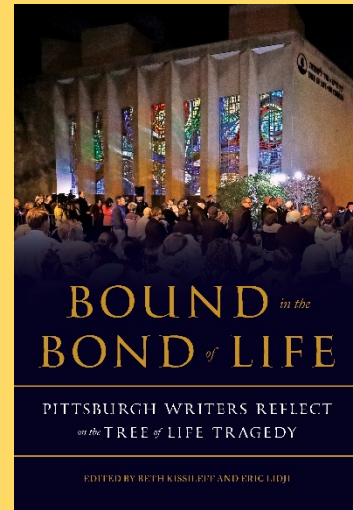
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Introduction

On October 27, 2018, three congregations were holding their morning Shabbat services at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh's Squirrel Hill neighborhood when a lone gunman entered the building and opened fire. He killed eleven people and injured six more in the deadliest anti-Semitic attack in American history. The story made international headlines for weeks following the shooting, but Pittsburgh and the local Jewish community could not simply move on when the news cycle did.

The essays in this anthology, written by local journalists, academics, spiritual leaders, and other community members, reveal a city's attempts to come to terms with an unfathomable horror. Here, members from each of the three impacted congregations are able to reflect on their experiences in a raw, profound way. Local journalists who covered the story as it unfolded explore the personal and public aspects of reporting the news. Activists consider their work at a calm distance from the chaotic intensity of their daily efforts. Academics mesh their professional expertise with their personal experiences of this shattering event in their hometown. A local rabbi shares his process for crafting messages of comfort even as he attempts to reckon with his own feelings.

Bringing these local voices together into a chorus raises them over the din of international chroniclers who offer important contributions but cannot feel the intensity of this tragedy in the same way as Pittsburghers. The essays in this anthology tell a collective story of city shaken to its very core but determined that love will ultimately win.



About the Editors

Beth Kissileff is the author of the novel *Questioning Return* and editor of the essay collections *Reading Genesis: Beginnings* and *Reading Exodus: Journeys*. She has taught at the universities of Pittsburgh and Minnesota and Carleton, Smith, and Mount Holyoke colleges. Her writing has appeared in the *Atlantic*, the *New York Times*, *Tablet*, and *Religion News Service*, among others. She is the spouse of Rabbi Jonathan Perlman of New Light Congregation, who survived the October 27 attack by hiding himself and others.

Eric Lidji is the director of the Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives at the Senator John Heinz History Center. He is the author of *John Riegert and The Seventeenth Generation: The Lifework of Rabbi Walter Jacob* and a co-editor of *Her Deeds Sing Her Praises: Profiles of Pittsburgh Jewish Women*. He writes extensively about the Jewish history of Western Pennsylvania and hosts the local Jewish history podcast *The Cornerstone*. He has been overseeing the effort to preserve documentation of the October 27 attack.

Praise for *Bound in the Bond of Life*

“Raw and profound.” —*Pittsburgh Jewish Chronicle*

“The voices that animate this collection are varied and stunning.” —
Pittsburgh Current

“*Bound in the Bond of Life* is a document to be read and contemplated, not summarized—a close-to-the-event memorial that expresses grief, the search for understanding and the effort to find a way forward.” —*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

“*Bound in the Bond of Life* does more than humanize a historic event: it gives us the rare opportunity to see what happens ‘after the vigil,’ in the apt words of contributor Molly Pascal.” —*Times of Israel*

“The impact of the attack that claimed 11 lives . . . was also extraordinarily local. It happened in Squirrel Hill, a neighborhood most Pittsburghers know well, and many area residents have only a degree or two of separation from that day’s violence. *Bound in the Bond of Life* reckons with that legacy.” —*90.5 WESA*

“Gathering accounts from local journalists, academics, rabbis and community members, Eric Lidji and Beth Kissileff reveal efforts to make sense of the shooting, from raw, first-person descriptions to pieces by those who translated the horror into activism.” —*Hadassah Magazine*

“What does it take to mend the world? Parts prayer, howl, remembrance and meditation, the essays in *Bound in the Bond of Life* go beyond the initial shock and grief of October 27th to examine the meaning of community and the power of faith under attack. Rather than make sense of hate, the Pittsburghers here wisely try to find perspective on a moment evil struck too close to home.” —*Stewart O’Nan*

“This sterling collection of essays by writers from Pittsburgh reflecting on the October 27, 2018 massacre of Jews at the Tree of Life Synagogue gives us just the company we need as we work through our collective grief, together and alone. I was stunned by their deep, generous insights into how this tragedy affected this dynamic and diverse city and by the writers’ compassion for both the victims and survivors. By turns devastating and consoling, each of these reflections takes us a little further down the path to healing, despite community wounds and losses that can never be fully mended or compensated.” —*James E. Young, author of The Stages of Memory, At Memory’s Edge, and The Texture of Memory*

“Taking its place in the somber tradition of heart-rending Jewish chronicles, *Bound in the Bond of Life* memorializes the Tree of Life synagogue massacre, the most deadly act of antisemitism in all of American Jewish history. Filled with heart-rending, first-person accounts, this book fulfills a sacred commandment: to recall the tragedy that befell Pittsburgh on October 27, 2018, and never to forget it.” —*Jonathan D. Sarna, University Professor and Joseph H. & Belle R. Braun Professor of American Jewish History, Brandeis University*

Additional Suggested Reading

The Rauh Jewish Archive Tree of Life Response

Steel City Jews: A History of Pittsburgh and Its Jewish Community, 1840-1915
by Barbara S. Burstin

Antisemitism: Here and Now
by Deborah Lipstadt

From a Taller Tower: The Rise of the American Mass Shooter by Seamus McGraw

Questions for Discussion

1. The Tree of Life tragedy occurred in Pittsburgh on October 27, 2018 and resulted in the loss of 11 innocent lives. It was the worst anti-Semitic attack in U.S. history. *Bound in the Bond of Life* gives voice to the local Pittsburgh community and the resulting trauma from which it suffers. Why is this so important, considering the intense national coverage this event received?
2. Since October 2018, there have sadly been more mass shootings in the U.S., including in El Paso, Dayton, and more recently Atlanta and Boulder. What can the narratives in *Bound in the Bond of Life* offer other communities suffering from the shock and trauma of mass shootings?
3. There are a wide range of voices featured in *Bound in the Bond of Life*, including those from religious and secular spheres within the Jewish community and from the non-Jewish community. How do differing voices affect you as a reader?
4. Trauma has a major and long-lasting effect on individuals and the entire community after a mass murder. How does *Bound in the Bond of Life* help readers cope with that trauma?
5. Does *Bound in the Bond of Life* contribute to the cause of gun reform in this country?
6. Which essay from *Bound in the Bond of Life* affected you the most? Why?
7. If you are familiar with the Jewish vision of "choose life" (*Deuteronomy 30:19*), how does it apply to the essays and narratives in *Bound in the Bond of Life*—as well as to the reader?
8. What makes the Tree of Life tragedy different from other examples of mass shootings in the United States? What aspects are similar?
9. Since the Tree of Life tragedy and the resulting trauma of the event, this country has suffered the trauma of more mass shootings; civil and social unrest because of racial, ethnic, religious and gender biased injustices; a pandemic resulting in the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives; and extreme economic decline. How do we avoid becoming "numb" or apathetic in our responses and feelings to these overwhelming tragedies?
10. Editors and contributors Beth Kissileff and Eric Lidji envisioned *Bound in the Bond of Life* as a platform to give voice to a community in trauma. While not everyone can write or edit a book, what can you do to help your children, community, and country address the issues of anti-Semitism that caused the Tree of Life tragedy, as well as other hate crimes?
11. In the essays you read, how did connection to and attempt to learn from the Jewish tradition aid in the memorialization process? Which essays connected to ways that Jews processed these types of events in the past and what can we learn from that? Were there particular Jewish texts or teachings that stood out to you as important in the essays you read? Why?
12. Though some of the essays were by journalists who covered the event, all were written not with an objective journalistic perspective but a personal one. Why is it important to have this distinct perspective on the event? What did you gain from reading a personal essay that you would not have from a newspaper account?
13. As of yet, there is no physical memorial at the Tree of Life site. In what ways do the stories told by these writers, in which each of the victims is mentioned by name at least once throughout the volume, serve (or not serve) as a memorial to their lives? What is the purpose of a memorial and can a book fulfill it as well as a physical space?