



# INTRODUCTION

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“MAY THE SOUL BE BOUND IN THE BOND OF LIFE” is a Jewish prayer. It first appears in the Book of Samuel, where Abigail says it to her future husband David, after preventing an act of bloody vengeance by assuaging his anger. “Though a man rises to pursue thee, and to seek thy soul: yet the soul of my lord shall be bound in the bond of life with the Lord thy God; and the souls of thy enemies, them shall he sling out, as out of the hollow of a sling” (1 Samuel 25:29). The phrase has since become essential to the Jewish mourning liturgy. It was incorporated into the prayer *El Malei Rachamim* (God, full of mercy), recited graveside at funerals and at subsequent memorial services. A five-letter Hebrew acronym of the phrase traditionally anchors the bottom of Jewish gravestones.

The “bond of life” surely refers to divine protection. But just as surely, humans have taken it as an imperative. So much of Jewish custom and culture—especially its manifestation in North America by families of Ashkenazic descent—is built around remembering the dead: the annual *yahrzeit* commemoration marking the anniversary of the death of a loved one, the memorial *yizkor* service recited at four major Jewish holidays, the illuminated bronze memorial plaques covering almost every synagogue, the recycling of the names of deceased ancestors for newborn children, the auspicious days established on the

death dates of the righteous, the public commemorations of sorrow enacted in ancient times on Tisha b'Av and in modern times on Holocaust Remembrance Day, and all the many miniature ways the dead are incorporated into the patterns of life. There is a sense within Judaism that the dead depend on the living. Our actions somehow help them navigate the mysterious realms beyond this world. It is customary on the *yahrzeit* of a loved one to learn a little Torah or to bless a meal and then to add, "The neshama should have an aliyah." "The soul should ascend." *Through the merit of these good deeds I have done down here on earth, the soul of this person should be elevated through the heavenly spheres.* Beyond the religious realm, there has long been a strong cultural tradition among the Jewish people to push the act of remembrance from thought into action, be it charitable, artistic, or political. The bond of life is a vital and eternal connection between the dead and the living. It exists through our memory of them.

The attack at the Tree of Life synagogue on October 27, 2018, created more death than any Jewish community in America has ever faced at one time. Eleven people from three congregations were murdered. Eleven funerals were held. At each of those funerals, the prayer was recited: *May the soul be bound in the bond of life.* What do those words demand of us, the living? And more specifically, what do those words demand for the millions of people who stand beyond the immediate blast of the attack?

The attack sent two shock waves through the world. The first was the private pain felt by those who knew the victims personally. The second struck everybody else. It was felt all over the world, and it brought people from all over the world here to Pittsburgh, to mourn and to bear witness. Eventually they departed, leaving the city to reckon with the aftermath. The writers who contributed to this book have all taken part in that reckoning in different ways. Some have been involved through their work as journalists, historians, teachers, archivists, activists, and rabbis, or through their personal connections to the people and institutions attacked that morning. Some were involved emotionally, through the perspectives gained by reckoning with personal tragedies. With the notable exception of Rabbi Jonathan Perlman, who leads New Light Congregation and lost three of his congregants that morning, all of the authors occupy middle ripples in

the “concentric circles” of grief. None of the other writers were inside the synagogue that awful Saturday morning, and none of them lost an immediate loved one in the attack (although many of them knew at least one of the victims, as is inevitable in a city like Pittsburgh, with its many interwoven communities). And yet, as locals, they feel they have a closer connection to the attack than someone who watched it from another place.

Perhaps that feeling of closeness is an illusion. Perhaps living near a tragedy is really no different from living far from one. Soon after the attack, “Pittsburgh” became convenient shorthand for a range of interrelated topics: the growth of violent antisemitism and other racially and religiously motivated attacks, the call to strengthen coalitions of targeted groups, the rise in gun violence and the ways of preventing it, and the need to improve security at Jewish institutions, among others. The power of that shorthand increased with subsequent antisemitic attacks in Poway, Halle, Jersey City, and Monsey, and with attacks motivated by similar hatreds in Christchurch, El Paso, and many other places. (These attacks are now so frequent that this list will likely be outdated by the time it appears in print.) With each of these attacks, Pittsburgh becomes increasingly fixed as an archetype, so that today, a great American city, a city with 182 years of continuous Jewish settlement and all the resulting variety of life experiences implied by those years, has been reduced in the minds of many to a single terrible event. A city has become a way of having a conversation. It is a necessary conversation, and the writers in this book have been participating in that conversation, too. But they have also been having a different conversation, one that is only happening here, one that can only happen here.

A horrifying act cannot easily be reduced to a symbol when it occurs in your neighborhood. To casually pass the site of a massacre on your way to the grocery store—or to consciously avoid it—is a profound and confusing experience. The big questions of human existence lurk within all of us, covered by our daily routines. A place of great destruction has a way of bringing those questions into the open, like salt drawing blood from raw flesh. As the story of Pittsburgh is increasingly told from afar, the editors wanted to create an opportunity for a diverse group of local writers to grapple with these questions in an

intimate way. We selected writers who were entangled in the aftermath through their professional or personal obligations. We sought a variety of perspectives within the local Jewish world, and also just beyond it. We are pleased with the results, and yet at the same time we regret the inevitable limits of such a project. So many perspectives are worthy of public consideration. We could compile dozens of volumes like this one. We hope this book will inspire others to share their experiences.

All honest writing is grounded in authority. Any writer can write about any subject, so long as they truthfully define their relationship to it. The contributors to this anthology had to find the authority to write about an attack that most of them did not experience directly. Again and again, closeness is where they find that authority. They describe their visits to the Tree of Life synagogue over the years and their involvement with the three congregations housed within it that morning—Tree of Life Congregation, New Light Congregation, and Congregation Dor Hadash. They describe their prior interactions with the victims at street corners and grocery stores and book clubs and synagogue events throughout Squirrel Hill and the greater Pittsburgh area. They note their physical proximity to the attack. They measure the miles and the blocks, sometimes even the feet, between their homes and the crime scene. They explain how their familiarity with personal tragedy gave them insight into the pain caused by unexpected violence. They describe how their professional or communal obligations have given them intimate access to the unfolding aftermath. Over and over, closeness makes it personal. To read all these essays together shows how a single tragedy can rip through a community, the stunning volume and variety of pain it causes throughout the local population. This is the other conversation, the quiet conversation. And it is being had all over the world, in every community beset by such violence.

Closeness changes how you see an event. It focuses the eye on specifics, away from the big picture. Things are what they are, not what they represent. Closeness also opens the heart. Compassion has a way of expanding to fit its surroundings. That is why public tragedies are different from private ones. They create a class of indirect victims, neighbors who are blown over by the shock waves of a blast they never felt. We are living in an era of public tragedies, where local events become international concerns. Each one inflames debate about causes

and about methods of prevention. These debates are important, but they are incomplete. Without a corresponding close view, these debates will inevitably erase the actual victims. They will turn every tragedy into an item on a list.

The bond of life is that close view. It is a commitment to carry actual people and specific experiences in our hearts and in our minds as we move through our lives. We are bound by that commitment. It is an essential responsibility and privilege of being alive.