

I AM PROUD TO BE AN AMERICAN JEW

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Everyone carries around a multiplicity of identities. My American one, I tend not to speak of. In any event, it's readily detectable. But years spent in Israeli playgrounds taught me that it is much better to say "I am a second generation Jerusalemite". Or, if an ethnic identity must be revealed, then I am entirely Dutch. But an American Jew? That's not something of which to be proud.

And in general, American Judaism is not something that Israelis like to think about with any seriousness. Certainly not the liberal sort. Until, that is, they are killed because they are Jews, and because they are liberals. And thus, even amidst the pain, and notwithstanding the freshness of the mourning, this is a significant moment in which to stop and think for a moment about the American Jewish liberal community, members of whom died as martyrs last Shabbat.

Martyrdom. An expression that does not easily escape our lips. It belongs, after all, to the Jews of Europe under the sword of medieval Christianity, and to the instances of persecution in Islamic lands. It is cited in prayers concerning the millions who were slaughtered in the Shoah. And it gets mixed in with the tears shed over those killed in terrorist attacks in our tiny country.

But not in North America. In the U.S., Jews do not die as martyrs. Not that this never ever happened, but in general, it does not occur. In Har Nof? Sure. But in Los Angeles? No. And yet now it has come to be.

This coming Shabbat we Jews all over the world will once again gather in our synagogues. And when the moment comes to return the Torah scroll to the Ark — a bittersweet moment of leave-taking — we will sing "Etz Hayyim Hi...", "it is a Tree of Life to those who hold onto it". And one by one the worshipers in congregation "Etz Hayyim - Or Le-Simhah" in Pittsburgh, PA, who met their death while praying, will pass before our eyes. Jews who, because they chose to go to synagogue, and especially this synagogue, with its particular values, gave their lives as martyrs against their will.

Sadly, in the 3000 year Jewish narrative, when a community suffers a martyr's murder, it is elevated to the status of a "holy congregation". [So says the Shabbat morning prayer:] "May the compassionate One, enthroned on high, remember with sublime compassion the pious, the good, and the innocent; the holy congregations who gave their lives as Jewish martyrs."

Perhaps that's the very reason that the American Jewish identity had not, in the eyes of many, ever been granted the status of a holy congregation. It was not like the community of Mainz, Volhynia, or Sana'a. Nor like the communities of Andalusia and Mashhad. The conscious designation of a holy congregation assumes that the values of that community are authentically Jewish, and thus worthy of the name "Jewish". That the Judaism of that community is the kind the Holy One imagined when we, the few, were chosen from among the nations to be God's people. A Judaism to which a person would be proud to belong.

So perhaps this is the appropriate moment to state, against the backdrop of the gaping hole ripped into our hearts by the acts of an extreme rightist spewing out the damnable lie known as "white supremacy", that the Etz Hayyim-Or Le-Simhah community in Pittsburgh is a holy congregation. That its values are holy, and that we should want to be associated with them and to take pride in what they do. Because they are (as is written in the weekly portion that could not be read in congregation Etz Hayyim) of the children of Abraham, who instructed his children and his future family "to preserve God's ways by doing what is just and right." Because of them, we can be proud to be Jews. And sad though it may be that it took such an act in order for us to pay due attention to their deeds, it is surely better to say this too late, rather than not at all: "I am proud to be an American Jew."

When one clearly sees people who for decades (in truth, for 97 years!) worked, saved, contributed and invested, establishing with their own hands, without government funding, in an unremarkable suburban neighborhood of [what was once] an ash-gray city, a community center in which they could continue the traditions of their fathers and mothers and to pass it on "from generation to generation" [they love to say "midor le-dor" in their American-accented Hebrew], then I am proud to be

an American Jew.

When one comes to know that the murder was carried out ten minutes after the start of the service, that is to say, when only the hard core of worshipers were there — the “minyan makers”, the ushers and volunteers, all there alongside the more vulnerable members of the community, for the support of whom others take pains to come early — and when one thinks of all the congregations in which, for hundreds of years people have gotten up early so that prayers can start on time, and of how many hundreds of congregations were lately established for that purpose in the United States, then I am proud to be an American Jew.

When one sees a woman standing outside the synagogue, weeping, a Kippah on her head, and one recalls the clarion call for equal rights with which American Jews have gifted — and still gift — the Jewish people and the entire world, then even if the Israeli style in matters of equality is different, and in light of the sharp and distorted interpretations of these matters now proliferating in the Orthodox community here, I am proud to be an American Jew.

When one sees a video of the collaborative, interfaith, civic memorial event with which the Jews of that community chose to remember their dead — an event with such local accents, and both so Jewish and so American — attended by Americans of all races, religions, and creeds; and when one then understands how this is the promised land that they all dreamt of for themselves and for their children, a dream both so American and so Jewish, then I am proud to be an American Jew.

And when one acknowledges that the straw that broke the back for that abhorrent anti-semitism was the fact that families of that community volunteered to defend refugees and immigrants to the United States, with the help of a magnificent organization like HIAS, and that they tried in that way to fulfill the words of the most prevalent mitzvah in the Torah, namely, giving love to the stranger; and when one acknowledges that they reasoned thus: “Because we were once strangers both in Egypt and in America, we are obligated to aid strangers, immigrants, and refugees in our domain, and what does it matter that they are not of our people? What difference does it make if they speak Spanish, whereas we still have Yiddish inflections? And who cares if the U.S. President

considers them to be a threat (something he sees in us as well)?" And when one understands that these Jews were doomed to die at the hands of that murderer because of all of this, then I am proud to be an American Jew.

This we must know, and if it has not been written clearly on our hearts prior to this, it is surely written there now in the blood of these murdered martyrs: Those who were murdered were liberal American Jews. They are a holy congregation with a 300+ year tradition of love of humanity and social justice, alongside a love of the Jewish people and of its hoary traditions. A community that sometimes has differences of opinion with other Jews, both in the U.S. and elsewhere, but for whom those differences are always for the sake of the highest cause. A congregation with a splendid past and with a future that I believe will yet surprise all of us. As Israelis, we have much to learn from them.

So in this era of such complex Israeli-Jewish identities, of emigrants from Morocco, Kurdistan, the Soviet Union and The Netherlands, in which all contribute to the Jewish Israeli pot the bitter and the sweet within them, I am proud to be counted among the community that has come from America, the great liberal community. I hope to continue to shore up the "tree of life" that my forbears planted on American soil. And from my place of residence in Jerusalem, I plan to continue to walk in its ways, for they are ways of pleasantness, and all of its paths are peace.