

**The Idolatry of Fear**  
**Temple Israel, Rosh Hashanah 2019**  
**Rabbi David J Fine, PhD**

The tragic attack at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh on October 27<sup>th</sup> of last year changed the way we feel in synagogues across the country. Much like the way September 11<sup>th</sup> increased security awareness, the Tree of Life massacre challenged synagogue leadership throughout the United States to rethink our preparedness in the event of what had been unthinkable. Four months later another a synagogue in Los Angeles suffered a similar assault. We learn about increasing incidents of antisemitism across the world and close to home. Swastikas have been found drawn on school desks and in bathrooms right in our backyard. We are more aware of ourselves as Jews, as others in America, than ever before.

Here in Ridgewood we welcomed the embrace of our non-Jewish friends as this sanctuary overflowed with warmth at the interfaith Thanksgiving service. Joined by the mayor and my Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist friends, we joined hands and prayed together in thanksgiving for our common and shared blessings. That warmth, that community, the immediate attention we received after Pittsburgh from our town and police department, assured me that while there are still so many that hate us, America *is* different from what we remember from across the ocean in the not-so-distant past.

What must we do? First, we come together. As we did for Shabbat after Pittsburgh. As we did for Thanksgiving. As we do every time we enter a synagogue. As we have done today. And as we can do here in this room on Saturday night, October 26<sup>th</sup>, as we will be hosting an AJC gathering and welcoming Congressman Josh Gottheimer to our bimah in marking the one-year anniversary of the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting and uniting our voices against antisemitism. With more details to come.

What can we do? Well, my son Laurence has made his parents proud as he works with other student activists to make sure that people who should not have firearms are not able to so easily acquire weapons.

What ought we to do? Our synagogue leadership has been devoting, for the past year, extraordinary time and energy to making our synagogue more secure and safe for us so that we can continue to feel here a sense of sanctuary. New professional assessments were procured, grants were applied for, enhancements were installed, training for staff and volunteers has been offered, new procedures initiated and evaluated, and many of our congregation responded to the call to help fund our increased security measures. So many people have volunteered their efforts, but I want to extend a special thank you, on behalf of the entire congregation, to Bob Obeiter, and now Howard Schreiber, for their commitment, perseverance and wisdom in shepherding our congregation through this process. It has been our top priority for the past year.<sup>1</sup>

Our security this Rosh Hashanah is significantly enhanced from what we have had in the past. We keep our doors locked when there is no agent to stand at the threshold, we changed the glass to a light and bullet blocking mesh, and we have all been asked to request personalized fob keys so that the doors do not have to be left open. I changed my personal Shabbat practice since Pittsburgh. I now keep my cell phone in my pocket when I go to synagogue. One of the most liberating aspects of traditional Shabbat observance is the freedom from the cell phone for the day, and yet now I make sure I have it on me, just in case I need it to dial 911. Don't worry, I always make sure to turn the volume off. That would be pretty embarrassing if it started ringing now. But I know that I am not alone among many rabbis who have, since Pittsburgh, gone through in our minds what we would do if faced with similar circumstances.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Obeiter served as president of Temple Israel and Jewish Community Center from 2016 to 2019. Howard Schreiber served as president from June of 2019.

And as a congregation we have changed our routines, from how we enter the building to where we do things, since Pittsburgh. From the late spring when we had minyan here on Sundays when there was no Hebrew school or other activity, we set up the service in the lobby by the main doors so that we could let people in but otherwise keep the doors closed and locked. On one of those Sunday minyan mornings I had a very uncomfortable revelation. We were set up around a table in the lobby, and then when it came time for the Amidah, the standing silent prayer, we all turned east, in the direction of this ark, and Jerusalem, and I bowed my head as I began my prayers and looked up to see an imposing bronze idol staring down on me. Yes, on the east wall of the main lobby we have our Holocaust memorial. The names of the camps, Auschwitz, Bergen Belsen, Birkenau and Buchenwald on the left, Dauchau, Maidaneck, Tereczin and Treblinka on the right, surround a bronze figure representing the suffering and martyrdom of the victims. Its arms are outstretched, reaching beyond a string of barbed wire, one hand reaching out as if toward us. Based on where I was standing at the time, I found myself facing this bronze figure directly, with my head bowed and the hand of the figure reaching out over my head as if it were receiving my devotions. If you can't picture what I'm describing, you'll understand next time you are in the lobby. How many times have I walked past that sculpture on the way to my office or the sanctuary without giving it any thought or concern? But here it was, as I found myself inadvertently worshipping it.

Several thoughts passed through my mind that Sunday morning. That's a powerful memorial. Synagogues usually don't have graven images. That's an image. And it's graven. It's not an idol. Because we don't worship it, I thought to myself as I continued to bow down toward it while flipping the pages of the morning Amidah in my prayerbook. Oy. Maybe I should face another direction, I thought? I made a mental note to consider a different place for the Sunday morning minyan so it was not placed directly in front of that image. But of course I couldn't write myself a note as I was praying, and then I would only remember again the following week when I found myself yet again in the same circumstances.

My mind wandered from the problem of worshipping a graven image in synagogue to the idea that we had begun to worship the idea of what that image stood for. American Judaism is facing a crisis of contraction as our numbers and our resources are declining. Some claim that the crisis is a result of the inability of one generation to transmit its faith to another. The American Judaism that I grew up in was rooted in the memorialization of the Holocaust and celebration of the State of Israel. But today many argue that a community rooted in the worship of fear and power cannot easily transmit itself. The Holocaust triggered a fear of antisemitism and its inherent dangers, and that fear was something that brought Jews together and gave a reason for Jewish continuity. The Holocaust gave us a motivation to go to synagogue, to undo the work of the Nazis and secure the future of the Jewish people. Celebrating Israel was celebrating the miracle of Jewish power, a phoenix resurrected from the ashes of the Holocaust. For American Jews, the Holocaust gave meaning to Israel just as Israel gave answer to the Holocaust. Today, many question the usefulness of these motivations for a new generation that knows neither the fear associated with antisemitism nor an appreciation of the miracle of Israel. Recent surveys have shown that Israel and the Holocaust play a lesser factor in Jewish identity for younger American Jews than they did in the past.<sup>2</sup>

We must answer these challenges. We must work to transmit the memory of the trauma of the Holocaust, and how I wish we did not have any help from the increase in antisemitism and violence that we have witnessed over the past year. But at the same time, we should also be mindful not to create idols out of our collective fear of hatred, or celebration of our own, or Israel's, power.

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<sup>2</sup>The most authoritative survey is the 2013 Pew study, "A Portrait of Jewish Americans." From the report: "The survey also finds a generational divide in the importance attached to caring about Israel. Among Jews 65 and older, about half (53%) say caring about Israel is essential to what being Jewish means to them. Among Jews under age 30, by contrast, 32% express this view. Older Jews also are more likely than their younger counterparts to say remembering the Holocaust, working for justice and equality in society, and having a good sense of humor are essential to their Jewish identity" (pages 55-56).

A few months before I found myself worshipping before an idol of Holocaust, so to speak, I had another strange morning minyan experience, this time in Berlin. When I was teaching rabbinical school there for a week last February, I had joined my students for minyan in the college synagogue, and one my students took the German and Israeli flags down from their poles and placed them on the floor. Now, almost every American synagogue has an American and Israeli flag. I supposed in this context my student, and this particular student is a British citizen, might have been uncomfortable praying toward a German flag. Even though the Federal Republic of Germany has proven to be one of the best governments we Jews have encountered in our long history. But I assumed my student had a problem with the fact that that flag still represented Germany and what that meant for Jews, and I also understood that if the German flag were to be removed it would only be proper to remove the Israeli flag for the same reason that in this country, no matter how Zionist we might be, we would never hoist any flag, even the flag of Israel, without the Stars and Stripes. But I was bothered that my student put the flags on the floor. You can't put a flag on the floor! A flag must be treated with respect. But my student could not understand my concern. He would have removed any flag, he told me, because to pray towards a flag is idolatry! And who cares if a flag is on the floor? When I started to explain that in the United States we revere the flag, and that we have receptacles, as we have in our village hall here in Ridgewood, for the proper disposal of flags so that they should not be disrespected when they are old, just like we treat sacred Jewish writings, he said that I had just proven to him what all Europeans fear, that Americans are crazy nationalists. All I had to do then was smile and bring up Brexit, and that was how I got out of it. His perspective, though, was not unreasonable. Do we even know where the line is between respect for the ideas that these two flags represent and the worship of them as idols? Synagogues only began to put flags on the bimah in the 1950s and 60s after the establishment of the State of Israel. It was a development that soon became widespread, but was not without controversy.

There is an extraordinary passage in the Talmud that addresses the problem of idolatry when the objects of worship are not nonsense but essential and important elements of the world. The pagans asked the rabbis in Rome, according to Mishnah Avodah Zarah 4:7, why God does not destroy idolatry if God is all-powerful and despises idols so much. The rabbis responded that if idolaters only worshipped things that were not important in the world, then yes, God would destroy such things. But idolaters worship necessary aspects of the world, such as the sun, the moon and the stars. Should God destroy such things, and thereby destroy the world, because of certain fools who choose to worship them rather than God? This teaching from the Mishnah is reflecting on the passage in Deuteronomy 4:19 that concedes that God has intended the sun, moon and stars to be worshipped by the other peoples of the world. The Mishnah continues, in classic Talmudic parlance, to have the pagans suggest in their continued goading of the rabbis, that if God recognized the usefulness of the worship of such necessary things, why God did not at least destroy the idols of unimportant and worthless matters. The rabbis respond that if God were to discriminate between useful and useless idolatry, the worshippers of the useful idols would erroneously conclude that their idolatry was true.

What shouts out from these ancient passages of Israelite and Jewish wisdom is that idolatry is not always a simple matter. Sometimes, the object of worship is not nonsense, but something as important as the sun, or water, or fertility, or good health. Our ancient wisdom understood that people needed to celebrate and acknowledge what was important and essential. It also understood that we sometimes found it difficult to distinguish between celebration and worship. I want to share two stories about the ambiguity of idolatry, one from the Talmud and one from my own childhood. The Talmud tells about Rabban Gamaliel enjoying the waters in a Roman bathhouse in the Galilee when a pagan philosopher challenges him how he can enjoy himself in the shadow of a statue of the goddess Aphrodite that stood over the pool. The Jewish patriarch explained that context is paramount. While they were bathing before

an image of Aphrodite, they were bathing, not worshipping. In that context, the image of Aphrodite was merely decorative, and therefore not idolatrous.

That being said, I think we can agree that images of pagan gods and goddesses would not be appropriate in a synagogue. In the days when the Concord still existed in the Catskills and hosted the annual convention of the Rabbinical Assembly, I remember how the hotel would cover the statues that decorated the large plenary room called “The Columns” so as not to offend the rabbis with images of pagan divinities. I found the sheets strewn over the statues as more alluring than the merely decorative images, appearing as ghosts hovering over our deliberations. But the story I want to share from my childhood that made such an impression on me was a conversation I once had with my school bus driver. He knew his charges were from a Jewish day school—this was when I attended the Solomon Schechter School of Queens—and he was telling us that he had attended a synagogue service for the first time that weekend. He was surprised, he explained, when at one point they opened an elaborate cabinet and brought out an idol wearing a crown which they paraded around the synagogue and everyone kissed it as it passed by. I explained to him that it was the Torah, and is treated that way with respect, but I was struck then, at an early age, at how our own traditions might appear to someone from the outside. Do we sometimes seem to worship the Torah itself as an object, forgetting about the ideals it stands for? I am reminded of that scene from *The Frisco Kid*—one of my favorite movies—when the rabbi played by Gene Wilder regrets his impulsive decision to save the Torah scroll before the life of his friend, the bank robber played by Harrison Ford. Sometimes, we fall into the old habits of idolatry in worshipping objects, and forgetting about what they stand for. More often, we worship what they stand for, when we ought to merely celebrate and even love but not necessarily adore and offer homage.

An archeologist of the future could write a dissertation on what that image of the suffering concentration camp victim meant for the Judaism practiced at Temple Israel in Ridgewood. But ours is not the first synagogue that contains what might appear to be idolatry within its art. A motif of the late

ancient synagogue is the zodiac floor, and many of these floors that archeologists have uncovered in Israel and elsewhere depict the image of Helios, the Greek god personifying the sun, in the very center of a synagogue sanctuary! Scholars debate whether the ancient Jews were pseudo-pagans, or whether it was “just art” like the statue of Aphrodite in the bathhouse. Did they pray standing over those very pagan images the same way that I found myself praying before our image of the suffering Holocaust victim in our lobby, not realizing what I was doing? This is an ongoing controversy among historians. But it can help us recognize the complexities of what we do, and what we worship, and why.

How do we memorialize the Holocaust without making that ideal the object of our worship? How do we show our respect and love for Israel and the United States without practicing blind adherence and ultra-nationalism? These questions arise as we reconfigure and re-asses our commitments to our community and congregation after the attack at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh almost one year ago.

Yes of course we are right to make sure that we feel safe in our community. Our concern for security, our fear and vigilance against antisemitism, are indeed necessary elements of our world like the sun, moon and stars. These concerns command our attention, but not our devotion. There is not a Shabbat morning that I don't feel guilty about carrying my cell phone in my pocket. I feel it burning at my side, challenging me. Am I right to carry it, or have I violated the sacredness of the Sabbath by not leaving it home on the holy day of rest? I am satisfied that I struggle with this every week. And I am satisfied that as a synagogue we struggle with the tension between keeping a welcoming open door and maintaining a secure barrier. What is critical is to make sure that we don't find ourselves worshipping this concern for security. Our efforts in responding to security concerns cannot become an end in themselves. We must not forget the real reason why we are here. What is it that we want to be safe for? It cannot be safety itself, or we will all find ourselves worshipping the gods of fear, the gods of suffering.



Judaism cannot be built on fear. The post-Holocaust theologian Emile Fackenheim famously wrote that after Auschwitz we now have an eleventh commandment: Thou shalt not forget. While that may be so, I am uncomfortable with a religious identity that is premised on responding to the Nazis. The response that Judaism offers is to God. Anything else is by definition idolatry. Isn't it? I am proud of both of these flags here on our bimah and what they stand for. But I insist that my Jewishness does not exist so that I may lend support to Israel. Rather, it is Israel that exists to support my Jewishness. Or at least it should, it ought to, despite various unfortunate decisions of the current government. And I won't start to talk now about the government entrusted to defend the values symbolized in the Stars and Stripes. Let's just agree that there is a big difference between love of country and idolatrous worship of country.

I return to the circumstances that brought me face to face with a graven image in the midst of my morning Amidah. I felt uncomfortable. I felt sad. But I also felt challenged. I felt awake. And most importantly, I did not feel alone. I was in a minyan. We were together, as we are in a bit larger minyan this morning. We face the same challenges, together. We will find the way to respond to our fears without handing them our devotions. We will be vigilant against antisemitism without giving those who hate us the power to determine who we are and why we come together. We will not allow ourselves to become victimized as the Other by an angry jingoist minority that cannot accept the principles by which this nation was formed. We will not allow such hatred and fear to take over our country and we will certainly not allow it to take over our Judaism. We believe in an open society where we will need neither walls nor secure gateways. We worship the God of peace, not the idolatry of fear.