

Being a Hero in the Time of Corona

It has been about ten days since Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker of Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas and three of his congregants were taken hostage. Like so many I watch the unfolding of what could have been an incredible tragedy similar to what occurred in Pittsburgh on October 27, 2018 at the Tree of Life Synagogue where eleven worshippers were murdered and six were wounded. As Jews we all personalized the experience. These folks could have been us. For clergy everywhere we were forced to reckon with the notion of what we would have done.

Some folks in our own congregation reached out to me. “*Rabbi I thought of you. Are you ok?*” Others in the interfaith community also reached out, and were equally supportive. A few folks pulled me aside and said, “*Rabbi whatever you need for security, you let me know.*” And still others, “*Rabbi, I don’t suppose you are a gun person, but I want to take you out shooting. You have to protect yourself and your Congregation.*” I understand the sentiment, but I’m not sure being the sheriff is in my job description.

Emotions are all over the map. And deciding what to do (on top of all of the many things we have already done over the years) started with us having a paid guard at our services at Friday and Saturday Shabbat services along with a guard during religious school. The actions won’t end here I am sure, and will be the subject of upcoming board meetings and our security committee. We are thankfully in very good hands. And I guarantee you that similar discussions are taking place in synagogues throughout the country.

Over the past ten days I couldn’t stop thinking about what I would have done. I have gone through the training like Rabbi Cytron-Walker. But one never knows until he or she is tested.

For now, I turned to one of my personal expressions of emotions as I sort through my feelings; poetry. And here is what I wrote:

I don’t want to be a hero
I just want to live my life
In naïveté that everything
Will be ok
Day after day
After day
Until it’s not
I don’t want to be a hero
But I do not want to be a victim
Either
We live in two worlds
The aspirational world of common humanity,
Goodness, and friendship
The horrific world of danger, violence and
Hatred.
The two worlds collide more often than I would
Like
I don’t want to be a hero
I want to do my best to live in the aspirational world
And understand and protect against the other world;
The netherworld

Here is one thing I do know. I looked at each student who attended religious school last Sunday, and everyone who showed up for shabbat services, and everyone who went to study Torah and understood that *they* are the real heroes. The virus of Corona has kept us hidden in our homes. But the virus of hate cannot be stopped by hiding. It must be faced by our own commitment to being Jewish, our standing tall in the face of those who look down upon our faith, and our living our Jewish lives unabashedly every day of our lives.

Professor Deborah Lipstadt said it so well in her recent essay, “Going to Services Should Not be an Act of Faith” (January 18, 2022)

We are shaken. We are not OK. But we will bounce back. We are resilient because we cannot afford not to be. That resiliency is part of the Jewish DNA. Without it, we would have disappeared centuries ago...

We will protect ourselves. But we must never forget what we are protecting.

Never. Ever. Ever.
Rabbi Sanford Akselrad