

***This d'var torah was delivered by Rabbi Josh Lesser at the 2018 Reconstructionist Convention, Rooted & Relevant, in Philadelphia.***

In a shtetl outside of Vitebsk, Belarus, there was a young learned man. In the wake of increasing violence, and with encouragement from his parents, he began to save money to make his passage to America. An arduous journey; uneasy, he set out for a port in Latvia. He was relieved to have arrived a day before the ship was leaving. Eager, yet anxious, he found a place to make his bed on the docks. After a fitful night of sleep, he awoke to the horror that his pack - all of his possessions and money had been stolen in the night. Dejected, he cried out in prayer. As he wandered aimlessly with not enough money to even return home, he felt alone and in despair. But then he saw a sign: a literal sign. He thought he must be dreaming, and like the ladder in Jacob's dream, it was a way up and a way out; the man holding the sign was nothing short of an angel in his eyes. He ran towards the words "Free passage to Montreal for Hebrew Teachers." He spent nearly a decade teaching children in the small but growing Jewish community in Montreal before finally arriving in New York. This man was my great-grandfather.

My grandmother relished telling me this story with her very clear moral at the end: "You can steal everything from someone, but not their education." A moral that many of us have had impressed upon us. I have told this story at baccalaureate services and graduations framed the same way that it was handed down to me. And yet, after the tragedy in Pittsburgh, I encounter this family story with a recognition of the danger, which was never the focus and ask: "Where do we find safety?"

In our Torah Portion, we immediately encounter Jacob fleeing grave danger and seeking a new life. Never straying too far from his tent, he was forced to abandon the home that he loved. Jacob, like my great-grandfather, was imagined to be a Torah scholar who was now compelled to travel far from home with an unfamiliar destination in mind "very afraid and distressed." Medieval Italian commentator Sforno believes Jacob is utterly lost. In this raw and vulnerable time, he dreamt of a ladder stretching heavenwards with angels ascending and descending. When he awoke, he uttered the profound words, "Surely God is in this place and I did not know it...How awesome is this place!" The word *norah* means awesome, but it also means terrifying. "How terrifying is this place" is probably closer to the meaning here.

Usually, in the face of terror, we flee. We shut down and retreat or we seek to bolster and protect. Jacob encounters God in the terror and brokenness. This ability to find God in the midst of danger is what Rabbi Jonathan Sacks believes that Jacob adds to our spiritual DNA. He says, "We normally assume that the great spiritual encounters happen in the wilderness, or a mountain top, in an ashram..., a place where the soul is at rest, the body calm and the mind in a state of expectation. But that is not Jacob, nor is it the only or even the primary Jewish encounter. We know what it is to encounter God in fear and trembling. Through much of Jewish history, our ancestors found God in dark nights and dangerous places." That was true of my great grandfather and so many of our forbearers.

Many of us find ourselves in a terrifying place. In our current political climate, with emboldened white supremacists, flagrant bigotry, racism, misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia and antisemitism; we find ourselves vulnerable and fearful. The tragedy in Pittsburgh pulled back a veil of deniability and if we weren't already, we are now forced to wrestle with "How terrifying is this place!" Is God encounterable in this place? Where do we find safety?

Our North American Jewish community is rapidly shifting and what movements can contribute is being questioned. How we respond to questions like these is crucial for our relevancy. And I believe, our approach as Reconstructionist Jews is needed. When I see how the response to Pittsburgh by so many synagogues is primarily, even exclusively security driven, I know a new perspective is essential. How much safety is there in more police, more armed guards, more training and more protocol? I do not eschew taking prudent measure for the safety and well-being of our communities, yet this should not be the only, nor the primary response. I worry that creating fortresses only partially solves the problem and creates a slew of new ones, including preventing a holistic safety. Can we be like Jacob?

Rather than just wall ourselves off, we must invest at least as much in our spiritual resilience and in building connections with other communities walking similar paths. Rabbi Deborah Waxman teaches that "Judaism, writ large, is about resilience. Across the span of Jewish history, [we] have experienced extensive trauma, even catastrophe, and we have survived – as a people and as a civilization. After each catastrophe, the prevailing paradigm was inoperable: we no longer knew how to understand ourselves in relation to God, to other Jews, and to other peoples. And, throughout our history, Jews have ultimately transcended catastrophe after catastrophe. ...We have found pathways toward repair." I believe we must call on our treasure trove of history and examples in our own lives. Not only do we have Jacob, but so many family stories that remind us that we come from irrepressible stock. Jews from around the globe, by birth and by choice share a spiritual DNA of not only bearing pain and oppression, but of making meaning, creating community and committing to keep moving forward taking strength from being Jewish even when being Jewish is why they have been targeted.

And when we're not sure how to make it through, we must turn to others who have walked this path and stand with them. As someone who has had the privilege to work with transgender women of color to reform our Atlanta police system, I have learned more about resilience and fidelity to one's own sense of being. As Reconstructionists, we are equipped to write this chapter well and it won't be because we isolated from the world, but because we embraced it.

And I embrace the lesson from our ancestors that safety can be an internal perspective, a commitment to walk through the world as intact as possible. My perspective on safety is shaped not only by our collective past, but also as a Southern Jew who grew up standing outside of my Hebrew School because of bomb threats and witnessing a cross burned on the lawn of the synagogue close to my home. And it has been shaped by my time teaching in New Orleans when my principal warned that my

classroom was in the line of fire for drive-by shootings and I should have a plan for my physically disabled students in case such an event should take place. Safety is not the same for people of color, women and LGBT folks; we must live with heightened vigilance.

This notion of safety only became amplified when I became an openly gay rabbi. In addition to the death threats I received when I arrived back home, my parents never ceased worrying whether I would be shot or otherwise harmed speaking at a protest or a rally. One of the last things my father said to me was to keep fighting for what was right, but to please be safe.

Safe? Despite having immense safety in my daily life, I have never felt like safety is the only concern. I've said to those who feared for my safety, "God forbid if something were to happen to me, please know that I do work in this world that I'm proud of." That is its own kind of safety.

So, when I think about the beloved elders z"l who died in Pittsburgh, they may not have been safe in that building in that moment, but what I have read about them is that they were safe in is how they lived their lives. Every one of them, in one way or another, were dedicated to living lives of generosity and kindness. They lived lives that, God forbid, if something happened to them, they would, and have left behind a legacy to inspire us. And they did.

After Pittsburgh, people have taken solace in the words *Stronger than Hate*; I have seen people amend to say *Love Is Stronger than Hate*. My LGBT-founded community through protests for equality and after the tragedy in Orlando, has also found comfort, in the idea that *Love Will Win*. But these ideas don't mean that we somehow will be magically protected in a bubble. What it means is that the way we commit to live our lives is the way that love wins.

It is the way that we walk through this world whether we are scared or whether we are fearless. And trust me, we are often both of those things. We must come to terms that the world is a fraught place. It is complicated, and it is scary, and dangerous. But there has to be a commitment to our own sense of resilience and commitment to move further because the way that we commit to live our lives *is* the way that love wins. Spiritual resilience is encoded in our DNA. We have the opportunity to bring that sense of committing in this moment to make the world a better place. That is the safety that we have, and it's all that we have.

Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk taught in the book *Emet V'Emunah* that "People are accustomed to looking at the heavens and wondering what happens there. It would be better if they would look within themselves to see what happens there." When Jacob dreams of the ladder, it directs him not only upwards but more importantly inwards. And even though he continues to bargain with God, he is able to move forward into what is next, not from the security of his tent, but from the security within. We too, have the ability to find safety in building our lives such that we create hope and meaning for ourselves and others.

The people in this room, the people who are gathered, this is how you're already living your lives. This is who you are. And all I'm suggesting is that in this moment of deep pain, when our hearts are cracked open, choose not to shut down, but to commit to more of who you already are. Commit to what you already love. Commit to what you want to see. Commit to who you are becoming. This is an investment that is worthy. We can be the messengers traversing the ladder. We are the inheritors of a great tradition and as a part of Reconstructing Judaism, we are forging a powerful future. Anyone (with means) can build a fortress after a tragedy, it takes courage and leadership to navigate to a place of wholeness and betterment. This is how I believe we can be deeply rooted and boldly relevant. This is the leadership we need--and who I believe this incredible community already is. Together in the broken places and in the whole, we will make meaning, bring justice, strengthen connection and find God. And if we do *this*, we can transform the terrifying into the awesome.