



## **Parashat Toldot & Kristallnacht November 10, 2018 - 2nd of Kislev, 5779**

This issue of the FJMC Unraveller, a weekly commentary explaining the aspects of Jewish history, ideas and thought, is being sent to you by the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs. We hope you enjoy it and find it intellectually challenging. If you wish to 'opt-out' of receiving the Unraveller, please click on the link at the bottom. Your congregants can subscribe, without cost, by clicking on the following link <http://fjmc.org/content/fjmc-unraveller>.

Dear FJMC leaders and supporters,

As our brothers and sisters in Pittsburgh enter the period of Sheloshim, the next stage of mourning the eleven Jews killed in the massacre at Tree of Life Synagogue the Shabbat before last, this edition of the FJMC Unraveller honors both the martyrs and those who survived the attack, who are now recovering from wounds physical and psychological. In addition to our religious and ethical obligations to grieve with and support those in the Pittsburgh community, we also have an historic duty to stand in solidarity with all those suffering from the acts of domestic terrorism, for Jewish communities around the world prepare this week to mark the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht. The "Night of Broken Glass," encompassing both widespread violence against German Jewry and their subsequent economic disenfranchisement in the days that followed, in fact represented a major turning point for Nazi Germany that many now view as the beginning of the Shoah, or Holocaust.

In light of this tragic convergence, I will again this week revisit and adapt a Torah commentary that I composed during my years of tenure as Rabbinic Fellow for the Jewish Theological Seminary's Florida Region Office. While I wrote during "quieter times" the following reflection about the striking echoes between a classical Rabbinic text and a famous poem from contemporary Israel, I first encountered the latter text because we as modern Jews have wrestled for decades with a sense that tragedy and our responses to it form a central part of our heritage. I look forward to your feedback as I strive to make my words and the words of our tradition relevant, compelling and meaningful to all of you

HaMakom Yenachem - May the Everpresent One bring comfort to those mourning in Pittsburgh and Louisville and beyond.

Rabbi Andy Shugerman, Executive Director

## Parashat Toldot - Genesis 25:19 - 28:9

ותכהין עיניו מראות א"ר אלעזר בן עזריה מראות ברע מראות ברעתו של רשע

ד"א מראות מכח אותה ראייה שבשעה שעקד אברהם אבינו את בנו על גבי המזבח בכו מלאכי השרת הה"ד (ישעיה לג) הן אראלם  
צעקו חוצה וגו' ונשרו דמעות מעיניהם לתוך עיניו והיו רשומות בתוך עיניו וכיון שהזקין כהו עיניו הה"ד ויהי כי זקן יצחק וגו'

Genesis Rabbah 65:10

*[When Isaac was old] and his eyes went dim from seeing...(Gen. 27:1). R. Elazar b. Azariah said: from seeing the evil of that wicked man (his son Esau)...*

*Another interpretation of from seeing: from the shock of that spectacle when our father Abraham bound his son Isaac upon the altar. The ministering angels wept...and tears dropped from their eyes into his and were imprinted upon his eyes so that, when he aged, his eyes dimmed, as it is written, When Isaac was old...*

Many centuries before the advent of modern medicine in general and mental health in particular, our Sages developed the symbolic language of angels' tears to explain the hidden wounds impressed upon Isaac's psyche in the aftermath of the Akedah. Today, one finds myriad psychological interpretations of his near-death experience at the hands of his father, Abraham. In fact, a trend has emerged in Israeli poetry over the last few decades: re-examining the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, as a paradigm for understanding the role of trauma and fear in contemporary Jewish life.

Israel Prize-winning poet Hayim Gouri famously revisited the Akedah and its repercussions in his poem "Heritage" ("Yerushah"):

The old man raised his head. / Seeing that it was no dream / and the angel stood there /  
- the knife slipped from his hand.  
The boy, released from his bonds, / saw his father's back.  
Isaac, as the story goes, was not sacrificed. / He lived many days more, / saw (life's)  
goodness, until his eyesight dimmed.  
But he bequeathed that hour to his descendants. / They are born / with a knife in their  
hearts.

Gouri's final verse connects the event that caused Isaac's blindness to a life-threatening injury all Jews have inherited as his descendants. Just as the midrash imagines the angels' tears as a ticking time bomb that eventually dimmed Isaac's eyesight, we experience as "a knife in (our) hearts" a fear that the darkest moments in our history might be repeated. Indeed, many scholars have described this poem and others like it as literary attempts to recover from and make sense of the Shoah and of violence in Israeli life.

I take great pride in teaching about this collective literary and scholarly effort to heal ourselves through creative expression and compassionate critique. Reading poems like Gouri's has sensitized me to the spiritual power of these texts as modern midrashim. They give us new language for coping with our recent past through empathy and imagination.

Let us embrace this life-affirming enterprise, too, as part of a heritage that balances our human emotions. Our Sages speak of a dual duty to love and to revere God. While “God-fearing” behavior relates to our need for discipline and protection, the devotional love of our covenant with God both inspires and requires the courage and confidence to meet any test we may face.

May we rise to the challenge of the anxieties and uncertainties in our lives today, secure in the promise that Isaac receives from God early in this week's Torah portion: "Fear not, for I am with you, and I will bless you and increase your offspring for the sake of My servant Abraham." (Gen. 26:24)

May that ancient blessing come to fruition as we continue to honor the blessed memory of the eleven men and women murdered in Pittsburgh:

Joyce Fienberg, 75 - Yiddis Bultcha bat Aba Menachem  
Rose Mallinger, 97 - Raizel bas Avrohom  
David Rosenthal, 54 - Dovid ben Eliezer  
Cecil Rosenthal, 59 - Chaim ben Eliezer  
Bernice Simon, 84 - Beila Rochel bas Moshe  
Sylvan Simon, 86 - Zalman Shachna ben Menachem Mendel  
Irving Younger, 69 - Yitzchok Chaim ben Menachem  
Daniel Stein, 71 - Daniel Avrom ben Baruch  
Melvin Wax, 88 - Moshe Gadol ben Yosef  
Richard Gottfried, 65 - Yosef ben Hyman  
Jerry Rabinowitz, 66 - Yehudah ben Yechezkel

This week's Torah commentary was written by Rabbi Andy Shugerman, Executive Director of FJMC.