

## Showing Up for Shabbat (A)

As Rabbi Joel Sisenwine drove along 5th Avenue into Midtown Manhattan for a brief birthday getaway with his wife, Heidi, his cell phone rang. The road trip from the Boston suburbs went by quickly, the trees still ablaze with autumn colors in late October. Sisenwine remembered, “At about 69th Street, I get the call.”<sup>1</sup> He continued to drive as he listened to one of the Temple educators describe the horrible details of gunfire erupting during Shabbat services at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. Many were feared to be dead. By the time Sisenwine reached 65th Street, just a few blocks later, New York’s landmark synagogue Temple Emanu-El came into view. The large, historic temple was surrounded by the National Guard and officers carrying machine guns.

The rabbi’s thoughts turned to his own synagogue, Temple Beth Elohim (TBE), back in Wellesley, Massachusetts. The next day, hundreds of people would be coming in and out for Hebrew School. “So, what was the procedure going to be?” Sisenwine wondered, as he considered whether to turn his car around and drive back to Massachusetts immediately. With a capable clergy team of five and plans already coming together for a vigil at TBE that evening, Sisenwine decided to return the following day: he would handle the calls about safety and security arrangements over the phone.

Safety, Sisenwine reflected, wasn’t just a matter of a police presence or guards at the door. It was about community members feeling comfortable returning to the synagogue for regular Shabbat services the following week. With eleven confirmed dead, the Tree of Life shootings were the worst anti-Semitic attack in U.S. history. Yet when Sisenwine heard the news, he realized that he wasn’t surprised. He sighed, “I was not shocked. Just deeply sad.” He reflected: “Right now it’s just a matter of comforting people that they’re going to be secure.”

Back in Wellesley the next day, Sisenwine received an email from the American Jewish Congress: “Today we are launching #ShowupforShabbat a new nationwide initiative aimed at filling synagogues across the country. Join us...” As Sisenwine read the message announcing the initiative just one week after the shootings, he thought: “This is terrible. They just invited outsiders to come, when my synagogue is fearful, to open the doors?” He worried: “Now do we have to have metal detectors? Do we ask people not to bring bags? Do we ask them to RSVP?”

In addition to grappling with security issues, Sisenwine also needed to shape the service and write a sermon. As a leader, he reflected, “Ultimately, my job is to give the answer. But I have to figure out the question. If people come with one question and I’m answering a different question, it doesn’t matter how good my answer is .... the service didn’t meet their needs.” Friday’s Shabbat services were in just five days, and the doors would be open whether he—and his community—were ready or not.

### Temple Beth Elohim

The large, vibrant Reform Jewish community of Temple Beth Elohim (TBE) in Wellesley, Massachusetts was first established in the 1940s. At the time, Jewish families were regularly prevented from purchasing homes in the wealthy, white, predominantly Protestant town; realtors routinely refused to show Wellesley properties to Jewish home-buyers even after the passage of the state’s Fair Housing Act in 1946. Sisenwine acknowledges

Wellesley's history of exclusion but notes that the town is more diverse today than its reputation might suggest: it is now home to growing racial and religious diversity and a vital clergy council. On the large, sloping lawn in front of Wellesley's stone Romanesque town hall building, the holiday display now includes a menorah alongside a Christmas tree--and, more recently, a crescent moon.

Today, of the more than 1,200 TBE families, some live in Wellesley, while others are drawn from 35 other cities and towns in the greater Boston area. TBE bustles with activity throughout the day, from the preschool in the early morning to the evening classes and activities, from the B'nei Mitzvah and book clubs to "Tot Time" and Torah study. While many other religious communities are shrinking, new members join TBE each week. The stunning modern building, which opened in 2010, was designed to accommodate this growing community. The sanctuary at the heart of synagogue seats 450, with sliding walls to accommodate 700; another set of walls extends the capacity to over one thousand for the High Holidays.

Within the building, inscribed upon the temple's wall, a quotation from the Mishna expresses the three pillars of the TBE community: "The world stands on three things: on *Torah* (learning), on *Avodah* (worship), on *Gemulit Hasidim* (acts of loving kindness)." (*Pirke Avot*, 1:2) The decoration and design of the purpose-built structure reflect the values of the community, such as ramps and accessible passageways to promote inclusion of people with physical disabilities. The design also elegantly incorporates another concern: security. Although the front of the building includes soaring glass walls, and a warm sense of welcome, visitors may only enter through one, central, alarmed door. After the Pittsburgh shootings in late October of 2018, the doors of the synagogue are not left open or unattended: visitors buzz in at the front door, and a security guard stands outside. Rabbi Sisenwine notes that he receives many questions about the level of security provided. "We do not say publicly whether our guard is armed, but part of me thinks we should."

### Rabbi Joel Sisenwine

Growing up in Philadelphia, Sisenwine experienced some anti-Semitism. "But," he reflected, "minimal in terms of its potential danger: name calling, pennies thrown, things like that." His worries about anti-Semitism in America began to grow after the Charlottesville rally in 2017. "One can't separate [the Pittsburgh attacks] from that." For Sisenwine, it was also difficult to separate the synagogue attacks from the highly polarized political climate of 2018. The shooter in Pittsburgh targeted Tree of Life, in part, because of their affiliation with HIAS, a refugee aid group. Sisenwine noted: "And we're a congregation that welcomes Syrian refugees. We're deeply involved in HIAS' work." The mid-term elections would be held in less than a week, and issues like gun control and immigration could be divisive at TBE, as in any community. Sisenwine added: "When community is your agenda at a time of polarization, it's really challenging."

On the basketball court and on the *bimah*, Sisenwine sees himself as a community builder. While a torn rotator cuff keeps him off the court, his love of sports continues. He jokes, "I think there have been many Jewish boys who slowly started to shift their long-term dream from NBA player to something else, and that's what happened to me." When still in his teens, Sisenwine had to choose between playing on the high school basketball team or becoming more involved in the life of the synagogue. His choice reflected a "serious calling"; later, Sisenwine would go directly from undergrad to rabbinical school. And, for the past 19 years, he has served the TBE community. During that time, he helped the community through other national tragedies, including 9/11 and the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings. Each of those had local impact: one of the planes that hit the World Trade Center originated in Boston; the synagogue is just a few blocks from the marathon route. Yet it was clear that the attacks at the Tree of Life synagogue struck even closer to home.

## **A Busy Monday at Temple Beth Elohim**

On Monday, two days after the Tree of Life shootings, Sisenwine believed that the community's main question was: "Will I be safe to come to synagogue?" That morning, Sisenwine rose early. He wanted to be sure that he was standing at the entrance of TBE, next to the security guard, to greet the preschoolers as they arrived for the first time after the shootings. "It's not every day I'm there at 8:00," he laughed. "I felt like it was important to be there. To take the temperature... and to convey a welcoming message." Afterwards, in a discussion with a preschool parent, Sisenwine asked about how they felt about his presence and the additional security. The mother explained that the presence was welcome, adding: "My older son is in the elementary school, and they have lockdown drills all the time now." He added, "So, the world has changed."

Later that day, Sisenwine and the clergy team gathered for a meeting to discuss the approach to the service. He stated to his team, frankly, "I have no idea what's going on right now. Let's put our ears to the ground until Wednesday." He wanted to be sure that the service responded to the needs of the community. Meanwhile, there were many logistical decisions to be made related to opening the front doors of the temple. As a security measure, they would distribute name tags to the local churches if members of other communities decided to come to the services. Yet other questions remained: how many officers and security guards should be present, and what should they wear: a sweater? A jacket and tie? A yellow reflective jacket? Sisenwine wondered, "How do you protect yourself and maintain a culture of openness and welcome?"

In addition to opening the doors at the temple, there was also the question of opening the walls of the sanctuary. For weekly Shabbat services, the standard setup of 450 seats were more than adequate, but the space could be expanded to 700 or up to 1,000. Yet Sisenwine worried, what if they opened up the walls and no one showed up? He thought, "It would make people feel vulnerable...alone. And the whole point of that service was to not feel alone."

As the busy Monday of meetings drew to an end, Sisenwine was struck by "a moment of deep, deep sadness." With all of the preparations, he had little time to think about what happened in Pittsburgh and how he felt about it. "It was just a tremendous sadness that this happened in a synagogue. That I have a security guard in an American synagogue right now." Sisenwine sighed: "He's there all the time. That's crazy. That I live in a country that-- In Poland, they don't have a security guard. That's the grounds of the concentration camps, of the death camps... Something's wrong." Yet Sisenwine couldn't dwell in his sadness for long, as there were other matters that needed his attention. In a few days, the synagogue doors would be open for Shabbat.

## **Planning the Service, Writing the Sermon**

In the days that followed, Sisenwine received offers that might help him to shape the service: a minister from a nearby church offered for his congregation to stand outside and welcome everyone, and walk them into the building. A senator's office contacted TBE requesting to speak at the Solidarity Shabbat. As Sisenwine reflected on the message he wanted to offer his community and how to address the visitors that would be joining them, he considered the letter from George Washington to the Jewish congregation in Newport, Rhode Island. The 1790 letter affirmed the community's longstanding presence in America, which seemed far away from the polarized present-day political scene.

...For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good

citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support. ...May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingily happy.

As he continued to write and revise, he received two emails from community members. One stated: “If you don’t address politics in your sermon, you have failed moral leadership.” Another warned: “If you address politics in your sermon, I’m leaving.” Sisenwine thought, “I don’t usually get emails in advance. I get them after the fact. So, this is how vulnerable people are feeling, and how passionate.”

The Solidarity Shabbat service was scheduled for the evening of November 2. The mid-term election would come a few days later, on November 6; a few days after that, November 9, marked the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht. Sisenwine reflected, “And so all these things are brewing in people’s minds. It was ripe.” On Kristallnacht, “the night of broken glass” which took place in 1938, attacks on Jewish synagogues, homes, and businesses represented an inflection point in the hostility against German Jews, signaling the beginning of the Holocaust. Sisenwine knew that there were those at TBE who worried that the Tree of Life shootings might be a similar inflection point for American Jews. Yet he wanted his community to feel safe and not to “hunker down.” And what did it mean to be having this conversation with the doors of the synagogue open to guests? Sisenwine wondered to himself: who would show up for Shabbat? And what would he say to them?

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#### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> All quotes from Rabbi Joel Sisenwine: Rabbi Joel Sisenwine, interview by author, Wellesley, MA, November 18, 2018.