

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# Listening to and acting with a the 'massacre generation'



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"I am 18. I belong to the massacre generation."

This is the title of an essay by Julia Savoca Gibson, published in The Washington Post one year ago following the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh.

She continues, "It was last Saturday when it hit me that my entire life has been framed by violence. ... I don't remember being born on Jan. 28, 2000, and I don't remember being a year-and-a-half old when 9/11 happened. ... I remember the lockdown drills at my elementary school, the helpful signs in every classroom telling us where to hide in case of an active shooter. ... I remember being in seventh grade, and I remember my teacher looking up from her computer, pale and running out of the room without a word during a quiz. I remember her walking back in, tears streaking her face, as she told us there had been a shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, where her grandchildren lived. I remember her telling us they were all right, and I remember thinking of my little brother and feeling my stomach churn. ... Virginia Tech, Newtown, Orlando, Las Vegas, Parkland, Tree of Life. These are my memories."

During Yom Kippur services this past October, Rabbi Seth Limmer, at Chicago Sinai Congregation, shared these reflections from Julia Gibson and other youth who lament the world they have inherited. In his sermon Limmer says, "The Massacre Generation. Let that sink in: not the Greatest Generation, not the Baby Boomers, Gen Xers or Millennials; the Massacre Generation. This is how our young people see themselves, a generation when school shootings happen more often than NFL games."

I was surprised to see this comparison until I checked the CBS News report that already by Sept. 1 of this year there had been 283 mass shootings (defined as four or more injured or killed). This compares to 265 total NFL games in a whole season including the Super Bowl. Mass shootings are likely to exceed the total number of days in this year.

In his sermon, Rabbi Limmer acknowledges that we must confront our sins and failings when it comes to gun violence and mass shootings. But he also says we cannot hide from the truth taught by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: "some are guilty, all are responsible." He continued by reminding his congregation that it is not enough to acknowledge wrong, but we must also resolve to change our ways. While none of us is likely guilty of killing or injuring someone by gun violence, we are responsible for our actions to reduce such senseless violence.

Rabbi Limmer suggests that our most effective response might be to follow the path set forth by this "massacre generation" themselves. They are taking action. They have a plan and are leading even though they know the enormity of the problem. He gives a number of examples of people in that generation who have stepped forward to lead a new movement. They need our help, our presence and our support. Furthermore, since many of these youth are too young to vote, we also need to support them with our vote.

Rabbi Limmer concludes his message with these words: "Let us change our hearts and turn them towards our children, so they can change the future. If we burdened

them with the moniker 'Massacre Generation,' let us allow them to become instead the leaders who earn the title, 'Defenders of the City,' of the nation, of the world. ... Let us help them create the world of peace and wholeness they envision."

Rabbi Amanda Greene, the associate rabbi and colleague of Rabbi Limmer, also gave a sermon as a part of the Yom Kippur services. She confessed that she no longer feels comfortable and safe in the worship space. For most of her life the word "antisemitism" was about historical events of the past like the pogroms in Europe and the Shoah or Holocaust. There were also local, less-violent versions, like restricted country clubs and signs prohibiting Jews. She told of her Nana pointing out an area where she grew up on the Chicago North Shore, and where there used to be a sign that said, "No dogs. No Jews."

But more recent events in Europe and America leading to violent attacks have been unnerving. The largest mass synagogue shooting in American history occurred in Pittsburgh, and it was followed by over 500 antisemitic incidents in schools and Jewish institutions.

Rabbi Greene proposes three ways of response.

First, stand up and speak out.

It may sound trite, she says, but our culture is passively absorbing antisemitism and it is becoming normalized. She observes that these attitudes and comments are coming from both the extreme right and the extreme left, and we cannot make excuses from where ever it might emerge. It is about saying out loud and clear, "I will not accept a society in which hateful language pervades. I will not live in a world in which people are unkind to one another for any reason, no less the religion they practice."

Second, build bridges.

"We cannot fight antisemitism alone, we need allies." The shooter at Tree of Life Synagogue hated immigrants as well. He wrote on social media against the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society. The shooter at the Chabad Synagogue in Poway, California, had been previously charged with setting a fire at a mosque.

"He didn't just hate Jews, he hated Muslims too," Greene points out. We must not stand by when any form of hatred is directed toward any group of people. She says, "It is our obligation to prevent the demonization of the Other in our society."

Third, show up.

Following the attack at the Tree of Life Synagogue, there was a great community response by Jewish and non-Jewish people to express solidarity and declare "hate will not destroy us."

In the past few weeks, there has been vandalism and antisemitic posters pasted to the door of Temple Emanuel here in our own Grand Rapids community. Fortunately, no one was hurt or injured, but it is a reminder that no community is free from hate.

We stand by our Jewish brothers and sisters, as well as the Muslims, Sikhs and others, including immigrants who are the targets of hate and violence. By standing up against hate, we also work together to prevent violence. We build bridges by getting to know those in our community that may not look like us or worship like us, while affirming all as children of God.

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