

[Reflections on the Tragedy in Pittsburgh...and Beyond--blog by Rabbi Marc D. Angel](#)

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Sholom Aleichem wrote a story about a Jewish young man who was conscripted into the Russian army, and was trained how to use his rifle "At the firing line the sergeant noticed Yechiel shooting up in the air instead of ahead; he poured a flood of curses and abuse on his head, with all the worst names for Jews in Russian to boot, and showed him where to aim his gun. A little later the sergeant again saw Yechiel aiming up in the air. This time he was flabbergasted: What, he wanted to know, was the matter with that crazy Jewish soldier? Hadn't he told Yechiel where to aim his gun? 'Yes,' Yechiel replied, 'but there are people there!'"

This seemingly amusing story points to a serious truth. When people see each other as fellow human beings, it is difficult to shoot at them. To engage in violent action first requires a process of dehumanization of the victim. People need to be trained to hate the "enemy," to see the other as a villain unworthy of life.

The root of hatred in our society—in all human societies—arises with the planting of seeds of mistrust, fear and vilification of those deemed as "the enemy." Once the victims are dehumanized, violent action against them becomes possible. There's no need to show mercy on people who are now deemed to be vermin.

Jews know as well as anyone—probably better than anyone—how dangerous it is to become victimized by haters. Once the hatred seeps in, violent words and actions follow. Once people come to dehumanize others, they become capable of acting against them with egregious cruelty.

It is impossible to ignore the growing polarizations within our society today. The level of hateful discourse has led to increasing acts of violence, including the tragic murder of Jews in their synagogue in Pittsburgh by a hate-filled anti-Semite.

This one murderer's heinous deed reflects a much broader and deeper malaise within America—the dehumanization and demonization of people perceived to be the "enemy." We Jews certainly feel the pain of this phenomenon...but so do almost all people who are targets of one hate group or another. There are those who demonize Jews, blacks, whites, Hispanics, Asians, Christians, Muslims, immigrants, homosexuals...the list goes on. Because

hatred is aimed at virtually everyone, virtually everyone needs to rise and resist it. Demonization of any one group threatens the moral fabric of society as a whole.

While we grieve the terrible tragedy and loss of life in Pittsburgh, we should also take heart from the thousands of people of all backgrounds who stood strong with the Jewish community. We witness a profound idealism and sense of solidarity on the part of those who refuse to surrender to dehumanization.

Various national studies have shown that Jews are among the most highly regarded groups in the United States. People feel more warmly toward the Jews than toward most other American religious denominations. People appreciate that Jews generally are highly educated, highly involved in social justice, highly engaged in the betterment of society. We cannot ignore the haters, but we also must not forget those many millions with whom we have warm and very positive relationships.

We cry at the murder of innocent Jews in their synagogue. We cry at the manifestations of anti-Semitism in our land.

But crying isn't really enough. We also have to cry out, loudly and clearly: unless society as a whole can address the plague of dehumanization and demonization, all of us—of whatever background—are at risk. Crying out is a responsibility of all people, at all levels of society.

We need to strive for a society where we look into each other's eyes and see a fellow human being. As Yechiel in Sholom Aleichem's story said: There are people there!

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