

Guest column by Debbie Israel – The killing of 11 in a house of worship is an attack on all of us

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Rabbi Debbie Israel

For Jews, Saturday is the Sabbath. When we greet one another on Saturday, we say these words, “Shabbat shalom, Sabbath peace.”

But Saturday, Oct. 27, as Jews gathered in worship at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Penn., there was no Shabbat shalom.

Throughout the United States and indeed the world, we were horrified with the news of what had happened during the most sacred time in Judaism.

Each of us come to our respective sanctuaries to pray, to commune with the Holy One, to be at peace, to share life’s meaning with friends, family, and our faith community.

By definition, a sanctuary is a refuge, a haven, a shelter, a place of safety. But on this past Sabbath, the sanctuary of Tree of Life synagogue was not a haven and not a sukkat shalom, a shelter of peace.

We’ve been told that this was the most hideous and worse attack on Jews in America since its founding.

How can this be? We have well documented evidence that anti-Semitism in America has been rising year after year.

But we also know that when one group is attacked all groups are attacked. When one group suffers all groups suffer.

In recent years we have seen attacks on Muslims, attacks on the undocumented and refugees, attacks on transgender and non-binary and gays and lesbians, attacks on women, attacks on indigenous people and all people of color.

And then they came for Jews. I am a Jew. They came for me. They came for us.

And because this attack was an attack on American values and principles, they came for all of us.

You and me, dear friends of different faiths and races and sexual and gender identifies, over the years we have stood together through each of these attacks and we said in one voice, “We will overcome them!”

This is not the first attack in a place of worship. In fact, on Friday, Oct. 26, an attempt was made to enter a black church in Kentucky.

When that failed, the killer went after two African-Americans in a nearby convenience store and murdered them instead.

And last week we read of repeated bomb threats to our nation's democratic leaders and media.

A week of violence. Violence begetting violence.

In "Words from a Witness," Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Elie Weisel, referring to the biblical story of the destruction of Sodom as a consequence of the inhabitants' evilness, wrote:

"I want you to be as determined as I am to change the culture of bigotry, anti-Semitism, racism, Islamophobia, and all the other "antis" in which we are drowning."

One day a righteous person, came to Sodom; he knew what Sodom was, so he came to save it from sin, from destruction. He preached to the people. "Please do not be murderers, do not be thieves. Do not be silent and do not be indifferent." He went on preaching day after day, maybe even picketing. But no one listened. He was not discouraged. He went on preaching for years. Finally, someone asked him, "Rabbi, why do you do that? Don't you see it is no use?" He said, "I know it is of no use, but I must. And I will tell you why: in the beginning I thought I had to protest and to shout in order to change them. I have given up this hope.

Now I know I must picket and scream and shout so that they should not change me."

Speaking as the spiritual leader of the Jewish community of South Valley, I ask you not to comfort us, not to pray for us, not to offer us sympathy.

I want you to be as determined as I am to change the culture of bigotry, anti-Semitism, racism, Islamophobia, and all the other "antis" in which we are drowning.

Use all of the emotions this hate crime stirred in you to create change in our beloved country.

It is not too late.

Rabbi Debbie Israel is the rabbi of Congregation Emeth in Morgan Hill. She wrote this column for Morgan Hill Life.