


Plus

BREAKING

Williams: The Pittsburgh synagogue massacre is the latest example of hate redoubling in America. Here's how we should respond.

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Adria Scharf was visiting the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington on Saturday, noting to her sister and daughter how the exhibit's examples of anti-Semitism and xenophobia in 1930s America seemed eerily familiar, when she received a text from her husband about the Pittsburgh synagogue massacre.

Scharf, executive director of the Richmond Peace Education Center, is the granddaughter of Viennese Jews who fled the Nazis. Her relatives experienced Kristallnacht, a two-day spasm of violence 80 years ago in which Jewish homes, schools, businesses and synagogues in Germany and Austria were torched or vandalized and nearly 100 Jews were killed by Nazis.

Kristallnacht, or "Crystal Night," named for the broken glass from the smashed properties, presaged the roundup of Jewish residents for the concentration camps.

In the aftermath of the atrocity in Pittsburgh — the killing of 11 worshippers at Tree of Life synagogue — America seems as fragile, if not as broken, as those storefronts in Germany.

"I am deeply troubled by what feels like a growing wave, and a mainstreaming, of lie-filled, conspiracy theory-fueled anti-Semitic and racist hate," Scharf said in an email after I reached out to her. "You can almost taste it in the air."

On Wednesday, two black senior citizens were shot to death at a Kroger near Louisville, Ky., in what is being investigated as a hate crime. Police say suspect Gregory Bush was recorded on video moments earlier trying to forcibly enter a black church.

Saturday's shooting in Pittsburgh was sadly reminiscent of the 2015 massacre of nine black congregants at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., by white supremacist Dylann Roof. It also had parallels to the 2012 mass shooting by white supremacist Wade Michael Page that killed six worshippers at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wis.

Toss in the more than a dozen pipe bombs sent last week to critics of President Donald Trump, and it's easy to feel exhausted, overwhelmed and numb.

Sadly, we can no longer expect the highest reaches of government to be a force for moral clarity and national unity. And our silence and inaction will obtain us neither.

Rabbi Michael Knopf of Temple Beth-El in Richmond's Museum District said his congregation was shocked and shaken by Saturday's massacre.

"Jews carry a lot of intergenerational trauma, and when events like this happen, it awakens that trauma," he said Monday.

But he also sees people energized to redouble their efforts to create a more just world.

Motivation comes from the realization that Pittsburgh shooting suspect Robert Bowers had ranted against a Jewish refugee resettlement agency called HIAS, which had held a National Refugee Shabbat on Oct. 19-20, amid anti-immigration fervor from the White House.

Knopf, 35, said he has always been aware of the persistence of anti-Semitism in America, but the events surrounding last year's Unite the Right rally of white supremacists and Nazis in Charlottesville, where some chanted "Jews will not replace us," shook him out of his complacency.

"When an American is killed by a Nazi in 2017 for the crime of protesting against Nazis, and the president of the United States says there are good people on both sides, of course there's going to be a rise in hate ideology," he said, referring to the death of Heather Heyer.

How should we respond to Saturday's tragedy?

Knopf said voters need to send a message that they won't support leaders "who cannot, at the very least, unambiguously condemn racial bigotry and acts of terrorism."

Scharf and Knopf called for a reinstatement of the national ban on assault weapons, which expired in 2004.

"In Pittsburgh, the shooter was armed with an AR-15 assault rifle and three handguns. The AR-15 is the very same weapon used in the Parkland, Las Vegas, San Bernardino, Newtown, Orlando and Aurora massacres," Scharf said.

Knopf said the mass shootings will continue as long as there's easy access to such weapons.

"I can have armed guards stationed around my building, and it still wouldn't keep us safe," he said.

Jonathan Zur, president and CEO of the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities, said he's grateful to folks who reach out to his organization after an act of hate takes place to volunteer, donate, attend an event or provide support in some other way.

"What I'd like to see is the same level of energy that we see right after a tragedy instead show up a week or a month or a year beforehand," he said.

"How can we mobilize the community to work together to prevent hatred and violence from happening at all? What would happen if we had the resources to ensure that the people perpetrating these awful acts instead were guided years earlier to take a different path?" he asked. "How might our outcomes be different if we passionately practiced solidarity with targeted communities every day, not just after a crisis? I believe we need to engage these questions more and more if we want to see a different outcome."

A common refrain Monday was that we are responsible for one another.

Scharf said we need to build a culture in America “in which we all recognize that we belong to one another. Whatever our cultural, religious, racial differences, ultimately, our well-being is bound together. My well-being depends on yours.”

Scharf and Knopf continue to believe the forces of love are stronger than the forces of hate. “And I know that those of us who believe in multicultural democracy, those of us who know that our diversity makes us stronger, are much, much greater in number than those who want to move our country backwards,” Scharf said. “We are the majority.”

Knopf found comfort in the flowers that were placed on the steps of Temple Beth-El in the aftermath of the Pittsburgh shooting.

“That sort of thing makes me feel safest,” he said of the show of sympathy and solidarity. “That’s been borne out throughout Jewish history: When we have broad and deep relationships throughout the community, that’s when we’re best off.”

Toward that end, the Jewish community must have the back of the African-American community, the Muslim community, Sikhs, Hindus, Hispanics and the LGBT community, he said.

It should go without saying that those groups need to stand by the Jewish community, beyond this moment of crisis.

As for the dominant white Christian community, it must double down on its efforts to befriend and support other communities, Knopf said.

Knopf, a native of Atlanta, recalled that some of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s sharpest critiques were directed at the white Christian moderate.

In his “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” King wrote that he had almost reached the conclusion “that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council-er or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice.”

Today, it would appear that we have neither order nor justice.

“My message for the white Christian moderate is you need to get off the sidelines,” Knopf said. “You’re likely the silent majority, and we need you not to be silent.”

Quoting Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the leading Jewish theologians of the 20th century, Knopf said now is no time for neutrality.

“Either you’re on the side of justice or on the side of injustice,” Knopf said. “There’s not a middle ground.”

Vigil for Pittsburgh victims

When: Tuesday, 7 p.m.

What: community service hosted by the Jewish Federation of Richmond

Where: Weinstein JCC, 5403 Monument Ave., Henrico County