

RECLAIMING THE TREE OF LIFE

By Rabbi Susan Leider, Congregation Kol Shofar

Etz hayyim hi l'mahazikim ba, v'tomheha m'ushar

D'rakhehah darkhei noam v'khol netivoteha shalom. . .

Proverbs 3:18

On October 28, at 9:20 am, I heard the news, just before beginning a musical service. I sang these words at the end of the Torah service, but I was really just barely holding it together.

On October 29, 650 people gathered in our sanctuary for a candlelight vigil, and I heard the words again, spoken by a dear colleague Reverend Rob McClellan of Westminster Presbyterian Church:

It is tree of life to them that hold fast to it; those who support it are happy.

My tears flowed. Hearing him speak these words that usually bring so much joy, now brought me so much pain. And yet, I felt comforted by hearing the words of Proverbs ring out in our sanctuary.

On Wednesday, my weekly skype study partner and I found solace in studying these verses together. As we studied, I felt myself recoil from this text – how could I teach this text now? For me, this text needs to be reclaimed from the grips of death and destruction that took place in the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh.

But in the very act of study, I felt myself reclaim these words. The 19th century Russian-born commentary, the Malbim, tells us to focus on the two verbs in the text: hold fast and support. There are some who hold fast to the Torah. They clench the Torah; it is a struggle for them. And there are those who support the Torah; they grasp it lightly, agilely.

I have been clenching ever since I heard the news. I have been holding my breath, tightening my jaw, tensing my muscles with anger and disbelief: fighting the reality of what happened. But this teaching urges me to release, to support the Torah rather than clench it, to release my jaw and relax the muscles. I can't keep the tears back; I can't fight the reality of what has happened. I have no choice but to be with it, to mourn with it.

As we face this week ahead, let us release our clenched fists, the muscles that are balled-up in despair. Let us lightly support the Torah, not clench the Torah. May we find the strength to release and breathe, to lean on others. And most of all: that we resist the deceptive notion that we are all alone.