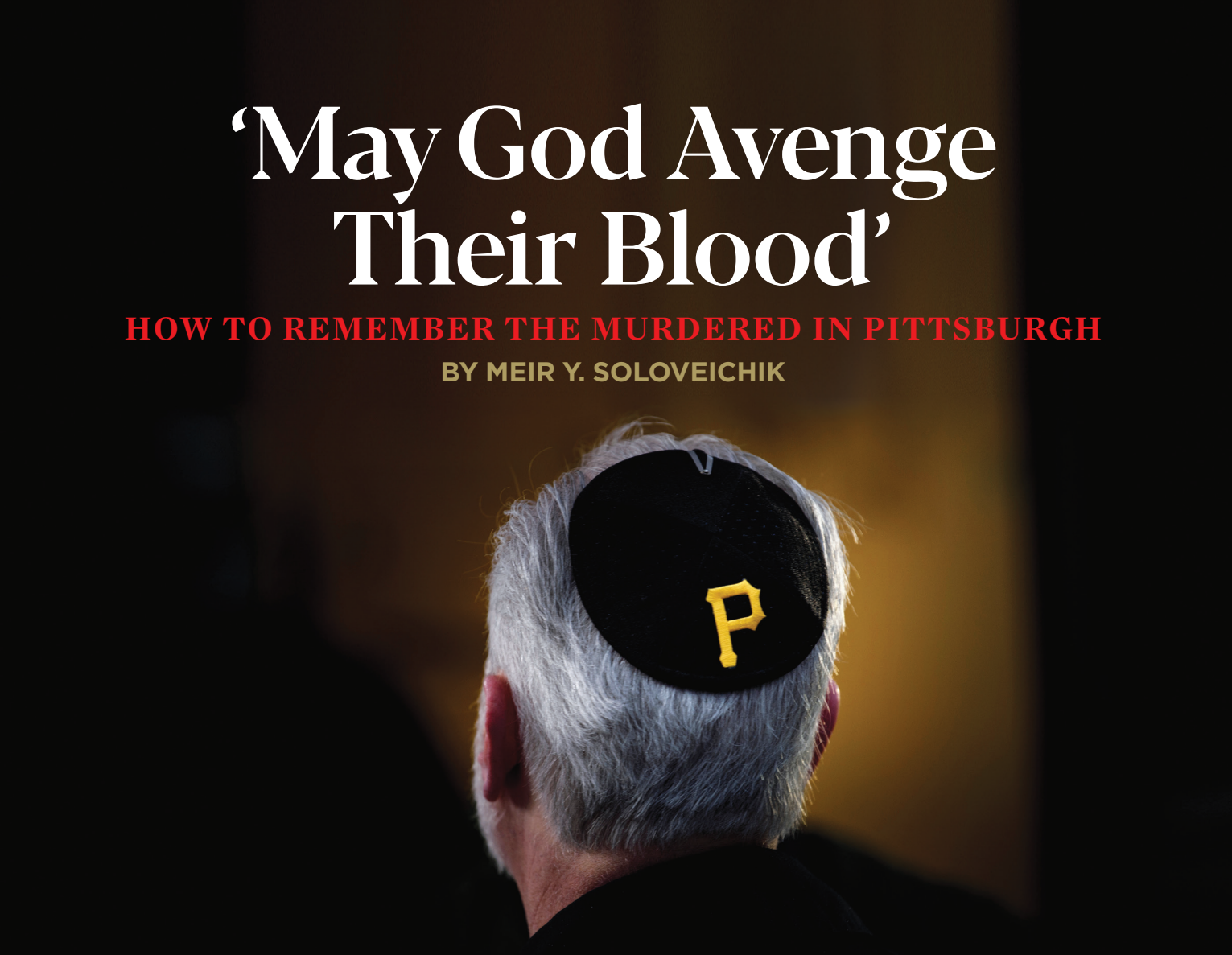
‘May God Avenge Their Blood’

HOW TO REMEMBER THE MURDERED IN PITTSBURGH

BY MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK



Remember what Amalek did unto thee by the way as ye came forth out of Egypt; how he met thee by the way, and smote the hindmost of thee, all that were enfeebled in thy rear, when thou wast faint and weary; and he feared not God. — *Deuteronomy 25*

And the LORD said unto Moses: “Write this for a memorial in the book, and rehearse it in the ears of Joshua: for I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.”

And Moses built an altar, and called the name of it “God is my battle-standard [Adonai nissi]*.”*

And he said: ‘The hand upon the throne of the LORD: the LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation. — *Exodus 17*

AS THE NAMES OF THE JEWS murdered in Pittsburgh were released, many of their co-religionists, responding online to this unthinkable occurrence, looked to Jewish tradition and parlance. “*Zichronam Livracha*,” some of them typed. “May their memories be a blessing.” That is indeed the phrase usually utilized to mark the passing of a Jew, and it was heartfelt. But it was also, in this con-

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK, *who writes our Jewish Commentary column, is the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City and the director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University.*

BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/Getty Images

text, insufficient and therefore inappropriate. When Jews are murdered because they are Jews—by a Nazi in Auschwitz, by a terrorist in Netanya, or by an anti-Semite in Pittsburgh—then the traditional phrase we use is different, and starker.

Hashem Yikom Damam, we say.

May God avenge their blood. The phrase draws on several biblical verses, paralleling the 13th-century prayer known as *Av HaRachamim,* which, commemorating those murdered in the Crusades, cites the Psalms:

> Why should the nations say, "Where is their God?"
> Let it be known among the nations in our sight
> that You avenge the spilled blood of Your servants.
> And it says: "For He who exacts retribution for spilled blood remembers them.
> He does not forget the cry of the humble."

Prayers such as these illustrate something fundamental about Judaism. Memory is central to Jewish life; that is why we pray after any death that the one who has passed should be remembered. Yet when it comes to murdered Jews, our recollection of how they died must be joined forever with a prayer for divine vengeance.

Why is this so?

The saying reflects the fact that when it comes to mass murderers, Jews do *not* believe that we must love the sinner while hating the sin; in the face of egregious evil, we will *not* say the words ascribed to Jesus on the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." We believe that a man who shoots up a synagogue knows well what he does; that a murderer who sheds the blood of helpless elderly men and women knows exactly what he does; that one who brings death to those engaged in celebrating new life knows precisely what he does. To forgive in this context is to absolve; and it is, for Jews, morally unthinkable.

But the mantra for murdered Jews that is *Hashem Yikom damam* bears a deeper message. It is a reminder to us to see the slaughter of 11 Jews in Pennsylvania not only as one terrible, tragic moment in time, but as part of the story of our people, who from the very beginning have had enemies that sought our destruction. There exists an eerie parallel between Amalek, the tribe of desert marauders that assaulted Israel immediately after the Exodus, and the Pittsburgh murderer. The Amalekites are singled out by the Bible from among the enemies of ancient Israel because in their hatred for the Chosen people, they attacked the weak, the stragglers, the helpless, those who posed no threat to them in any way. Similarly, many among the dead in Pittsburgh were elderly or disabled; the murderer smote "all that were enfeebled," and he "feared not God." Amalek, for Jewish tradition, embodies evil incarnate in the world; we are commanded to remember Amalek, and the Almighty's enmity for it, because, as Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik explained, the biblical appellation refers not only to one tribe but also to our enemies throughout the ages who will follow the original Amalek's example. To say *Hashem Yikom damam* is to remind all who hear us that there is a war against Amalek from generation to generation—and we believe that, in this war, God is not neutral.

It is therefore inappropriate to merely say "may their memories be a blessing." We must treat these kinds of murders differently from most deaths; to do otherwise is to ignore Jewish life, Jewish tradition, and the Jewish historical experience. In her *Atlantic* article "The Jews of Pittsburgh Bury Their Dead," Emma Green describes the process of *tahara*, the ritual of washing dead bodies before burial, as well as the society known as the *chevra kadisha*, the "sacred colleagues," members of the Jewish community who answer the call to bury our brethren, as emotionally searing as it may be. She writes:

> When one person dies, members of the Jewish community often step in to care for the body and the family. When 11 people die, the whole community becomes part of the mourning process. The logistics are complicated. Eleven bodies have to be accompanied, washed, and buried. Eleven funerals have to be planned. Families move into an intensive period of mourning, called *shiva*, that lasts for up to seven days after the burial.

Green's description is beautiful and her intent admirable, but the picture she paints is incomplete. "If an Israelite is found slain," we are informed by the *Shulhan Arukh*, the Jewish code of law, "they bury him as they found him, without shrouds, and they do not even remove his shoes." As the Pittsburgh rabbi heading the *chevra kadisha* told *Tablet*, "if the bodies are being buried in their original condition, then there

is no *tahara*." Rather, he said, "they are buried in the clothes in which they died." If we are able, if autopsies do not intervene, we bury murdered Jews in the clothes soaked in their blood that was shed.

The intent, in part, is to highlight the fact that they died *because* they were Jews, and to inspire constant recollection of their murder, to inspire eternal outrage, on the part of the Jewish people—and on the part of God himself. To mark the memory of the murdered as a blessing, without speaking of just and righteous vengeance, is to treat them as anyone else who may have died; it is to forget the fact that they died before their time and that their lives were cruelly cut short solely because of the people and faith to which they belonged.

For Jews in America, thank God, the world of the auto-da-fé does not exist, and rarely have Jews been safer in their history than they are at this moment. But Amalek has not been defeated. When the news from Pittsburgh broke, Jewish and Gentile Americans alike invoked George Washington's words to the Jews of Newport: "May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants—while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid."

Washington loved the phrase "under his own vine and fig tree." It is from the Hebrew Bible, and he used it often. The fact that this country's first president applied imagery from a Jewish text to the people whose ancestors wrote those words tells us a great deal about the blessed home that Jews found, and continue to find, here in America. Yet the context of the quote, from the prophet Micah, reminds us that we do not *yet* live in an age where nothing can make us afraid:

> But in the end of days it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established as the top of the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills; and peoples shall flow unto it. And many nations shall go and say: "Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, and to the house of the God of Jacob; and He will teach us of

TO MARK THE MEMORY of the murdered as a blessing, without speaking of just and righteous vengeance, is to treat them as anyone else who may have died; it is to forget the fact that they died before their time and that their lives were cruelly cut short solely because of the people and faith to which they belonged.

IT IS WITH THIS IN MIND that we must mourn the murdered Jews of Pittsburgh—by treating their murder as an act of evil that is an Amalekite example in our age. As my own community, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York, prepared to memorialize those slaughtered in the attack, it was suggested to me that we utilize the text of a medieval memorial prayer said by Sephardic Jews on behalf of those who died in the Inquisition's auto-da-fé. Thus, one week after Pittsburgh, we used words written to remember Jews burned alive in Toledo 500 years ago to mourn the deaths of Jews shot to death in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the 21st century. We thereby connected recent deaths of Jews to Amalek's assaults throughout history—from the desert after the Exodus, to Torquemada, to today.

> His ways, and we will walk in His paths"; for out of Zion shall go forth the Torah, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem…and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig-tree; and none shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts hath spoken.

The world Micah describes is not yet upon us. Peace does not reign on earth, and the nations of the world have not all celebrated the Jewish connection to God, to the Torah, to Jerusalem. Nothing could illustrate this better than the fact that Micah's words, paralleled in Isaiah, predicting an age when swords are beaten into plowshares, grace the wall outside the United Nations—while inside the building, dictators and modern Amalekites are welcomed to inveigh from the podium. Evil still exists, and as long as it does, the Lord is still at war—from generation to generation.

We know, and we pray, that the memory of those 11 murdered will be a blessing. The eulogies described remarkable human beings who were dedicated to their people, and to their neighbors. And we must remember their deaths in an exceptional fashion, never forgetting that they were murdered because—and only because—they were Jews. This fact will be forever on our minds, and on our lips, whenever we make mention of Daniel Stein, Joyce Feinberg, Richard Gottfried, Rose Mallinger, Jerry Rabinowitz, Cecil Rosenthal, David Rosenthal, Bernice Simon, Sylvan Simon, Melvin Wax, and Irving Younger.

Hashem Yikom Damam.