

Being an Ally

Shabbat Balak 5781

June 25, 2021

Rabbi Barry H. Block

The presence of allies is powerful, particularly when one is frightened and in a difficult or threatening situation. At Congregation B'nai Israel, we experienced that power palpably on Monday evening, October 29, 2018, two days after the Tree of Life Synagogue massacre in Pittsburgh. Yes, our congregation and other members of the Jewish community turned out for our memorial service, but that was not the reason we had to open the back wall to accommodate the largest crowd ever gathered for a service in this building. The presence of our allies—Christians, Muslims, people of other faiths and no faith from across our community, including but by no means limited to elected officials, clergy, and other community leaders—was deeply comforting to us at a horrible time.

More recently, some Jewish people have complained that many of our friends were absent as antisemitism again reared its ugly head in the wake of Israel's armed conflict with Hamas terrorists. We do not expect everybody to agree with us about Israel's actions—heck, we don't agree among ourselves—but no mental gymnastics are required even for critics of the Occupation to speak out against attacks such as those described by the *New York Times* in late May: “A brick shattering a window of a kosher pizzeria on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Jewish diners outside a sushi restaurant in Los Angeles attacked by men shouting anti-Semitic threats. Vandalism in synagogues in Arizona, Illinois and New York.”ⁱ

Maharat Rori Picker Neiss is the Executive Director of the Jewish Community Council of St. Louis. For clarification, “Maharat” is a term preferred by some Orthodox women rabbis. In the spring, as many Jews were bemoaning our allies' silence, Maharat Picker Neiss argued that we must tell our allies what we need, rather than simply expecting them to show up for us on their own. And then, she proved her point: She invited a broad spectrum of St. Louis leaders to speak out against antisemitism. And they came. In droves. At a press conference on Thursday, June 1, one of the speakers, Rev. Rodrick Burton of New Northside Missionary Baptist Church, proclaimed: “Anti-Semitism, just as racism in America, ... must be stamped out, must be corrected and must be stopped. I ... stand with the Jewish community and we're asking you to stop hate. We must stop hate.”ⁱⁱ

Locally, we did ask our interfaith partners to show up in the wake of Pittsburgh, and they did. We did not ask again this spring—in part because of my

judgment that most of our local Jewish community was unaware of the problem—and we therefore have no standing to complain about our allies’ quiescence.

I am often invited to be present and to lend my voice locally when other individuals and groups are imperiled. If I am unavailable, I am grateful that Justice Annabelle Imber Tuck is willing and widely recognized as an equally appropriate representative of our community.

Before I continue, I should explain what I mean by “other individuals and groups.” I define that narrowly as people who are threatened for some reason other than that they are Jewish. Gay and lesbian people, transgender folks, immigrants, Black Americans, and others of a variety of ethnicities are members of our congregation, as are women and others who can bear children. Therefore, allyship with LGBT, antiracist, immigration, and reproductive justice groups is not merely about advocating for “others.” In these cases, “they” are “us.” At other times, such as when Muslim Americans are on the firing line, we are asked to be there for groups that do not include our own congregants.

My policy for allyship on these occasions is to follow the lead of those who are most impacted by the injustice we have banded together to fight. In the words of Imani Chapman and Rabbi Ellen Lippmann, the ally’s “job is to become knowledgeable ... in [the] experience [of the directly impacted group], to become more cognizant of contributing factors from *our* cultural heritage, and to lend labor and power to the endeavor.”ⁱⁱⁱ Just as Maharat Picker Neiss called interfaith leaders together to speak out against antisemitism, and they did so in the format she arranged, when I am asked to combat discrimination, I strive to do so in ways that are requested by leaders of groups harmed by that injustice. To cite a potent example, three years ago, when leaders of the Arkansas Poor People’s Campaign asked me to submit to arrest for civil disobedience, I did not spend much time or thought evaluating whether that strategy was cogent or effective. Showing up for the people in need took precedence. When I was asked to rally the troops with a spiritual message on the steps of Little Rock Central High School, agitating for an end to the racist state takeover of our local school district and particularly against a plan to divide it, I did so when and where I was asked, even though that was only an hour after our Yom Kippur Break-Fast. More quietly, a year ago, invited by the local leaders I trust most in the struggle for racial justice, Senator Joyce Elliott and Rev./Dr. Anika Whitfield, I lent no more than my presence to a Covid-safe and entirely peaceful interfaith clergy gathering around the 12th Street police station, in the wake of George Floyd’s murder.

I raise this topic tonight for three reasons, the first being the one with which I began, the recent controversy over responses to antisemitism.

The second is that this Shabbat is the last of Pride Month. We celebrated Pride last Shabbat; but, as is our custom, members of the LGBTQ+A Chavurah spoke, not I. Still, I want to note that last week’s sermon was a terrific example of allyship. Yes, one of the speakers is the Chavurah’s leader and a gay man, but Meg’s and Tim’s topic was gender identity, and neither of them identifies as transgender or nonbinary. Still, they have engaged with nonbinary and transgender congregants significantly, sought their input, and lent their voices and relative power to the struggle of others in a way that was appreciated by those most impacted.

Finally, we read this Shabbat about the most reluctant of allies, the sorcerer Balaam, who is initially commissioned by Balak, King of Moab, to curse the Israelites. As Balaam explains to Balak why he cannot deliver the bought-and-paid-for curse, he references what Chapman and Lippman might call “his own cultural heritage,” deriding his own profession as a sorcerer, proclaiming: “No harm is in sight for Jacob, No woe in view for Israel. The Eternal their God is with them, and their King’s acclaim in their midst...Lo, there is no augury in Jacob, No divining in Israel: Jacob is told at once, Yea Israel, what God has planned.”^{iv}

Ultimately, Balaam raises his voice in unqualified praise: *Mah tovu ohalecha Ya’akov, mishk’notecha Yisrael*, “How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel!”^v The medieval commentator Sforno suggests that Balaam is now all-in: He praises not only the Israelites’ homes—that is, their “tents”—but also their *mishk’not*, translated “dwellings,” but which Sforno understands as referring to our synagogues.^{vi} Therefore, we sing these words at morning worship, having come from homes blessed by an ally and entered the similarly-blessed synagogue.

The words of a reluctant, even coerced, ally continue to be sacred to our people today. How much more may that be true, when we bring ourselves, body and soul, to the causes of justice that need our voices today.

Amen.

ⁱ Ruth Graham and Liam Stack, “U.S. Faces Outbreak of Anti-Semitic Threats and Violence,” *The New York Times*, May 26, 2021.

ⁱⁱ “Local leaders speak out about anti-Semitism,” *STL Jewish Light*, June 2, 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ Imani Romney-Rosa Chapman and Rabbi Ellen Lippman, “Shedding Light on Solidarity” A Candle Loses Nothing by Lighting Another Candle,” as-yet unpublished manuscript, *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, Rabbi Barry H. Block, Editor, forthcoming from CCAR Press

^{iv} Numbers 23:21, 23-24.

^v Numbers 24:5

^{vi} Sforno to Numbers 24:5.