

Tree of Life

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It was gray the day I heard the news. In a coffee shop at 10th and Waldkirch, I watched as teardrops ran down the windows that kept me safe inside. The trees in the distance burned orange against the cotton ball sky. Everything was soaked.



I had wished to get away from campus that day. Over the past few months, I had learned that the numerous distractions of my suite were not compatible with a planner full of assignments with rapidly approaching deadlines. So, I started that Saturday early and made my way to my favorite study spot. Trying my best to shield myself from the rain, I ran inside, hood up. Upon entering, I shook off the sprinkles and ordered a large coffee. I found the perfect place to sit, a low table near the window where I could observe the storm outside, the rain rolling off the leaves of the trees, and the people that shuffled inside through the door with the little bell.

Out of the ground the Lord God made grow every tree that was delightful to look at and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden.



From my table, I could see the rain outside was picking up. I watched as a young couple ran through the storm to an awning on a nearby building. After looking at one another, they began to laugh at how drenched they were. I have always enjoyed seeing people in love. The sparkle in their eyes, the gentle touch on the shoulder, the way one looks at the other out of the corner of their eye. I have always thought that there is something about love that reveals to us a greater mystery of truth and beauty and goodness. Something about love unites all of us. Something about love shows us why we are.

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.



It is after 3pm. I plug in my headphones to take a short break before gearing up for the next task on my list. I open up the NPR One app and listen to the most recent National Newscast update. "Live from NPR News in Washington," the host breathes into the microphone. "Breaking news," she says next.

That day, eleven lives were lost. Eleven innocent lives made their way to the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania for prayer and fellowship, to be with God and His people. Eleven innocent lives didn't return home. Instead, those eleven lives ended.

The serpent beguiled me, and I ate it.



Sunday nights, I sit in the pews of Benton Chapel before the 9pm Mass. I arrive early to allow my thoughts time to settle down, to clear my head of all the busyness of the day. What a gift it is to have a place where God most gently and tenderly comes to meet us. There is no place on Earth more home than the Mass.

It is strange, then, that these days my thoughts are not peaceful. They are not different than the ones I have outside. Rather than being able to focus on the good, I find myself wondering if someone will come in with a gun. I turn pages and I see news article after news article about shootings in sacred places.

Sutherland Springs, Texas. Baptist.

New York City, New York. Muslim.

Charleston, South Carolina. African Methodist Episcopal.

Overland Park, Kansas. Jewish.

Oak Creek, Wisconsin. Sikh.

Nashville, TN. Church of Christ.

I am shocked that the thought of being massacred does not come as more of a surprise. I wonder what I would do if it happened. Would I fall to the ground, hiding behind the tall columns or the wooden pews? Would I try to stop the shooter, would I be brave enough, angry enough? Would I protect others or myself? In my prayer, I tell God that I love Him, for it is love that allows us to move forward. I ask that He give me the strength and the boldness to stand up for Him in an hour of darkness.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?



Two years earlier, I found my home in the Church. It became my place of sanctuary, of retreat, of shelter. I found real Truth here. I felt the yearnings of my heart slow down, as they had finally discovered what it was they were looking for. Although I am still without all the answers, although I still have many questions, I cannot deny the peace that envelops my heart, the peace that comes with knowing I am loved eternally.

There is freedom in knowing that you are enough. There is freedom in relationship with God. There is freedom and safety in this place, in this Church. There is freedom and peace in knowing that God is enough.

It is disturbing to think that not many people live with this freedom, this peace. It is disturbing to think that many Jews no longer feel this peace at their synagogue. It is disturbing to think that eleven no longer feel anything.

She is a tree of life to those who grasp her, and those who hold her fast are happy.



In class, my teacher read us a poem. A “Poem Without an End.” She said that sometimes we cannot make sense of the world in any way other than in writing, in any way other than in using the words we have left in our distraught minds. I sat with my eyes closed, trying to make sense of the world with Yehuda Amichai’s words.

“Inside the brand-new museum there’s an old synagogue,” she began.

Inside the synagogue
is me.
Inside me
my heart.
Inside my heart
a museum.
Inside the museum
a synagogue, inside it
me,
inside me

my heart,
inside my heart
a museum.ⁱ

I remember wishing that we lived in a world without vigils. I wished that we lived in a world where they weren't necessary. I wished that I were more surprised by the Tree of Life shooting. I wished that I were more sensitized to the loss of eleven lives. How far gone are we?

The Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?"



All is dark, save for the faint glow of the candle that illuminates the cold and empty space. I lay facedown on the wood floor in the upstairs chapel, one arm folded beneath me, my head resting in the soft fold of my elbow. My hair gently tickles my forehead. I can hear the rumble of midnight, city traffic roaring from outside the window. Tonight I find myself here as I have many nights before. The comfort of Frassati House, sitting just off campus, has made it one of the places in which I most feel at home. The people, the laughter, the chapel, the silence.

In here, it is quiet and I breathe deep and slow. I feel each inch of myself resting, letting go of the weight that has spent weeks on my shoulders. It is hard to live in the world, especially one with so much evil. I can't help but think that we were not made for this. I see no circumstance in which we were created for evil, no circumstance in which we can't escape from it. Isn't it empty to believe that humanity only exists from one moment to the next? I can't help but think that we have strayed much too far from the good life we were meant to live.

In here, my mind is free and clear, and I am able to think. I can't shake the thought that this is where I want to be forever. I want to rest in the Truth that there is something more. In here, I feel that Truth with each inch of my being. In here, I feel held, known, and comforted by invisible arms and heart. I feel as though I have come to understand the inmost depths of my person, the parts that long for more, that long for what I cannot see way out there in the spaces beyond the world. And in here, I experience an ounce of what is surely awaiting me and it is very good. I want to stay here forever and just *be*.

This is the only place that I can wrestle with the evil outside. The quiet, the Presence, the whispers in the dark. God is surely with me in here, comforting me, preparing me for battle.

When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you set in place – what is man that you are mindful of him?



It was sunny the day we came together. It was three-thirty on a Monday afternoon, and the sun was shining brighter than it had in several days. Three hundred of us gathered close in the grass outside of Buttrick Hall, sharing with one another the white sheets of prayers passed around by the Chabad chaplain and rabbi. As the vigil ceremony began, I closed my eyes. I gave thanks to God for having brought me there. I thanked Him that in the midst of so much hate and injustice, we could find peace in one another's company and support. A light breeze tickled my skin, and I gave thanks for the ability to stop and recognize the gift of the present moment.

"If there is one thing we can take with us from here," began the chaplain, "your acts of goodness and kindness, your acts of reaching across the divide to stop looking at the others as an 'other,' will heal this world." Where are we? Where have we gone? When will we learn that the people of this world are of eternal importance? When will we learn to heal instead of break, to love instead of hate? It is easy to be bogged down by these thoughts, but in moments like these, God shows us that all is not lost, that there is still goodness in the world.

"You and I are here and alive right now because the world needs healing, and you and I are its healers."

At the end of the ceremony, the rabbi explained that in the Jewish tradition after someone dies, it is customary to donate to charity on their behalf, since they themselves are no longer able to give. He took a bowl of pennies and began to pass it around. "Take eleven," he said. "One for every life that was lost on Saturday. Take each penny, donate it, and remember that life is a precious gift." After the bowl made its way to me, I took eleven pennies and squeezed them together in my palm. I stuffed my hands in my jacket pockets and turned the bronze coins over and over and over and over.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.



When I arrived back at my dorm, I set each penny on my desk, heads-up. Each day, the sight of their faces reminds me to live a little more in the present and to experience the fullness of the healing and love that is waiting for me.

The fruit of justice is a tree of life.



ⁱ *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* (The University of California Press, 1996).