



Jewish Educational Wisdom,
Experience & Leadership

Selections recommended for High Holidays:

Dan Leger's First Person Account

&

Reconstructionist Congregation

Dor Hadash's Statement

as found in:

First Person Accounts of the Squirrel Hill Massacre

October 27, 2018

These accounts can be shared in conjunction with a Powerpoint with corresponding slides.

**Compiled and Edited
by Rabbi Erin Hirsh**



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Squirrel Hill is the neighborhood in which my parents raised me to be a proud Jewish woman with liberal Democratic values. I thought it was such an extraordinary place that I wrote my college thesis about American Jewish identity in Squirrel Hill. Dor Hadash is the congregation in which I fell in love with Reconstructionist Judaism and decided to become a rabbi. It is the community that held my family as my father died in 2018 and supported us as we mourned in the months that followed.

On October 27, 2018, a family friend was murdered, another was shot in the abdomen. In the wake of the massacre, I was awed by the wisdom and eloquence of so many people touched by this experience. I created this collection of first person accounts to capture some of that. I also wanted to create a vehicle for individuals touched by the massacre to share their experiences, thoughts and feelings on their own terms rather than having their ideas and feelings co-opted in support of any kind of political agenda.



DOR HADASH | דור חדש
PITTSBURGH'S RECONSTRUCTIONIST COMMUNITY

[Slide 2]



This photograph was taken on the happy day in 2010 when members of Congregation Dor Hadash carried its Torah Scrolls through the streets of Squirrel Hill to the congregation's new home at Tree of Life synagogue. The man on the left in a pink shirt is my father, Charles Hirsh z"l.

Anyone is welcome to use any of the materials I have prepared.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Erin Hirsh



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After 5 and a half months recuperating from a gunshot wound to his abdomen, Dan Leger spoke publicly for the first time at a televised town hall about mass shootings with survivors of both the Parkland and the Pittsburgh massacres. The transcript below features Dan's remarks.

<https://www.wtae.com/article/replay-project-community-town-hall-parkland-to-pittsburgh-stronger-together/27088062>

Dan Leger [Slide 24]

Minute 5:09:

Since the shooting, Dan [Leger] has endured surgery after surgery. Today, he is sharing his story for the first time publicly. To Dan and our guests, we say thank you for being part of this conversation today. Dan, we will begin with you and we are honored and grateful you are here today. Hearing Rabbi Ron talk about the Center for Loving Kindness, talking to people who know you and love you, everything you have done in your life is caring for neighbors in need. The Center for Loving Kindness is founded on the concept of don't stand idle when you see a neighbor bleeding. Since this is your first time talking about what happened on October 27, can you tell us what happened to you that day in what you're comfortable discussing?

Dan: I remember many things from that day until I lost consciousness at the hospital. There are two things that are really prominent in my memory of that morning. One, the juxtaposition of such a wonderful getting together of all the people who usually come to that place on a Saturday morning to pray. To be there for this cause in the other thing is the juxtaposition of the awfulness of what ensued in a place of peace in which nothing like that should ever occur. I remember my friend Jerry, of blessed memory, and I and my friend Marty, preparing for services that morning. We heard what was going on. We heard the gunshots. Jerry and I looked at each other and Jerry was a physician. I'm a nurse. Our instinct is to help others. So we probably went in exactly the wrong direction, to try to help those who needed help. Jerry is gone. I'm here.



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I also remember, after I was shot, lying on the steps and a feeling of peace that I have been blessed with a wonderful life that is coming to an end. That I'm dying and I took that time to review all the wonderful people in my life with whom I've been blessed to be loved by and to love. The prayer of unity of us with our creator. I also remember the voice of our helpers when Dr. Keith Murray and the paramedic, whose name I only know as Justin, came into the building and walked by me. I remember grabbing someone's leg. It was Justin. I remember him saying there is one alive here. And the gratitude I felt, the helpers are here, we are not alone and how that has radiated out for the last five and a half months in terms of the helpers that are so much a part of our community and so much a part of this healing process that brings us all together in a way that none of us wish we would have to be here for. But in such gratitude that we are.

So many people at the JCC have been talking about how great it is to see you again at the shabbat dinner you offered for prayer and there were smiles, people so happy you are here. Happy to see Andrea as well. You have formed a relationship with Andrea. She is in our audience tonight as well. Talk about how important it was for you and Andrea to meet with our new friends from Parkland.

Dan: I never really knew Andrea as a friend. But I knew her every Saturday morning because she would come to *shul* with her mother and it was part of them -- part of the ritual and the predictability to see Andrea and her mother and to know that they would be there. There are bonds that are created through beautiful experiences and happy experiences and bonds created through horrific experiences that we have an obligation to turn into something of use. We can't make them happy but we have to make them of use. I'm just so thankful to have brought Andrea and Ron into my life in a way that I did not before and I'm looking forward to our friendship blossoming over the time that we have.

Minute 28:

Dan, how do you find god when something like this happens? How do you do that with a community that is struggling dealing with these violent acts?

God can handle it so we don't have to worry about being angry with God. God is used to it. I'm convinced the people who do these awful things missed the point of love your neighbor as



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yourself because they don't love themselves and in order to love your neighbor as yourself you have to love yourself first and you have to find that within yourselves. There are so many opportunities for us to be connected through social media and other electronic means -- and electronic means. That does not mean the real connection between people is there all the time. The social isolation that people experience in our culture in the presence of such potential and opportunity for people to connect with each other is really ironic. So we got to create those opportunities for people, one on one, to be able to reach out and extend our love. Hope that the other person will see that love and to get back to your original question, that is what God is all about. God is not a person that pulls puppet strings. God gives us the potential to be the best that we are and indoor the worst that can befall us - and to endure the worst that could befall us.

Minute 40:

Dan, you spent your career as a nurse. Part of your career was serving as a hospice nurse. Kathy Samuels was telling me the story about how compassionate you were to her father in his final time. What you experienced - since October of 27, has to change the way you look at other people. Do you emphasize anything differently when you care for them compassionately?

Dan: I think it has reinforced it. We all make this strange journey of life we have to find our way through it and we can't find our way through it alone. We need our neighbors to be able to help us in every conceivable way. Some of those ways we are not even aware of. So reaching out to others, there was a question asked a couple of minutes ago about how we can make a difference one on one to paraphrase the question. I cannot believe the comforter got from the cards I received from people around the world who might never met. They never met me but when you hear that somebody in Homewood was shot to death find out and address or church address, send them a card. Reach out. It means something. So much to people that somebody cared enough to sit down for five minutes, put a stamp on an envelope. That kind of human contact is part of the accompaniment that we all need to give each other through this life.



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Minute 47:10

I want you to meet Barry Werber. I wanted to take a look at what he's wearing. We will show this, the Stronger than Hate shirt but also the Air Force veteran. We thank you for your service. You are also a survivor of the Tree of Life. What is your question today?

Barry: I have to preface my question. I have gotten an awful lot of outreach from different organizations and individuals, neighbors, friends, a young lady I met 54 years ago. My question is specifically for Daniel, for Ivy. How do you get by being reminded day in and day out, newspapers, television, radio, sleep, of the horror that you went through? I've had professional treatment. I've had friends commiserate with me. But no one knows the feeling unless you've gone through it. How do you do that? That's my question. How do you feel comfortable in a crowd? How do you feel comfortable going into your house of worship? How do you feel comfortable going to a movie theater? How do you stop looking for the first exit? Stop looking for security? How do you go through that? I've talked to people. I can't find out from a fellow survivor how they do it. The people that I know have survived or relatives of those that have died. They don't really want to talk about it. How do you get through it?

Minute 50:55

Dan: I am blessed with a wonderful wife - a wonderful wife. One of the things we did together was go back into the building with the FBI. It was really important to do that and to be able to not be carried out but to walk out, to see the place where I was to verify that reality. To see the place where 11 of my friends are murdered. To have someone stand by me during that and to be able to walk out and together know that this place no longer has power over me. To be able to say that I can forgive this individual for what he did to me but I can't give forgiveness for the murder that he committed. The people capable of that are the people who are dead, they will never be able to forgive him. By forgiveness it does not mean the blame is wiped away. It means we were able to move beyond the event, to let go of the power it has over me, to be able to say you did something that was a really awfully bad choice in life and hopefully you'll be able to find out some day that it was and your eyes will be opened and there is hope for you because you are made in the image of God like I am. But that doesn't



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mean it takes away all of the consequences for someone who needs to be off the streets for the rest of his life.

It gives me the ability to move forward. Gives me the ability to honor the memory of my friends who I lost and continue to move forward every day. Every morning, I get up and I'm glad to be alive. I say a prayer of thanksgiving and I move forward. That is not mean I don't have things that come up during the day. Getting my lapel mic on, it made a noise that made me almost go under my chair. There are things that happen to us that will always remind us in a way that is visceral of what we have been through. But it doesn't need to stop us.

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[Slide 24]

You have stood with us. You have sung with us, prayed with us, grieved with us and raised funds for us. Your support has held us up over the past several weeks and affirmed for us the strength of our Jewish and Pittsburgh Communities.

We were attacked because we are Jews. We condemn the white nationalist ideology the perpetrator embraced, a toxic belief system that promotes anti-Semitism and demonizes non-white immigrants, Muslims, the LGBTQIA+ community, and people of color.

We raise our voices to demand an end to hate speech and the othering of any human beings by anyone, including our elected leaders. We raise our voices to demand rational gun laws to help prevent future tragedies.

This tragedy will forever be a part of our story, but it will not define us. We will move forward and rebuild, not only our congregation, but our country