

LIVINGSTON

From a time of 'family' mourning, a call to build bridges



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The day after a deranged anti-Semite attacked worshippers at a synagogue in Pittsburgh, Rabbi Cliff Kulwin called his congregation together to mourn at Temple B'Nai Abraham in Livingston.

"Jews are a family," he said. "You hurt one part of us, the rest of us all feel it. It is a kind of tribal moment. You hurt my people, my community, my family. You hurt me."

Cliff and his wife, Robin, are good friends. We had dinner together a few nights before the shooting. I've met their children and visited their home, as they have mine. So those words broke my heart.

I wanted to tell him that his family and his tribe matter to me, too, that this gunman hurt me, too. That their grief is shared. That while America is carved up into 100 tribes, the stuff that binds us is strong, too. I should have known he'd get to that. He's not the sort to miss the big picture.

He went on: "While this nasty, foul act of anti-Semitism stands on its own, we cannot view it in isolation. We are, quite literally, in the crosshairs. But so are others. We as a community must take care of ourselves, but we must do our part to take care of everyone assailed by violent bigotry and prejudice; through our activism, our generosity, our love. The more bridges we build, the less we are alone."

I don't want to talk today about gun safety. If you are among the fanatics who insist that every American has a right to military-style rifles with no purpose beyond increasing the body count, I don't know where to even start. We'll pick up that argument another day.

But not today.

Today, I am thinking about Jewish children across New Jersey learning to dive under their desks when they hear the

alarm. I'm thinking about rabbis like Cliff having to show their elderly worshippers where the nearest closet is, so they have a place to hide. Safety training, Jewish leaders said Monday, is in the works.

I'm thinking about Jewish parents teaching their children about the Holocaust for the first time, and then explaining that it's not over, that this ancient hatred lives, that they must be ready. Try to imagine that.

I stumbled when Cliff described this as a "tribal" moment for Jews. That word is attached to President Donald Trump these days, and it's become poisonous.

But Trump's tribalism isn't about loyalty to one's group. It's about whipping up phantom grievances against other groups, like immigrants, journalists or Nancy Pelosi. It's a call to combat. It's not about making America great for all of us.

Cliff was talking about something more benign, a feeling of special loyalty to one's family, one's faith, one's country.

Read history, and you can't deny that tribalism, of some kind, is baked into humanity's DNA. One core question facing America today is what kind of tribalism we will embrace.

We've seen what Trump has to offer. He barely finished offering condolences after the synagogue shooting when he was back on the campaign trail, vilifying his opponents. The migrants are coming, with terrorists hidden among them! Democrats are evil! The FBI is conspiring to overthrow the results of the election! The New York Times is lying!

We don't know if Trump is the inspiration behind any individual act of violence. But when a sick soul hears this stuff, it's not surprising that he might pick up a rifle, or a pipe bomb, and put action behind the president's hateful words. It's not surprising that anti-Semitic attacks jumped by 57 percent during his first year in office.

"The question we must pose," Cliff said on Sunday: "Was it coincidence that it took place now? My own answer is an unequivocal 'no.' There was no coincidence."

"When the most important, loudest voice in American life says of a congressman who assaults a journalist, 'Any guy that can do a body-slam ... he's my kind of guy.' When that same voice repeatedly says, 'Lock her up.' When that same voice witnessing a massive march of loud, aggressive Nazis chanting 'Blood and soil. Jews will not replace us' says that there are 'good people on both sides.'"

"There is no coincidence."

My hope is that Jews across the country feel the love from the rest of us today, just as I hope African-Americans did after the outpouring in 2015, when nine worshippers were mowed down by a white man, nursing the same kind of sickness in his soul, and using the same kind of weapon.

Gov. Phil Murphy rushed to the synagogue to speak Sunday at Cliff's invitation. Also in the audience was Tom Puryear, president of a local chapter of the NAACP.

"Too often, in the 21st century, our communities have drifted apart," Puryear wrote to Cliff on Monday. "The failure to recognize that our fates are intertwined have allowed those who seek our demise the ability to perpetrate crimes against our people."

I don't know what kind of tribalism will carry the day in America. Will it be Trump's brand? Will the divides become even deeper?

I'm scared, to be honest. Sometimes, it feels like we are living in Germany in the 1930s, that things could fall apart. Here's hoping that Americans of good will, from all tribes, push back hard against Trump's brand of tribalism.

So this week, hug a Jewish friend. And next week, vote.