

WAYS OF PEACE Community Resources

Mindful responses to human needs throughout the life cycle

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November 4, 2018

All Through the Night: Reclaiming the Vigil in Times of Trauma

We bury the dead of non-Jews along with the dead of Jews, for these are ways of peace. We console the mourners of non-Jews along with the mourners of Jews, for these are ways of peace. — Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Gittin (~400 CE)



(/service/blog/2018/02/20/honoring-our-dead-mourning-and-organizing)Thirteen Black and Jewish victims of hate-filled gun rampages in Jeffersontown, KY and Pittsburgh, PA were laid to rest over five days last week. The wounded are struggling to recover. Survivors are stunned. Our nation is overwhelmed.

Media concern for **Maurice Stallard and Vickie Lee Jones** (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/friends-family-say-final-goodbyes-jeffersontown-kroger-shooting-victims-n930341>) — of blessed memory — remains inadequate. Please remember "ways of peace" in opening your hearts to mourn and stand with the **survivors in Jeffersontown** (<https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/politics/a24396537/first-baptist-church-jeffersontown-kentucky-sunday-service/>) and **beyond** (<https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/>).

politics/politics/a24396537/first-baptist-church-jeffersontown-kentucky-sunday-service/) and **beyond** (<https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/>).

In Pittsburgh, two *hevra kadisha* / sacred burial fellowship colleagues are among the dead and wounded. **Jerry Rabinowitz** (<https://triblive.com/local/allegheeny/14229764-74/funerals-for-some-synagogue-shooting-victims-underway>) — of blessed memory — was one of the first Pittsburgh victims buried this past week. I am thankful that the condition of **Daniel Leger** (<http://www.post-gazette.com/news/crime-courts/2018/10/27/Pittsburgh-Squirrel-Hill-mass-shooting-survivors-victims-Daniel-Leger-UPMC-chaplain/stories/201810270086>) has been recently upgraded from critical to stable My heart goes out to their families and fellow volunteers of the New Community Chevra Kadisha.

I have long asserted that, when "nothing" can be done, the *hevra kadisha* goes to work. But when a sacred burial fellowship itself is wounded, the broader community must step forward into the breach — as is happening now in Pittsburgh. especially **through vigil-keeping** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/30/us/pittsburgh-crime-scene-jewish-rituals.html>).

And when the cloud lengthened many days over the Tabernacle, the children of Israel kept the vigil of the ETERNAL and did not move on. — Numbers 9:19

(/service/blog/2018/10/11/listening-for-guidance1)The ancient Israelites, camping beneath a great cloud in the wilderness, never knew when the cloud would rise and move them forward — and they never knew when the cloud would again descend and bring them to a sudden halt. While less perceptible, today's clouds of grief and trauma continue to rise and descend beyond our human regulation. As in the biblical wilderness, vigil-keeping can help to restore our broken rhythms of community life.



Beyond familiar vigils of public solidarity, the tragedies of the past week have highlighted the simple yet powerful practices of *sh'mirah* / vigil-keeping around the clock over the bodies of the dead. The last time that *sh'mirah* garnered any significant media attention was after the World Trade

Center attacks in 2001, when a pluralistic, 24-hour mobilization of more than 200 Jewish vigil-keepers at the NYC Medical Examiner's office was sustained until the Ground Zero recovery efforts were suspended in May 2002.

"This is something I can do," asserted **Judith Kaplan** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/06/nyregion/a-nation-challenged-vigil-stretching-a-jewish-vigil-for-the-sept-11-dead.html>), one of the 9/11 vigil-keepers whose stories went out around the world. **Jessica Russak** (<https://jessicarussakhoffman.com/blogandwriting/911-vigil>) — who organized Kaplan and other classmates at nearby Stern College to insure that the vigil would be covered each Shabbat — later discovered that her great-grandmother had been a burial fellowship leader. *"I think that's the best thing I've heard since it all began,"* commented Russak, as she reflected on the first anniversary of the attacks. *"I learned that there are more mitzvahs out there than I was aware of."*

"This was something they knew how to do," reported Emma Green in *The Atlantic* on the dozens of volunteers who mobilized for **sh'mirah in Pittsburgh** (<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/10/pittsburgh-jews-prepare-bury-eleven-killed-gunman/574342/>) over the past week, highlighting a range of personal practices. The only requirement for participation is the ability to be respectful and cooperative in the presence of the dead. Most vigil-keepers do not realize this until they volunteer.



(/performances-and-sing-alongs) May this commitment be shared and sustained toward future healing. I want to express the gratitude that I have felt for fellow vigil-keepers since my **own first vigil** (</service/blog/2013/06/28/caring-for-the-dead-by-singing-to-them>) over the dead more than two decades ago:

Thank you for volunteering to fulfill this *mitzvah* of ultimate kindness. Your presence means more than anyone can ever say.

Ar Hyd y Nos / All Through the Night

Melody first published 1784 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UmeNwptsUyM>)

Original Welsh poem by John Ceiriog Hughes (1832-1887)

***New singable English rendering lovingly dedicated
to all the dead, survivors, and vigil-keepers everywhere***

All the eyelids of the stars say—
ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT
"Vale of glory beckons this way"
ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT
Suffering at these times is winter
Yet to beautify life further
We'll put our weak light together
ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT

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