

TRAGEDY IN PITTSBURGH

'We will endure, we will survive, we will flourish'

The following is the text of the address delivered by **Rabbi Dr Benjamin Elton** at the communal vigil for Pittsburgh at The Great Synagogue last Wednesday night.

WE gather this evening overwhelmed by grief at the loss of 11 holy souls, murdered in the worst antisemitic attack in the history of the United States. It has shocked the world, Jews and non-Jews alike, and we are grateful for the presence of our non-Jewish friends here with us, sharing our sorrow and giving their solidarity.

We come together in a synagogue, which should be a place of peace, of prayer, of love. The Tree of Life synagogue was just such a place, but it was transformed by a man filled with hate and rage into one of pain, suffering and death. A moment of joy, the naming of a new child, became a time of the greatest sorrow.

Who were the victims? A retired gentleman who helped a friend's

daughters with their tax returns every year, a 97-year-old grandmother with a youthful spirit, a married couple in their 80s, a pair of brothers with intellectual disabilities who handed out prayer books as worshippers arrived, a man who became a grandfather only a year ago and whose grandson will never really know him, a widow who had looked after her husband's students like a second mother, a devoted family doctor who volunteered with the Chevra Kadisha, a man called 'the religious heart of his congregation', a youth baseball coach. Eleven good and innocent people, all slaughtered.

Through the tragedies of history the Jewish people has become accustomed to mourning. Tonight we echo Jeremiah's lament at the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem: 'Oh that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people.' When we mourn for the two Temples every year on the anniversary of their destruction we recall other times when Jews were murdered simply for being Jews. We recite elegies written at the time of the First Crusade, when violent bigots burst into synagogues, armed with weapons, and put the defenceless worshippers to death. That was in the 11th century, and here we are, almost a thousand years later, witnessing



Rabbi Dr Benjamin Elton.

Photo: Wendy Bookatz.

new atrocities in an old pattern.

As we prepare to mark the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht in this synagogue in a few days' time, the scourge of antisemitism is still alive, potent and deadly. At every service in this synagogue and many others, as well as at schools and other communal facilities, an armed guard stands outside, and because they are friendly, warm, affable people, it is easy to forget that they are there for a truly terrible and terrifying reason.

Now is not the time to engage in an analysis of the twisted psychology of antisemitism, but having acknowledged its existence, we have to determine how to deal with it. We need practical measures, and I pay tribute to the police and our own Community

Security Group who put themselves in danger to keep us safe. I want to thank the state and federal governments who generously assist with funding for our communal security needs, and I express our appreciation for our community's leaders who make our case and advance our cause.

But protection is just a means to an end, and that end is the continuation of a vibrant Jewish life. When a group of Jews near Lublin was ordered to sing by a Nazi commander in 1939, they lacked the energy or the will to do so, until one of their number improvised new words to an old melody, and called out *mir veln zey überlebn ovinu shebashomayim*, we will outlive them, our Father in Heaven. And we shall. We will continue to

worship in our synagogues, send our children to Jewish schools, manifest every form of Jewish activity, as well as taking a full part in the life of wider society. We will endure, we will survive, we will flourish.

The name of the synagogue desecrated with the blood of its faithful was Tree of Life, a quotation from the Book of Proverbs: 'It is tree of life to those who grasp it, and those who take hold of it are fortunate.' Jewish life is a source of more vitality, more energy and strength than any evil that can come to confront it. Let us rededicate ourselves to that spirit, and in the words of Deuteronomy, let us choose life, and defeat our enemies through life. Although the name of their synagogue might seem cruelly ironic, for those murdered in Pittsburgh it was anything but. Their faith and their congregation made their lives richer and fuller. They loved going to their synagogue, they were there right at the beginning of the service. It was a tree of life for them, and should be for us.

May the memory of the holy martyrs of Pittsburgh remain with us and be a blessing, may the Almighty send comfort to the bereaved and healing to the wounded in body and in spirit, and may we join together to create a world without hatred, without prejudice and without bloodshed. Amen.

THE JOINT

Rebirth of Jewish life is a modern-day miracle

ALTHOUGH I was only four when I left Hungary, hurtling over the Austrian border with my mother who had survived Auschwitz, it would have been inconceivable to her then that the child in her arms would return as a board member of The Joint Distribution Committee, which would go on to save our lives.

That this same Joint which orchestrated safe passage to Australia for me – and 25,000 other survivors – could still be a beacon for Jews in need today, is a modern-day miracle. That it's rebuilding Jewish life in places where Judaism was nearly eradicated, however, is something that needs to be seen to be believed.

Fortunately, I was given that opportunity when I was invited to visit Camp Szarvas in July.

Szarvas is a Jewish summer camp located near Budapest on seven hectares in the Hungarian countryside. Built in 1990 – in partnership with the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation – Szarvas is where young people enter disconnected and leave understanding they're part of a vibrant nation living across many borders.

Each summer, over 1600 campers aged 7-19 descend on Szarvas from Europe, the post-commu-



EVA FISCHL

nist world, and other countries, to spend 12 days exploring Jewish customs and history, while playing sports and raiding the canteen for candy and ice cream. This year was no exception.

"Many didn't even know they were Jewish until their parents told them they were coming to Szarvas," said Karolina, a former camper from Poland and now counsellor. I would later learn most come from families where being Jewish felt dangerous and have little understanding of their heritage. But you wouldn't know it.

As we approached the lunch hall, hundreds of kids were standing on tables and singing in Hebrew. "This is the one place where they can learn what it means to be Jewish and meet other kids who are Jewish too," Karolina explained. "We not only make sure they have three meals a day, we make them proud Jews."

As we entered, the campers were well into a rendition of *Chai*. A young boy wearing a tie-dyed shirt with the words, "I'm Jewish and I'm from Latvia" stood near the door. He smiled at me from his perch and each time I smiled back at him, he sang even louder.



The dining hall at the Joint summer camp in Szarvas, Hungary.

When the campers were seated, kids with birthdays received gifts and were serenaded with *Happy Birthday* in several languages. Watching the children reach for their presents, I was overcome with emotion that such a place could exist, let alone on the site of so much Jewish tragedy – including my own.

We joined a table of teenagers from Romania and Ukraine and I learned most came from families with one Jewish parent or grandparent. Almost all were returning campers, except for Ina from Ukraine. "My grandmother on my mother's side was a Holocaust survivor but I wasn't really aware that I was Jewish," she explained. "It wasn't something we ever mentioned at home."

When I asked how she discov-

ered Szarvas, Ina said her mother received a monthly delivery of epilepsy medication from The Joint in Kharkov, and a case worker had mentioned Szarvas during a visit.

Karolina explained parents don't have enough to make ends meet, let alone for summer camp, so most kids are sponsored by Jewish philanthropists including from Australia. I knew there was scarcity by watching the way they demolished their food. I also knew each would go home and become a leader, a teacher and one day a Jewish parent, and Jewish continuity in the region was being safeguarded right there at the table.

We toured the campsite where I saw kids doing sports, crafts, learning about Jewish holidays and in deep philosophical discussion.

Before leaving, we visited the charming synagogue where chil-

dren were celebrating bar and bat mitzvahs. There I met kids from America and England spending their summer at Szarvas and I promised myself Australians would be among them soon.

At midnight, Karolina walked me to my room. "There are no words, right?" she smiled as we said goodnight. She knew I was wondering how I would describe what I had seen to people back home – especially to those who believed Jewish life could never bloom on the ashes of six million Jews.

But something magical happens when people learn they are Jewish. It transcends the intellect and makes a beeline for the heart, defying the impossible.

As I closed my eyes, I thought of my mother and the thousands rescued by The Joint over 100 years. And I thought of all the kids I'd met that day. I realised saving Jewish lives and building Jewish life is still the same meticulous, delicate work it's always been – and it happens one person at a time.

I'd begun my life in Hungary as a hidden Jewish child but thanks to The Joint, Jewish children are no longer hiding in this part of the world. They're singing Jewish songs and dancing on tables. They're living as Jews out loud.

Eva Fischl is president of The Joint (Australia).