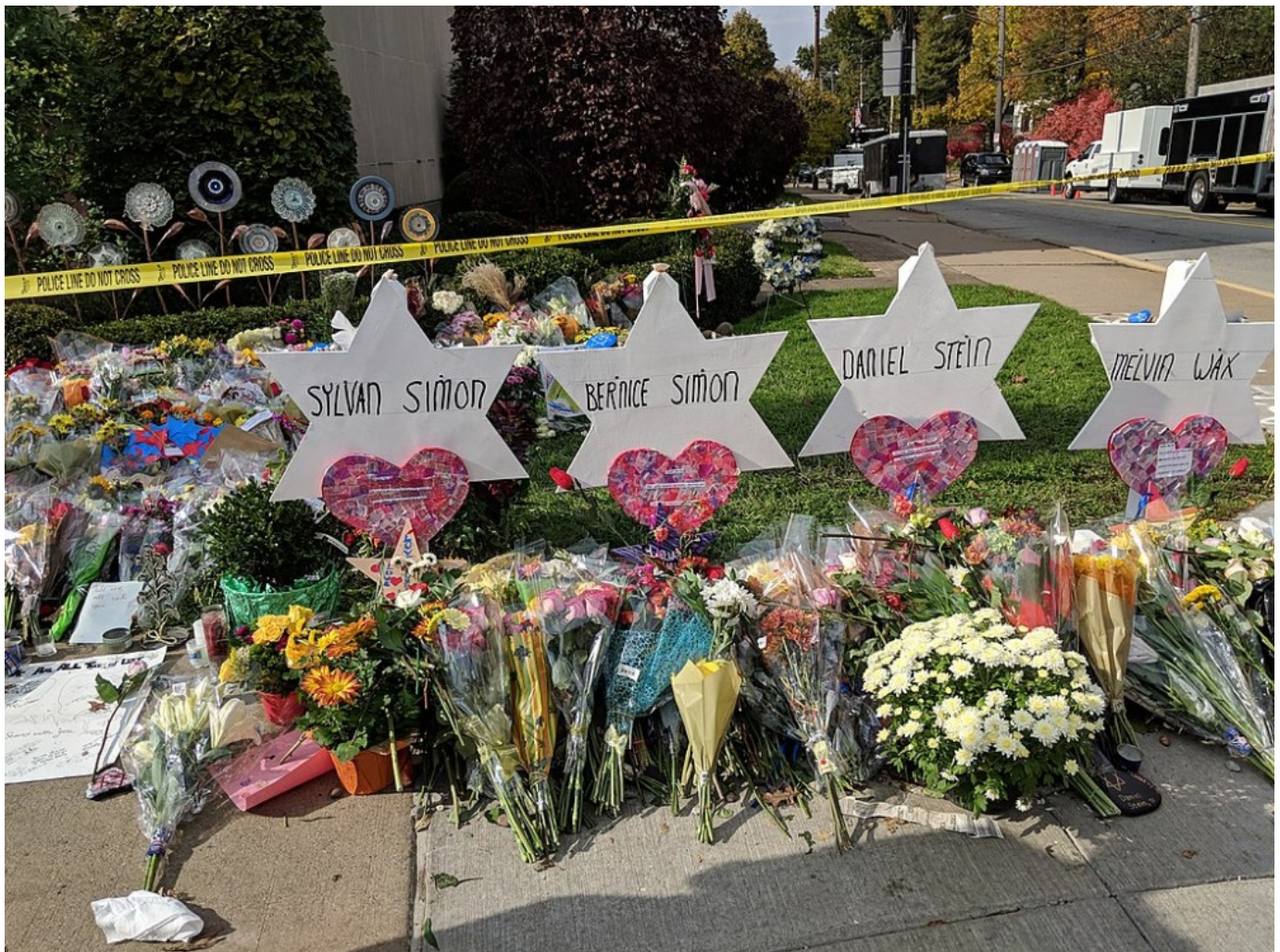


Two years after my husband survived the Tree of Life shooting, I'm still figuring out how to tell the story

How do you construct a narrative in the aftermath of communal trauma?

by [Beth Kissileff](#)

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It's difficult to be a storyteller and part of the story at the same time. How can I be sure my telling is not lopsided, veering too much toward my own perspective and

ignoring the experiences of others? Since the morning of October 27, 2018, when an antisemitic shooter entered the Tree of Life building in Pittsburgh's Squirrel Hill neighborhood and killed members of the three congregations who shared the worship space, learning how to tell that story has been my reality.

My husband is a rabbi of one of the groups that met at Tree of Life, New Light. He escaped by hiding himself and those he was able to summon to the front of the room in an electrical storage area that was too dark for the shooter to see them. He was able to somehow feel his way in the dark to a door and escape outside. The policeman he encountered told him in no uncertain terms to "get the [expletive] out of here." So in a neighborhood entirely on lockdown because of an active shooter, my husband walked home.

Early the next morning, camera crews showed up at our doorstep. Cards were left by large-audience television talk shows, asking us to get in touch. We declined. The story my husband needed to tell was in the eulogies for his murdered congregants. His only important task that week was to reflect on their lives in a way that would give them the dignity their violent deaths lacked, to attempt to give closure and a sense of peace to traumatized family members, helping them grieve.

The day after the shooting, reporters showed up at the [morning minyan at the neighborhood synagogue](#) that had not been attacked. The Torah portion for that week, Genesis 23:1- 25, teaches that when someone dies, the eulogy should focus on [who they were and how they lived](#) rather than on their death. And so I told a reporter about the lives of my congregants [Dan Stein, Mel Wax, and Rich Gottfried](#). This fall, that reporter [started rabbinical school](#), a move that he attributes in part to his coverage of the tragedy. It seems that the way our community reacted and gathered after the shooting not only told a story, it helped create a new one.

[Another reporter](#) came to the small gathering that my 14-year-old daughter and her friends organized at [the Holocaust memorial](#) at the Jewish day school they had recently graduated from. My daughter and I spoke about the victims we knew. We sang and said kaddish together. It was heartbreaking to have to help children cope with antisemitism on this scale. My daughter had never been to a funeral; that week she attended three in three days.

In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, I tried to avoid news coverage of the event. I didn't feel like I needed to see how others were filtering or processing what I

was living through. On the Friday after the shooting, I brought the newspaper in from the driveway and saw that the [headline, written in Hebrew letters](#), was the first four words of the prayer that mourners intone three times a day during the year of mourning. It expressed that the whole city of Pittsburgh was grieving with us. Upon unfurling the newsprint pages and seeing the familiar prayer, I wept.

Writing is central to my identity, and when I couldn't construct a narrative in those first weeks after the shooting, I felt unmoored. My mind raced faster than I could get my thoughts down. Someone had threatened my husband's life, killed three of my congregants, and killed and wounded several others in the same space. How could a thought remain stable on the page when words that had meant something a few days prior—words like *security*, *safety*, and *calmness*—now meant something completely different? Everything I had experienced was out of my control, including my ability to reign over my experiences by writing about them.

In the two years since the shooting, many people have wondered how my family and I are doing. Answering that question requires me to construct a narrative that's more complex than "A leads to B." I sometimes answer that we are as well as can be expected, and that is true. But it's also true that my family now feels a lack of safety and security, a loss of trust in the world.

Experiencing random violence because you are Jewish is not like experiencing a miscarriage or sickness or job loss. The level of threat is at the level of the person. Whenever I'm in a synagogue, I look around and think about where I might hide and how I'd escape from an armed intruder. I try to stay mentally and physically healthy so I can assess the danger in any situation, be constantly alert, and know when to flee. I live this story even as I don't always know how to tell it.

One way I've started to rediscover my narrative voice is by [coediting an anthology](#) in which local writers tell their stories about the shooting. The book, as my coeditor Eric Lidji puts it, offers not a final resolution but a snapshot that shows "this is where we are as a community at this moment." More stories will emerge. In the meantime, the ones we have gathered aim to show that there are many ways to cope with trauma, and that we have all been given the capacity for healing.

Since January, I've been studying a page of Talmud a day. There's a story in [BT Berachot 5b](#) about Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Eliezer. Rabbi Eliezer is sick and dying; his teacher Rabbi Yochanan, a beautiful man, comes to visit and exposes his

arm. When the arm is exposed, light falls on it and Rabbi Eliezer begins to cry. The puzzled teacher, who cannot fathom why his ill student is crying, offers a number of insensitive guesses. Finally, the student explains: this arm that is so beautiful will one day decompose in the earth. Then the student and teacher begin to cry together over their shared mortality.

That, to me, is the goal of any story: to enable all of us to cry together over our shared mortality.