

Going to church yesterday as a Christian who was raised Jewish

My visceral grief after the murders in Pittsburgh made me feel like a stranger in my own congregation.

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Yesterday I went to the church where I have worshiped and worked on and off for the past 20-plus years, and I was lost.

Not physically lost, of course. The contours of the sanctuary are so familiar, I could probably give a tour to a stranger who wandered in. Instead, unexpectedly, I felt as if I was the stranger. I didn't like the sensation at all.

It wasn't for lack of affection given or received. Part of what I love about this congregation is how motley it is, embracing an array of people with diverse beliefs on everything from liturgical practice to same-sex marriage. Attend the 11 o'clock in the original sanctuary and hear a traditional Episcopal Rite II service, complete with choir. Walk over to the newer church and experience a less formal service and a lot of folks praying with raised hands and lustily singing praise music.

Normally I'm one of them.

But I was raised in a Jewish home. My cousins on both sides of the family (some, anyway) are still observant. And even if they aren't observant, they are still Jewish. So even though I converted many decades ago, and pass as a devout Christian, my Jewish roots go deep. Perhaps as deep, maybe deeper.

The men and women murdered in Pittsburgh on Saturday died simply because they were Jewish, worshiping on the sabbath. The visceral grief and fear I felt was probably shared by people all across America—but especially by those who have observed the spike in anti-Semitism over the past two years with concern and now

with horror.

Jesus was a Jew. Christians don't engage that messy truth very often in church, but there is no indication that he renounced his ethnic identity or beliefs—he came to fulfill the law, scripture tell us, not to abolish it.

I sat on the hard pews. I stood. I watched. I prayed. I wept. I have rarely felt so isolated in the midst of a friendly crowd.

With increasing anxiety, I wondered, Does anyone here really care that much? Or is it, for them, a passing tragedy, to be noted and then forgotten?

I don't have an answer. It's not fair to expect that non-Jews will experience the Pittsburgh synagogue slaughter the same way Jewish person might (and there is no one way or a right way). Perhaps I would have done better, yesterday, to attend a vigil service with those gathered purposefully to mourn and celebrate the holy lives lost on Saturday.

“Today we are all Jews,” said Maura Healey at the Boston vigil to mourn the dead and support the living who need to find ways to go on. I hope many of you will be Jewish people (or black people, or high school students, or gay people, or immigrants) today, too. Heaven knows, we need you.

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