

New Light Congregation rabbi Jonathan Perlman asks attorney general not to seek death for Pittsburgh mass shooter

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Rabbi Jonathan Perlman and his wife, Beth Kissileff, recently penned letters to Attorney General William Barr urging him not to seek the death penalty for Robert Bowers, the alleged gunman who opened fire at a Pittsburgh synagogue in October, killing 11 worshipers.

Perlman is rabbi at New Light Congregation, one of three communities that met at the synagogue.

“We are still attending to our wounds, both physical and emotional, and I don’t want to see them opened any more,” wrote Perlman, 55. “A drawn out and difficult death penalty trial would be a disaster with witnesses and attorneys dredging up horrifying drama and giving this killer the media attention he does not deserve.”

Bowers pleaded not guilty to a 63-count indictment in US District Court, but one of his lawyers has suggested Barr might offer to forgo a trial in return for a guilty plea if prosecutors drop the death penalty they are now weighing and agree to a sentence of life without parole. On August 12, prosecutors and defense lawyers agreed to a 120-day extension in the case.

To Perlman, a lengthy trial in which the prosecution would highlight Bowers’s documented stream of anti-Jewish invective and conspiracy theories would be too much to bear.

“Some people think I’m doing it because I’m opposed to the death penalty,” he said in a phone interview. “I am opposed to the death penalty but in this case, it’s very personal. I’m looking out for the welfare of my community. I don’t want to see them re-traumatized.”

A bivocational rabbi who works as a chaplain in the Department of Palliative Care for the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center as well as leading New Light, Perlman has been attending to the dying in the hospital and to the families of three New Light members killed in the shooting. Perlman, who hid in a storage closet during the

shooting, said he and other survivors and family members of the victims were all receiving ongoing counseling.

Barr recently ordered the federal death penalty to be reinstated and has directed the Bureau of Prisons to schedule the execution of five death row inmates. But Perlman hopes his plea and that of other rabbis and congregational leaders will persuade Barr not to press for the death penalty in this case. —Religion News Service

FOLLOWING UP (Updated September 5): Two of the three congregations that met inside the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh said they were saddened and disappointed with the news that federal prosecutors plan to seek the death penalty against a man accused of killing 11 Jews at their place of worship last year.

Leaders of both the New Light and Dor Hadash congregations had written to Attorney General William Barr to beg him not to pursue capital punishment for Robert Bowers. Four of the 11 people killed in the massacre, considered the deadliest attack on Jews in US history, were members of those congregations.

But on August 26, five federal lawyers filed a motion in the United States District Court for the Western District of Pennsylvania, saying Bowers's alleged crimes justify a death penalty sentence. They cited five reasons, including Bowers's lack of remorse, his religious animus toward Judaism and Jews, and his substantial planning and premeditation.

Rabbi Jonathan Perlman of New Light Congregation vowed Tuesday to continue to fight the death penalty, which he believes is contrary to Jewish teachings. He also said it would re-traumatize the survivors of the October 27 massacre.

Perlman said he thought prosecutors were trying to curry favor with the Jewish community by seeking the death penalty.

Congregation Dor Hadash posted a statement on its website saying it would have preferred a plea deal that would have allowed the gunman to serve a sentence of life in prison without parole.

A life sentence, the statement said, would have "honored the memory of Dor Hadash congregant Dr. Jerry Rabinowitz, who was firmly and unequivocally opposed to the death penalty."

Rabinowitz, 66, a beloved family physician, was killed in the shooting.

The third congregation meeting in the building issued a statement saying: “Tree of Life-Or L’Simcha does not have a statement on this matter; we have confidence that justice will be served.”

Jewish tradition has mostly, but not always, opposed the death penalty. In the United States, rabbis from nearly all non-Orthodox Jewish movements have issued formal resolutions against the death penalty. That includes rabbis from the Reform and Conservative movements—the nation’s two largest Jewish denominations—as well as the smaller Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, with which Congregation Dor Hadash is affiliated.

—Religion News Service