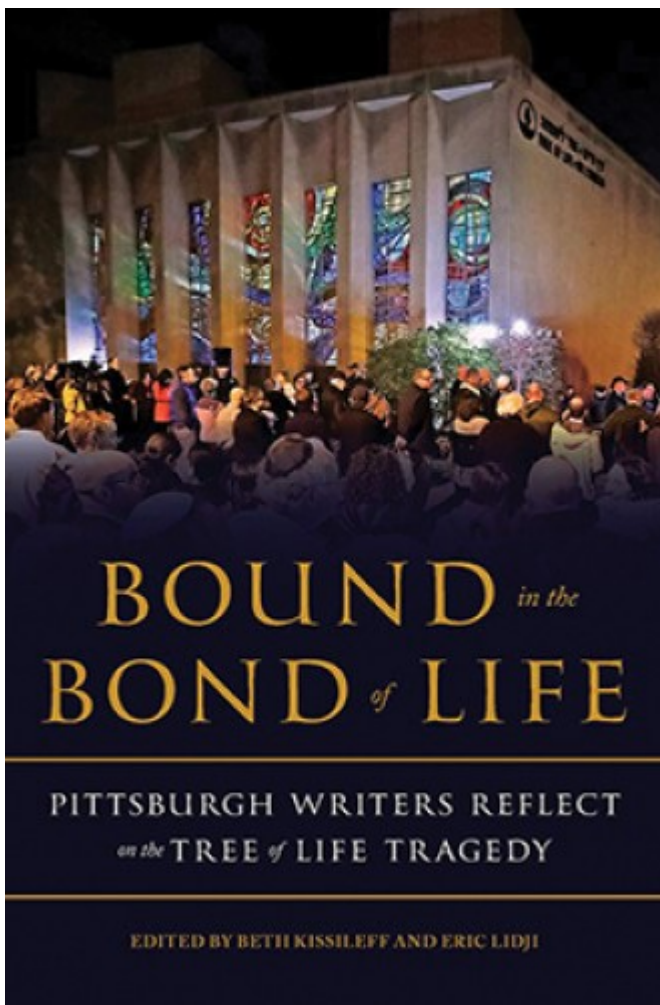


Finding a way forward after the Tree of Life synagogue massacre in Pittsburgh

A collection of remembrances that bind the living and the dead

by [Ross Carmichael](#) in the [January 13, 2021](#) issue

In Review



Bound in the Bond of Life

Pittsburgh Writers Reflect on the Tree of Life Tragedy

Edited by Beth Kissileff and Eric Lidji

University of Pittsburgh Press

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On October 27, 2018, a gunman came into the Squirrel Hill neighborhood, the center of Pittsburgh's Jewish community for generations, and took the lives of 11 people from Tree of Life–Or L'Simcha, Dor Hadash, and New Light congregations during sabbath services. The *kedoshim* of Pittsburgh, the martyrs of that day, are Joyce Fienberg, Richard Gottfried, Rose Mallinger, Jerry Rabinowitz, Cecil Rosenthal, David Rosenthal, Bernice Simon, Sylvan Simon, Daniel Stein, Melvin Wax, and Irving Younger.

The loss of these beloved individuals and the effects of that day's trauma cannot be adequately articulated. *Bound in the Bond of Life* acknowledges this and does not presume to do so. Instead it offers reflections from various contributors, each from a unique perspective and place in the community. Together, they attempt to remember the day and its victims, come to terms with their experiences, and find a way forward in hope.

David M. Shribman, former executive editor of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette newspaper, writes in the foreword: "We are living life after October 27, 2018, trying to recapture life before the Shabbat without shalom. Nothing is the same." *Bound in the Bond of Life*, he writes, tells the story "of life before, and of life after, and the difficulty—the impossibility—of reconciling the two. It includes accounts of how we learned, how we processed, how we grieved, how we carried on."

The book's theme comes from a Jewish prayer, "May the soul be bound in the bond of life." Coeditor Eric Lidji writes:

It first appears in the Book of Samuel, where Abigail says it to her future husband David, after preventing an act of bloody vengeance by assuaging his anger. "Though a man rises to pursue thee, and to seek thy soul: yet the soul of my lord shall be bound in the bond of life with the Lord thy God . . ." (1 Samuel 25:29). The phrase has since become essential to the Jewish mourning liturgy. It was incorporated into the prayer *El Malei Rachamim* (God, full of mercy), recited graveside at funerals and at subsequent memorial services. . . . The bond of life is a vital and eternal connection between the dead and the living. It exists through our memory

of them.

This connection between the dead and the living provides the backdrop for the book's collective act of remembrance. Congregation members and leaders, neighbors and activists, professors and journalists reflect on their experiences before, during, and after October 27, 2018.

The book first seeks to give readers a sense of the community, beginning with a section called "Here Is Squirrel Hill." That title comes from the compelling and at times emotionally raw account of the same name by Molly Pascal, a member at Tree of Life. The neighborhood and synagogue provide the setting for reflections on sense of place, family, community, and belonging as she ponders what it means for her to be Jewish and live her faith before and after the shooting. Pascal beautifully weaves in big questions with which so many of us struggle: Will my family be safe at school or worship? How do I responsibly answer a child's question and need for reassurance amid the unpredictability of the world today? How will I live in a way that honors the people who have gone before us? What comes next?

The book's second section, "Finding the Vessels," provides its deepest theological reflections. Its title comes from the first of two sermons by Rabbi Daniel Yolcut of Congregation Poale Zedeck, an Orthodox congregation in Squirrel Hill. This first sermon was delivered on November 3, 2018, the first sabbath after the attack, and the second on November 16, 2019, marking the one-year commemoration according to the Hebrew calendar. Both evoke a profound sense of hope based on the faithfulness of God and the certainty of God's promises.

Another especially engaging entry is that by Beth Kissileff, the book's coeditor (and spouse of New Light Congregation's rabbi Jonathan Perlman, who survived the attack). Using imagery of bees and honey from Judges 14, she writes honestly about the effects of trauma, the stabilizing power of ritual, and the ways that sweetness can coexist with grief.

The latter part of the book, "You Will Get Through It," includes reflections from several individuals who have previously experienced tragedy, offering a glimpse of what life could be like on the other side of inexplicable loss.

In the afterword, Kissileff writes,

This book marks a beginning of Pittsburghers' being able to tell our story with the agency to direct the narrative. We are hopeful that this offering of words, this telling, will keep those eleven who were lost on October 27, 2018, the eighteenth of Heshvan 5779, firmly bound in the bond of our lives.

Her concluding words hearken back to a question Lidji poses in the introduction: "*May the soul be bound in the bond of life.* What do those words demand of us, the living?" His answer will stay with me, serving as a reminder and call for my life and work: "The bond of life . . . is a commitment to carry actual people and specific experiences in our hearts and in our minds as we move through our lives. We are bound by that commitment. It is an essential privilege and responsibility of being alive."