

A Eulogy for the Minyan  
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Delivered November 2, 2018 following the October 27th shooting at the  
Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh

The words minyan with a y-a-n and minion with an i-o-n may sound the same, but while they both refer to a group of people, the words couldn't be further apart. Minions with an i-o-n are unimportant, uncounted masses, the followers of a leader who are ignored as individuals.

But the Hebrew word minyan, pronounced minyan in English and spelled with a yan, are the ten Jewish adults required for communal worship. Bar'chu, Kaddish, and the reading of Torah all, traditionally, require a minyan. While the members of a minyan are gathered together to worship, it is the opposite of minions with an ion, as it is specifically each of their value as individuals that makes their gathering as a community so important.

It's the presence of these ten unique, valuable individuals that officially makes a community a community. In the Talmud there is some debate as to the number, with some allowing as low as seven or even six, but ultimately there is no question - the number is 10. And the rabbis weren't concerned that any of their communities would have a difficult time meeting this goal because of the *batlanim*. *Batlanim* were men, (in Talmudic times, and still in Orthodoxy today, a minyan required ten adult men,) who had no profession, whose life was committed to the synagogue, who spent their time both studying and working in the synagogue, and who were always there, on time, not only for Shabbat, but for the three minyanim, the three services every day. Rashi adds, in defining the Talmudic *batlanim*, that they occupy themselves with the needs of the community. In the words of Rabbi Abraham Milgram, the *batlanim* "constituted the core of the permanent congregation and were highly respected for their piety and learning."

Unfortunately, the term *batlanim* gained a negative connotation over time, as synagogues would actually hire ne'er do wells, giving them a small wage with the same goal of ensuring a minyan at daily services.

The concept, however, of the *batlanim* is a beautiful one. That there are those in a congregation who are so in love with Shabbat, so committed to their community and to the concept of minyan, the idea that a community cannot worship without a community, that they make sure that they are present, ready to be counted, ready to be counted on.

In our Reform community, we are often more flexible with the idea of minyan, but that doesn't mean we don't have our own *batlanim*. We affectionately call them "Friday night regulars," and even when there is nothing special on a given Friday night, and it's pouring outside, and schools are on vacation, Cantor Cannizzaro, Rabbi Farb and I know that we will not be alone. We know that you will be here with us, praying with us, giving us strength. Even on an evening like this when our sanctuary is full, please know that we know that you are here, and we appreciate you.

And in today's Conservative and Orthodox synagogues, again while, perhaps, not using the word, *batlanim* are quite the known entity as well. Anyone who has been to a Conservative or Orthodox synagogue on a Saturday morning, showing up at the listed service start time, knows that most Conservative and Orthodox Jews do not arrive on Saturday morning at the listed start time. But at just about every one, there are those who are there *before* the scheduled service time, often before the rabbi or cantor, as they are the ones who not only make sure there is a minyan, but also, often, lead the opening prayers, and welcome the rest of the congregation as they arrive.

At Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Shabbat morning services begin at 9:45, so when the shooter entered the sanctuary at 10:00, these *batlanim* were the righteous souls he encountered. 69 year old Irving Younger would often not only welcome any guests (the only others who might arrive on time), but he would also make sure anyone less knowledgeable of the service knew the current page in the prayerbook. While the rabbi happened to be there last Shabbat, 87 year old Melvin Wax was the one who would lead the beginning of the service if the rabbi wasn't there or was running late. 59 year old Cecil Rosenthal and his 54 year old brother David

Rosenthal, two developmentally disabled adults for whom the synagogue was home, the place in which they knew they would be loved for who they were, were also the first to say Shabbat Shalom when you entered, and were sure to let any visitors know what a special place they had found in Tree of Life. While the other members may have felt they were taking care of Cecil and David, I have no doubt that their love and gentle compassion served as a source of comfort for their larger community. 97 year old Rose Mallinger and Sylvan and Bernice Simon, 86 and 84, who had been married on that bima 62 years ago. Dr. Jerry Rabinowitz, who had been present in the building for a different service (where he was also, likely, one of the first there), but who ran toward the gunshots thinking people might be hurt and need his help. 75 year old Joyce Fienberg, 65 year old Dr. Richard Gottfried, and 71 year old Daniel Stein. These were the members of the minyan, the batlanim, who arrived early last Saturday morning, who, on the Shabbat on which we read of Abraham welcoming strangers into his tent, for a moment, thought they were welcoming a new visitor into their sanctuary before they realized that that they were under attack because of their desire to welcome others into the Jewish community they cherished.

I mention each as individuals because they are not the minions - they did not show up blindly each week just because they were told to. They were the minyan, 11 individuals, who were there because they wanted to be there, each of whom brought their history, their priorities, their core values, into the service with them. Each offered their prayers as individuals, and each gave something unique to their minyan, to their service, to their community.

As we prayed for strength and healing for the Tree of Life community, we know that their minyan will never be the same without these 11 souls, going into any synagogue will never be the same for the members of Tree of Life, having witnessed what they witnessed, experienced the extreme feelings of vulnerability they experienced.

We also know that all of us, Jewish communities and vulnerable communities everywhere have felt exposed and afraid as well. We see ourselves in them; we feel that it could have been us.

Unfortunately, we risk becoming used to feeling vulnerable, exposed, and afraid. With so many shootings, with so many acts of terror, we know that this one felt different. On Sunday I asked my Confirmation class if it felt different coming to the synagogue that day than it had going to school the day after Parkland. One student raised her hand and shared that it did. “They attacked a high school in Parkland, but they didn’t attack the idea of high school. Pittsburgh was an attack against the Jewish people, and it could have been any of us.” Another of my friends shared that going to synagogue on Sunday morning felt like an act of bravery, and going to a place that, in its definition, is a place of safety, should never feel like an act of bravery. I know that even this evening, as we’ve acknowledged, in spite of the amazing men and women who are here to keep us safe, that we too may feel different than we did last Shabbat, or the last time we sat in this sanctuary or any sanctuary. We see ourselves in them, and it’s scary. One way in which we could react would be to stay away, to avoid this place. It would be understandable, and for anyone who felt uncomfortable coming tonight, perhaps you’re watching on the livestream or listening to our podcast, and please know, I understand, and I’m here to talk any time.

But in seeing ourselves in them, we have another option. We can look at Joyce Fienberg, Richard Gottfried, Rose Mallinger, Jerry Rabinowitz, David Rosenthal, Cecil Rosenthal, Bernice Simon, Sylvan Simon, Daniel Stein, Irving Younger, and Melvin Wax, and we can be inspired to be *batlanim* like they were. Tonight, in synagogues around the world, the hashtag, “Showupforshabbat” has symbolized that feeling so many have been feeling this week. One evil man wanted to take Shabbat away from us, wanted to make us afraid to be who we are, to be counted as members of our Jewish community, but instead, countless numbers of Jews and non-Jews are sitting in synagogues this evening, inspired by the victims, showing up. There may be too many to count, but they are not minions - we, tonight, are a minyan, each of us bringing our own history, priorities, and core values into this service with us.

This is not a guilt trip to try to get you to come to services more often. I promise. Rashi explained that the *batlanim* occupied themselves with the needs of the community. Whether greeting a visitor, helping someone find their page, or making sure that someone saying kaddish for a departed loved one would be able to do so, the *batlanim* recognized that it could be them. That there would be a time in which they needed their community, and they had to create the culture of a community that was there for all of its members in all of their times of need. As a Jewish community, we must occupy ourselves with the needs of our community. We must show up when others need us, and we must be counted. We also must remember that we are not the only ones who are afraid.

A week ago Wednesday, three days before the shooting in Pittsburgh, 69 year old Maurice Stallard and 67 year old Vickie Jones, both African American, were shot in a grocery store parking lot outside of Louisville, KY. The shooter went to the parking lot after attempting to enter the First Baptist Church of Jeffersontown, a predominantly African American church, where only an hour earlier over 70 worshipers had sat in the sanctuary. While many remained, the doors of the church were locked because the church had been advised to do so after nine people were killed at the Emanuel AME church in Charleston three years ago, killed because they were black.

We can be *batlanim*, we can make ourselves counted, by remembering that it could be us any time anyone is made fun of, threatened, discriminated against, denied an opportunity, attacked, or killed because of their religion, the color of their skin, their gender, their sexuality, or the country where they were born. It could be us, and we must occupy ourselves with their needs; we must stand up for them.

So many have reached out to me, to Jewish communities around the world, letting us know that they do not want to live in a country in which we feel afraid. (Many of you are here tonight). They (You) too are *batlanim*, and we are grateful for you.

There's a story about a couple on a cruise ship. The husband is approached by a man he doesn't know, who tells him he needs a tenth for a minyan that evening at 7:30. The husband agrees to attend, but when he tells his wife, she's angry with him. "You haven't gone to services since your Bar Mitzvah," she said to him, "and now you're going to make me miss the show I was looking forward to because someone you don't know asked you to go to *minyan*." "What was I supposed to say?" he asked. "It's a mitzvah." So after they finished their dinner, they went to Theater C, surprised to find what seemed like 200 people there, all of whom had been told that they were the tenth for the minyan. Some were upset, yelling at the man who had invited them, that he had tricked them into coming when they wouldn't have otherwise. The man stood up and told them all that it was his father-in-law's yahrzeit, and he wanted to ensure his wife could say Kaddish. "Each of you came," he said, "because you wanted to perform a mitzvah for someone you didn't know. The number of people here doesn't change that, but if you want to leave, of course you are free to go." As the story goes, no one left.

My prayer this evening is that in whatever way we each interpret our call to be a *batlan*, that none of us are doing so out of guilt. That none of us has to feel that we are the tenth in a minyan, to feel that if we don't do it, no one else will. I pray that we find ourselves part of a minyan that seems like minions, that we live our lives with a feeling that we are surrounded by others who want to be counted, who see us in them and who respond to our needs, who see the vulnerable in them and respond to their needs, inspiring each of us, as unique individuals, with our own history, priorities, and values, to be a part of this greater minyan, and to serve the needs of our greater community, whoever that may include. For when we do, *zecher tzadik livracha*, the memory of the righteous departed, will always be a blessing.