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CHAPTER I  
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## WAKING UP

**T**here is a shooter at tree of life.”

The first text came through our family chat at 10:22 A.M. It was from my baby sister, Suzy. I typed back immediately: “Is dad.”

My mouth turned to cotton as I waited for a response to my incomplete question.

My parents live a mile and a half from the Tree of Life synagogue. Three congregations meet in the building for Shabbat morning services; my dad is sometimes at one of them.

“We’re home,” my mom wrote. “do t worry.”

Casey, my sister, had heard more: “Magazine high powered ak 47. Doug is on police radio,” she said of her husband, a local firefighter.

Someone sent around a link to the Psalms—“in you our ancestors trusted; they trusted and you saved

them”—sacred poems Jews have always recited in times of distress. Several texts suggested that there were hostages, early and hopeful speculation. My mom wrote simply: “I’m sure we will know people there.”

Minutes slouched by. I turned on CNN. Nothing yet. I refreshed and refreshed and refreshed Twitter every few seconds. There were posts from some local sources urging people to stay away from the area; warnings that the police had shut down that part of the neighborhood; speculation that the shooter might be on the loose. I thought about the Boston Marathon bombers—how one of the Tsarnaev brothers hid in a boat in someone’s backyard—and told my parents not to leave the house.

Soon I started getting WhatsApp messages from close friends in Israel, where Shabbat was ending—a strange reversal from the years of the Second Intifada when I would write them: Are you safe?

I checked the news again. Early reports of a shooting in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh. No name yet. No victim count. Refresh Twitter.

At some point in those creeping minutes, between Suzy’s first text and the moment I booked a plane ticket back to my hometown to witness what the killer had done, my third-youngest sister, Molly, told us that she had heard something on the police scanner.

“He’s screaming all these Jews need to die.”

I didn't yet know that I would come to see that phrase as the one that marked the before and the after. That I would come to see that command—the one that had been uttered in a different tongue by Amalek, the villain who stalked the weakest of the ancient Israelites in the desert on their way to the Promised Land; the one that had been echoed by Amalek's ilk down through the generations; and the one that was now being shouted in mine—as my alarm bell. Those words would wake me up to the fact that I had spent much of my life on a holiday from history. And history, in a hail of bullets, had made its unequivocal return.

But this realization was to come. The morning of October 27, 2018, in a hotel room in Phoenix, I was pouring sweat and drinking lukewarm room-service coffee, replying to my editor at the *Times* to say yes, I would write a column immediately about what was going on.

This was before I learned that the name of the shooter was Robert Bowers, before I read what he had written on the social media website Gab: “There is no #MAGA as long as there is a kike infestation.” It was before I knew he believed that the Jewish people were responsible for the sin of bringing Muslims to America: “Open you Eyes! It's the filthy EVIL jews Bringing the Filthy EVIL Muslims into the Country!!” Bowers hated the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, a Jewish organization founded in the late 1800s to resettle Jews fleeing pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe. Today, it does the righteous work of res-

cuing Jews and non-Jews facing persecution all over the world. His final post before he entered the building was: “HIAS likes to bring invaders in that kill our people. I can’t sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I’m going in.” Tree of Life had been one of 270 synagogues around the country that had hosted National Refugee Shabbat the previous Saturday. That morning during services, American rabbis had spoken about the most fundamental and recurrent theme in the Bible: Do not oppress a stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

This was before I stood in the sanctuary of the synagogue and watched an FBI agent named Nicholas Boshers break down in tears talking about what he’d witnessed in my community. Down the hall, his colleagues, in white coveralls, were cleaning and assessing what had become a crime scene: a chapel with hundreds of shell casings, dried rivers of blood, and tiny pieces of flesh.

It was before I sat with Rabbi Daniel Wasserman in his Squirrel Hill synagogue, Shaare Torah, his eyes wet and wide as he told me about what he’d seen. As a member of the community’s *chevra kadisha*—literally, holy community—he was tasked with coordinating the cleanup of the bodies in accordance with Jewish law.

“I’ve seen bodies through *taharas*,” he told me, referring to the ritual purification that takes place before a Jewish burial. “But unless someone is a medic in a battle zone or a soldier, I defy anyone to tell me they’ve seen

that.” It was, according to Robert Jones, the FBI special agent in charge of Pittsburgh, the “most horrific crime scene” he’d witnessed in twenty-two years.

Rabbi Wasserman had to shut off his brain so he could do his work. Even so, the images were burned there.

He told me he’d seen the dead body of a sweet, intellectually disabled man we both knew splayed at the entrance to the chapel. Cecil Rosenthal always came early to services with his brother, David, proud to serve as an usher and greet everyone who showed up with a prayer book and a wide smile. From the location of his corpse, it seemed that he had welcomed the killer, too.

Wasserman had seen Bernice and Sylvan Simon, who were married in that synagogue, dead in each other’s arms. “He was protecting his wife,” the rabbi said of the way their bodies were positioned. He shuddered as he told me about seeing a piece of a person’s skull and recognizing immediately whose head it belonged to because he knew exactly how that man kept his hair.

This was before we knew all the names: the Rosenthals and the Simons and Joyce Fienberg and Richard Gottfried and Rose Mallinger and Jerry Rabinowitz and Daniel Stein and Melvin Wax and Irving Younger. It was before we buried them.

I filed the column that afternoon. Early the next morning, I gave the speech that had been my reason for coming to Phoenix. Someone sweet from the audience put a Pirates baseball cap on my head and I wore it as I walked through the airport.

Do you remember how things felt right after we watched the planes slam into the towers on September 11, 2001? I remember driving home from high school late that morning and noticing, as if in neon, the manicured lawns speeding by outside my window. I noticed that drivers stopped to let pedestrians cross and that the traffic lights worked and that the radio stations played. I remember realizing, maybe for the first time in my life, that none of it—not the paved roads or the running water or the loving parents who would come home from work to comfort me and my sisters—had to be that way. None of it was a guarantee.

That was how I felt walking through the Phoenix airport on October 28. I watched, baffled, as people told the cashier at Starbucks their coffee orders. I watched as one young woman asked another to borrow her cellphone charger. I watched as people lined up politely, according to their incomprehensibly assigned zone numbers, to board the plane, dragging their little wheeled suitcases behind them.

Everything was so miraculous. Everything was so fragile. The tears did not let up until I was thirty thousand feet above the country, heading back home to Pittsburgh.

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I have always considered myself among the luckiest Jews in all of history.

This would be true simply if I had been born in America after the midcentury. These were the years of plenty for Jewish Americans. The hospitals and law firms Jews had built because they'd been shut out of the others were now the ones everyone was clamoring to join. The consummate outsiders had, in mere decades, become the insiders, capable of advocating not just for themselves but also for those still facing systemic discrimination—and all without having to give up smoked fish or Yom Kippur.

That I have lived in the United States at this time is a matter of incredible luck or blessing, depending on your belief in the otherworldly. But the reality I inherited was not a happy accident.

Most Americans my age do not know the name Charles Coughlin, but in the 1930s, thirty million Americans would tune in every week to listen to the priest who defended Kristallnacht and who said of the Jews: “We have lived to see the day that modern Shylocks have grown fat and wealthy, praised and deified, because they have perpetuated the ancient crime of usury under the modern racket of statesmanship.” Coughlin was so influential that his town in Michigan had to build a new post office just to keep up with the nearly eighty thousand letters sent to him each week.

Henry Ford received a personal shout-out in *Mein Kampf* and was awarded, in 1938, the Grand Cross of the Supreme Order of the German Eagle, the highest honor the Nazis granted to any foreigner. Hitler, who owned a portrait of Ford, had been deeply inspired by the auto-



maker's passionate Jew hatred, which was regularly articulated in Ford's newspaper, *The Dearborn Independent*.

In 1939, half a year before Hitler invaded Poland, more than twenty thousand people showed up at Madison Square Garden to rally for the Nazi cause with banners declaring, "Wake Up America. Smash Jewish Communism" and "Stop Jewish Domination of Christian Americans."

Anti-Semitism, in other words, wasn't just a German or European problem. The Jews of that continent were killed by the application of ideas—not just those in the minds of the masses shouting "Sieg Heil!" in Manhattan, but also the eugenics movement and Jim Crow—that were then also percolating in America.

A large measure of the American Jewish freedom I have enjoyed was a reaction to what happened in those bloodlands. The postwar, liberal America that rose as the Nazis fell became a fairer place to live for Jews because of the lessons that the world, and that America specifically, learned only after the murder of six million.

Of the Jews born into the two or three generations of the blessed, I had it even better than most. None of my grandparents had been in Europe during World War II. All had been born here. All met at the same public high school in Squirrel Hill, the neighborhood where my parents would later meet and, soon after, marry. Decades later, they still loved each other, despite (or maybe because of) the fact that they canceled out each other's votes. Every Friday night, our house became a salon over

Shabbat dinner as we debated politics and news and Judaism with ten guests or many more. They'd worked hard to make enough money to send me and my three sisters to Jewish day school and summer camp and programs in Israel.

And—crucially—I was born into an era in which all the doors that would have once kept me out of the rooms of the powerful had been pried open for me by tireless, angry, righteous feminists who insisted on women's fundamental equality. At least in theory, none of the barriers that had stood between my grandmother and her desires, or even between my mother and hers, were insurmountable for me.

I was raised in what can be accurately described as an urban shtetl. In Squirrel Hill, we looked out for one another. We knew we were far from the fanciest or the most sophisticated or really the most anything. But snobby was for other people. We were *haimish*—to use the Yiddish word for anything cozy, homey, and down-to-earth. It may as well be the Yiddish word for Pittsburgh.

I became a bat mitzvah at Tree of Life in March 1997—but the ceremony wasn't supposed to happen there. The previous October, a fire had blazed through my family's regular synagogue, Beth Shalom, less than a mile away. Jews and gentiles alike ran toward the fire. As Beth Shalom's executive director told a reporter at the time: "I didn't have to look. Everyone came to me." If that sounds like a Mister Rogers line, it may be because Squirrel Hill was literally his neighborhood.