



'That perpetrator hasn't sought forgiveness in any way': Jewish faith says Pittsburgh synagogue shooter cannot be forgiven until he seeks it

The trial for Robert Bowers entered its final phase last week, where jurors will decide between life in prison and the death penalty



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Just two months after the Squirrel Hill synagogue shooting in 2018, a delegation from Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, S.C. came to visit Pittsburgh.

Those from South Carolina and those from Pittsburgh formed bonds over the tragedies in their sacred spaces – in 2015, a white supremacist gunman killed nine Black members of the Mother Emanuel church during Bible

'That perpetrator hasn't sought forgiveness in any way': Jewish faith says Pittsburgh synagogue shooter cannot be forgiven ... study – and at one point, a survivor of the South Carolina shooting shared one way that she had found some peace.

SYNAGOGUE SHOOTING TRIAL

“One thing she said is that she forgave, that the only way that she could move on in her heart as a Christian was to say you're forgiven,” said Stephen Cohen, co-president of the New Light congregation, which had three of its members killed in the Oct. 27, 2018 synagogue shooting. “And we looked at her and said, ‘That's not the way we approach things.’”



New Light President Stephen Cohen and rabbi Jonathan Perlman, a survivor of the Tree of Life synagogue shooting discuss the concept of forgiveness in Judaism. The two discussed forgiveness as it relates to Tree of Life shooter Robert Bowers.

(Sebastian Foltz/Post-Gazette)

Forgiveness is an important concept in Judaism, but it is also one with a clearly defined process. And the first step – always – is that the person who committed the wrong must ask forgiveness from the victim.

“The individual needs to be seeking forgiveness for it to be something we would ever consider,” said Danny Schiff, foundation scholar at the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh. “I think it’s fair to say that we differ from some other traditions where that might not be a prerequisite.”

At this point then – as the trial enters its final phase – forgiveness is not an option.

“As far as I know, that perpetrator hasn’t sought forgiveness in any way,” said Rabbi Schiff. “Given that he has not sought forgiveness, there is really no process that would be possible.”

It has been four and a half years since Robert Bowers opened fire in a synagogue at the corner of Wilkins and Shady avenues that housed three congregations: Tree of Life, New Light and Dor Hadash. Eleven people were killed: Richard Gottfried, Joyce Fienberg, Rose Mallinger, Jerry Rabinowitz, Cecil and David Rosenthal, Bernice and Sylvan Simon, Daniel Stein, Melvin Wax and Irving Younger.

Bowers, 50, was [convicted June 16 of all 63 federal charges against him](#). Twenty-two of those charges are capital offenses. The same jury on July 13 found him to be eligible for the death penalty. Last week, prosecutors and defense attorneys began making their cases for why Bowers should or should not be sentenced to die.

In some other mass shootings, forgiveness has emerged as a theme, with both victims and observers finding solace. In 2006, members of the Amish community in Lancaster County forgave the [killer of five school girls almost immediately](#), as is customary in their religion. Families of the victims attended the shooter’s funeral and contributed to a fund for his family.

Farid Ahmed, whose wife, Husna, was one of 51 victims of a mass shooting at the El Noor Mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, wrote a book about his process of forgiving the gunman, and speaks frequently on the topic. And several family members of victims at Mother Emanuel in Charleston spoke at a court hearing just two days after the shooting expressing forgiveness to the gunman.

Forgiveness can be a tool to heal from trauma, said Maggie Feinstein, a therapist and director of the 10.27 Healing Partnership, but it is by no means the only way to move forward.

“Forgiveness shouldn’t be viewed as more emotionally healthy than people who haven’t found forgiveness,” she said. “When you can understand the anger you hold for having been wronged, you can figure out what to do with that anger – there are ways to cope with that anger or to hold it in your life in a way that’s healthy without feeling like you are carrying it as a weight.”



Rabbi Perlman has not forgiven the shooter – and cannot at this point under the Jewish framework.

(Sebastian Foltz/Post-Gazette)

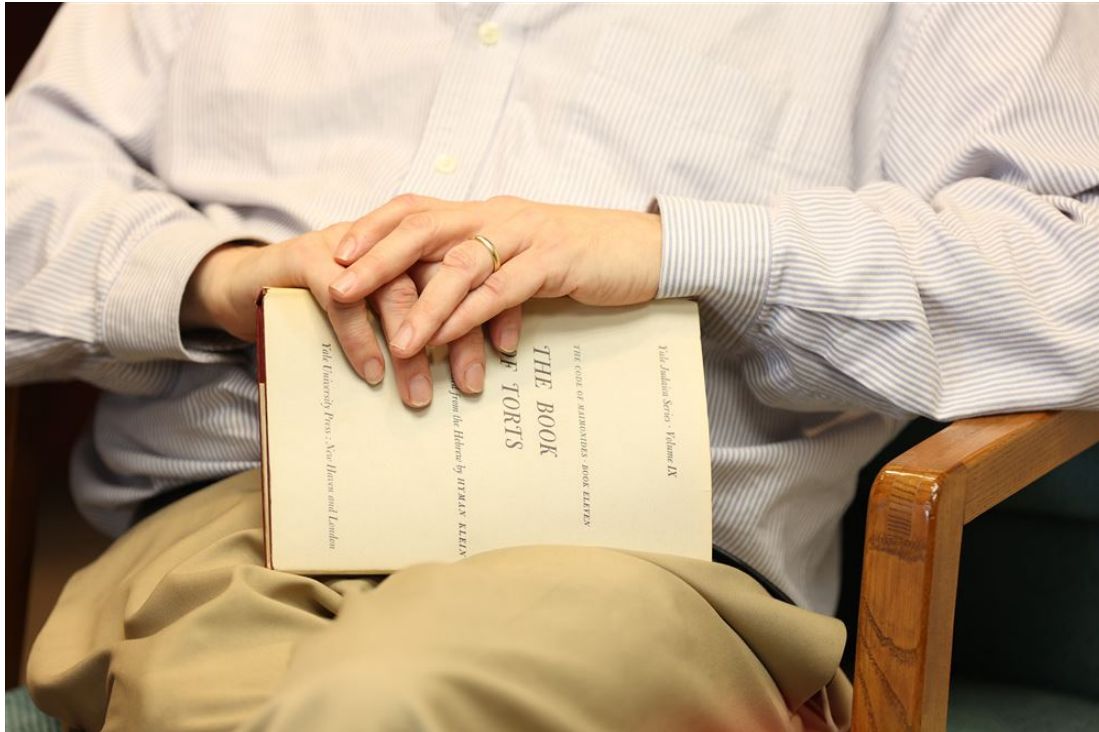
Jonathan Perlman, rabbi at New Light, was in the synagogue on Oct. 27, 2018, as the morning’s service was getting underway. Sitting in his office last month in New Light’s new home at Congregation Beth Shalom, Rabbi Perlman described how he hid in a dark closet with three other members of his congregation when the shooting began. One of those members, 87-year-old Melvin Wax, wanted to see what was going on outside during a lull in the shooting. Rabbi Perlman told him not to leave, but Wax opened the door anyway.

“I feel that if I grabbed hold of him, his arm, tackled him, done something, brought him into the room, that he would be living today,” said Rabbi Perlman. “But he didn't listen to me, or couldn't hear me and walked into the line of fire, shot three times.”

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 "Personally, I feel very wounded," he said. "I lost friends that day. I lost people that I had really come to love."

Sitting in his office, he holds a copy of a book by the Jewish scholar Maimonides written in the 12th century, periodically reading passages on forgiveness. The day before, he said, he had been talking to a pastor about the same topic.



New Light rabbi Jonathan Perlman, a survivor of the Tree of Life synagogue shooting, holds a volume of Maimonides' Mishnah Torah — a book of interpretations of Jewish law — while discussing the concept of forgiveness in Judaism.
 (Sebastian Foltz/Post-Gazette)

"He asked me yesterday the same question about, 'Well, why don't you just forgive in your heart – how are you going to walk around with this wound in your heart that's not healed,' " said Rabbi Perlman. "I just shook my head at him. We would keep speaking two different languages, about what sin is about, what repentance is about, what forgiveness is about."

Christianity generally believes that forgiveness is a decision completely in the hands of the person who was wronged, and that a Christ-like forgiveness of other people leads to forgiveness by God. Judaism distinguishes between sins against God and sins against man, said Rabbi Perlman. Sins against God can only be forgiven by God and sins against man can only be forgiven by the person who was wronged, after forgiveness has been sought and any restitution has been made.

“There are a number of steps but it begins with the acknowledgement that you have transgressed,” said Rabbi Schiff. “It requires people to put aside our all-too-human tendency to rationalize our behavior.”

Whether murder is forgivable at all is a topic of debate among some Jewish scholars.

“The one area where forgiveness is highly problematic and some may say impossible is murder,” said Rabbi Schiff. “Forgiveness can only be granted by the one who was wronged and once you remove the individual from this life, they can’t grant the forgiveness being sought.”

One of the most important periods in the Jewish calendar is the 10 days before Yom Kippur, said Rabbi Schiff, when Jews are expected to seek forgiveness from others for any outstanding transgressions from the prior year.

In 2019, on the first Yom Kippur after the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting, a crowd of hundreds packed a room in the Jewish Community Center for a lecture on forgiveness in the wake of mass shootings.

Dan Leger, a member of the Dor Hadash congregation who was shot and seriously injured in the synagogue shooting, spoke at that time of his desire to eventually have the opportunity to forgive the shooter.

“It’s too bad that the English language only has one word that says forgiveness,” he said at the event, “because forgiveness is not just one thing.”

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