Three years after the Tree of Life attack, my community struggles to feel safe

One of our Sukkot rituals helps me think about what it means to fight against evil.

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Someone's after me. I'm in the back row of the Tree of Life chapel, on the right side of the room, next to an older man. Since this is a dream, I'm not sure who he is. I look to my left and see a man in a dark suit and pork pie hat running down the aisle to the back of the chapel. He opens a closet and grabs a gun. The man in the hat aims at us, and I want to grab the old man and run, but he is screaming and won't move. Then I'm screaming too. I run toward the door, looking for a hiding place. I wake up, terrified.

Earlier that day I attended an outdoor luncheon at the synagogue where we rent space. Tree of Life is still deciding on rebuilding plans. It has been three years now

since the shooting, and we still have not reached a consensus. There were about 200 of us gathered under an outdoor tent, celebrating a bar mitzvah, the coming of age of the youngest in a family of four boys. It had been a long time since I'd been to such a large social event, and I was glad to have a chance to be with people in person.

Then a friend asked about security at this party. I looked around and saw not just smiling celebrants but security breaches. There were traffic cones in front of the area where we stood, but a car could plow through them without any trouble. A shooter could approach from any direction, if he chose to.

I'm not alone in feeling constant low-level anxiety, looking around to mark the exits and potential hiding places whenever I am in a public place. Stefanie Small, the director of counseling services at Jewish Family and Community Services of Pittsburgh, told the *Washington Post* that "10 to 20 percent of the surrounding populace will suffer a diagnosable traumatic response to a mass shooting," which amounts to about 5,600 people in the neighborhood of Squirrel Hill. "It may be adjacent or vicarious trauma, but it's trauma nonetheless." Menace lingers, even at joyful gatherings.

I recognize the man in the pork pie hat from my nightmare. He's from [Kung Fu](#), a TV show my husband loved as a kid in the 70s. We'd been watching the show before bed, and there were lots of men with guns stalking the hero, Kwai Chang Caine, a peace-loving Shaolin monk played by David Carradine. The man in my dream was directly out of the show, down to his hat, his gun, his dark suit. Why is Caine a threat to the many adversaries he encounters in the American west? They don't like his vision of the world. He's an outsider with unfamiliar notions of how to be an agent for good. Radames Pera, who played young Caine ("Grasshopper"), remembers David Carradine saying that *Kung Fu* was "an anti-revenge series." However, Pera added, Caine was often "the focus of people's negative attention and bigotry, so he would have to deal with these jerks coming at him. Despite that, he always tried to do the least amount of harm."

The Talmud teaches, "Anyone who has compassion on God's creatures, it is known that he is of the descendants of Abraham, our father, and anyone who does not have compassion for God's creatures, it is known that he is not of the descendants of Abraham" ([Beitzah 32b](#)). If that is the dividing line between Jews and those who are not Jews, perhaps both *Kung Fu* and Tree of Life remind us that some people who do

not practice compassion dislike those who do. The writers and creators of the series, Ed Spielman and Howard Friedlander, were Jews from Brooklyn. Might the Jewish creators have imagined their hero—a martial arts fighter who doesn't like to fight—as a stand-in for themselves, Jews who wanted to feel that they had some power to defend themselves, even when it may not have been as much as they imagined? Caine, aka Cain, the biblical character, might be code for Jew.

I tell my husband about the dream, and he comforts me. But he doesn't quite understand why I had the dream. After all, I wasn't there the day of the shooting; he was. Still, I'm scared and I need to fight back.

Since, like Caine, I don't want to use violence, what is the best way to fight? Against those who want to harm Jews because we support immigrants, I can help work for immigrants' rights and build the possibility of a diverse America. Against those who want to destroy the lives of Jews, I can encourage my non-Jewish friends to learn more about Jewish life and practice and to adopt an attitude of compassion. But will these activities help me to actually feel safe?

The problem with the notion of safety is that the world only seems safe until it no longer is. For the first 50 years of my life, I attended synagogue countless times without ever feeling scared. I even thought the off-duty police guards our synagogue hired on the high holidays each year were an unnecessary precaution. Then one shooter disrupted my entire complex of assumptions about what was safe. A year and a half after the shooting, it became unsafe to attend synagogue again, this time because of an airborne virus. My own backyard was safe until I slipped on a mossy surface and broke my ankle. None of these places felt unsafe until an incident where someone was harmed.

Recently, Jews celebrated the holiday of Sukkot, which includes the ritual of waving a palm frond in six directions to symbolize that God protects us in all directions. The Talmud says that the waving of the *lulav* can avert calamity and quotes the opinion of Rabbi Aha bar Yakov that it is "like an arrow in the eye of Satan" ([Sukkah 38a](#)). There's something satisfying about standing my ground, feet together, and shaking my palm frond in the four cardinal directions—east, south, west, and north—and then up and down. Its edges are sharp and could poke someone's eye. I feel like I am staking out my personal space, claiming it, and insisting on it, as I shake the palm and chant psalms in the synagogue.

I feel threatened both in my dreams and in real life. Sukkot allows me to create a framework in which I can try to feel safe, however illusory that safety is. Having the agency to prod and shove the air around me, pushing back against all the invisible forces of evil—satanic and manmade—seems at least a partial antidote. In a world where we don't know where the next danger is lurking, a ritual claiming the space around us as protected by God may be as efficacious as anything else.

I feel fortunate that my faith tradition offers such remedies as waving a *lulav* and sitting in a *sukkah*. But I need to take them with me into the rest of the year too. I need to remind myself that even when I am scared, running from the bad guys, I have the ability to poke my values into being and imagine a world where forces of compassion have power. Because the only way to make the world truly safe is to ensure that good people vastly outnumber those who do evil.