

AN INTERVIEW WITH RABBI SANFORD AKSELRAD

BARBARA TABACH

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REMEMBERING 1 OCTOBER

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH CENTER AT UNLV LIBRARIES

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS & ARCHIVE

**Today is March seventh, 2018. This is Barbara Tabach with Rabbi Akselrad.**

**Please spell your last name for us.**

Rabbi Sanford Akselrad, A-K-S-E-L-R-A-D. I'm a senior rabbi at Congregation Ner Tamid in Henderson, Nevada.

**You've done an oral history for us before, so we have a bit of your background from the Southern Nevada Jewish Heritage project. Today is part of the Remembering 1 October project, which is a totally different topic that brings us together. You're a spiritual leader.**

**How long have you been in Las Vegas?**

I've been here since February 1988, so about thirty years. It's just past my anniversary.

**Yes. Congratulations again. That's wonderful. You're here at Congregation Ner Tamid in Henderson; that's where we're sitting, is in your study. Going back to October first, maybe you could tell me what you were doing that day.**

October first was a Sunday. I am trying to remember what I was doing. I think I was reading a book or playing on my computer, and then my wife, Joanie, told me that there was something going on. I know it was a day that I was tired because on Saturday we had just finished Yom Kippur, the High Holidays, so Sunday was supposed to be a kickback, relaxing day for me after making my way through the Jewish High Holidays. She's got CNN on by the bed and it started appearing on television. She said, "I think there's something going on that you should see." Then I looked and it was active shooter; it was Las Vegas. It seemed like it was something that was going to be important, but not necessarily—how do I say that important? In other words, I didn't necessarily know it was going to be a point of historical proportion; it could be that one or two people would die, someone on the Strip, and then life would go on as usual. But as you followed the story, it became pretty clear that this was becoming a big story, like a lot of people were

going to be impacted. They were shutting down the Strip. They were closing the airport. There was a lot of unknown, whether there was multiple shooters, how many people were injured, and how many people were killed. The numbers just kept shifting and growing as the night went on. So that was really Sunday.

Monday morning I woke up fairly early, maybe five thirty, to check the news to see what was going on because if it was terrorism or racially motivated or a lot of people will die, then I felt probably it was something that would impact our congregation and the community and the interfaith community should get involved. By seven in the morning, I was thinking, *now what are we going to do?*

It so happened that my friend, Reverend Ralph Williamson, was thinking the exact same thing. He's the senior pastor at First AME Church and we've done a lot of work together. We started an interfaith group called (Communities) just for this type of immediate response. If it was racial or prejudice or whatever, the point of our interfaith group is that we want to come together quickly and we want to start either a protest or healing or just a response somehow depending upon what's needed. We began to talk and it seemed like we should do some kind of healing vigil. It was going to play itself out. We would meet on Tuesday or Wednesday and figure something out, where and all that. But the events of the day kind of took hold of themselves and we got a call from the diocese and they wanted to do something that very day.

**You're talking about the Catholic Diocese.**

The Catholic Diocese, yes. They were going to have a meeting at, I think, eleven a.m. I was free and he was free and we said, "Great." We don't need to have it our place, we just wanted to see something happen. We both showed up at eleven and became part of the planning process to have that first interfaith vigil that day; I think it was about five p.m. at the Catholic Diocese. It

was pretty full. I'd say it was packed. Within an hour we planned the whole thing. What can I tell you? We all had something to add. We needed a way to memorialize people. It turned out they had a gong, so we had the gongs for each of the people. There were certain prayers that were part of people's faith tradition. People knew others who were musicians or singers. Within an hour we had a pretty good outline of what we wanted to do and that's what happened. We got out word as much as we could.

I felt we should do something at Ner Tamid, so we did do something at Ner Tamid after that; I think it was at seven. Reverend Vaughn showed up. He's one of my friends. He wanted to see what I was doing and he also felt a need for healing.

### **Reverend Vaughn is?**

Barry Vaughn. He's Presbyterian. He just wanted to be a fly on the wall. We had a service of healing on Monday night; it was actually at seven thirty. The diocese was at five and we were at seven thirty.

The next day, October third, Reverend Vaughn had invited me to his church to be part of a vigil at Christ Church Episcopal, which is on Maryland Parkway near Sahara. I was actually the only non-Episcopalian clergy person that was invited, so out of friendship or respect or leadership; I don't know; all those. He had me speak, and so I spoke briefly at that particular gathering.

On the night of Wednesday, October fourth, that was the first night of a Jewish holiday called Sukkot, and so we already had something planned at our synagogue with children and families. It was a little bit surreal because that is a very festive holiday underneath the sukkah, so we didn't really turn it into a vigil, but we talked a little bit about it. We really talked more about it on October sixth, which was Friday, for Shabbat. We talked about it at Shabbat when we held

services in the sukkah, and then again there was another service for the young people called Shabbat after Dark in which we again talked about it in a sermonic fashion.

Those were kind of that first week where people felt in a very powerful way that they knew people who had been impacted, they were trying to understand what was going on, and they just turned to the synagogue for some support and strength.

While this week was unfolding, we got a call from a very prominent Jewish singer; her name is Julie Silver. She contacted the cantor and she said, just say the word and she will call her friends and colleagues and they would like to do a benefit concert in Las Vegas to raise money or bring emotional support. That was very generous. Julie Silver lives in Los Angeles, but she's been around awhile, and so she is looked up to by all the Jewish musicians. She has kind of taken that place of Debbie Friedman who is passed away, so now it's Julie Silver who is the matriarch, if you will, and the younger people look up to her. She knows everybody who is anybody.

Between her and the cantor, within a couple of weeks we had a benefit concert scheduled. We went through different ideas, maybe it would be the Strip. The Strip, we had some contacts, but it still was kind of chaotic and unions and security and just was not going to be possible. We ended up having it at the synagogue, which was much better in the long run. But we didn't know how many people were going to show up. On October 15th, which was a Sunday, at five thirty, we held Vegas Strong in Song. We raised over ten thousand dollars. We had quite an assortment of very prominent Jewish musicians and I invited the interfaith community. It was mainly the Jewish community who showed, but the interfaith community was invited and some did come. We had a concert for about an hour and a half, two hours of Jewish music and secular music. I think people just had a real sense of community. The cantor can go into much more detail.

When she was done, they went out to the Strip with the musicians. There were already

these memorials that were just blossoming, as people would come to the area and create artificial monuments. She and her musician friends each brought a stone that was painted by the children in our religious school and left them at the site of where this tragedy occurred. It came to the custom of when we visit a grave, we leave a stone behind, so I thought that was very touching.

Since that moment in time, I really have not been involved in any more vigils, although more interfaith work, but that was really the bulk of my involvement was really within the first couple of weeks other than talking with congregants and talking about it from the pulpit.

**I think when I talked to—not part of this project, but just on my own—when I've talked to people who were in Boston or September 11th, the time before the community gets back, it takes a couple of weeks, like a week to two weeks. People quit doing things until it's an anniversary or something, to commemorate.**

We were one of the first concerts, but after that eventually there were—my wife went to a major concert on the strip with major, top...And then Vegas Strong became a slogan. You see it everywhere and they're selling T-shirts. Of course, over thirty million dollars is raised and then they have to distribute it, so they're just starting to distribute the money. Let the lawsuits begin and let the healing begin and the repair of people's lives.

I think what's interesting—this is a little bit off topic, but what the heck, it's on topic enough—this was a big event, but still not enough, it was not a tipping point to get people to change their minds about guns and the role of guns in our society. It was the very usual response. *It's too soon to talk about it; don't politicize it; let's just mourn.* Then a few weeks go on and then people forget about it because there's either another tragedy or another news thing. That pattern has repeated itself until recently in Florida and the kids very gotten involved. I think that it did reach a tipping point and it's an issue that could falter in the sense that high school kids do

graduate and then they scatter, so the more mature ones who are seventeen are going to go off to college and it may lose steam, but my hunch is it won't. My hunch is it's such an issue that has affected everybody but especially students that they can latch on it. They have a very stupid simple solution: Let's get rid of the guns; let's get rid of these weapons of mass destruction. Who needs them? Let's raise the age. Let's get rid of bump stocks. A pretty straightforward message that I think it won't disappear. There's going to be something at UNLV this coming week and there's going to be something that the high school kids are organizing on the 24th. I think it will have legs. I think something is going to be done this time.

**I sure hope so.**

I think something will happen. I don't know if it will end these mass shootings because an open society is very difficult to protect.

**Right. There's evil in the world and people that need to act out, I guess, for lack of better terminology. But for yourself, you talked about you looked it from three different perspectives: As a person of the community, a leader of a congregation, and then also as a leader in the interfaith community of Las Vegas. I know you're a spiritual leader. You're a rabbi. You've got a lot of schooling. But what in your schooling or your education or life experiences helps you deal with that aspect of your job, your mission in life?**

Which aspect of my job?

**Of helping different groups heal.**

I guess my perspective has always been a baby doesn't know how to read when it's born, and so you need to create interfaith organizations when times are calm so that you get to know the players and you develop bonds of trust. I've been doing that all my life, professional life. But for whatever reason, since Trump was elected, there has been a resurgence of activism and interfaith

activity. It's just blossomed.

**Are you speaking about that in a national or a local perspective?**

I would say both. For sure local. But I've always seen nationally that's what happening here is also happening with colleagues everywhere that blacks and Jews, Muslims, everyone just feels a little bit more vulnerable; and, therefore, they want to come together to either protest or to support one another. So that was the start of it and Charlottesville was another one. The shooting just kind of has been part of this crazy year.

What prepares you is having a sense of community building and what it takes and the building blocks of getting to know the players and how to organize events to have venues at your disposal in a very quick fashion, to know about those little details. It's interesting, as the students are taking the leadership, they're not aware that you need permits. They're not aware of what you need for a sound system. They have the passion, but what they need now are mentors to teach them how to take care of the details of it; otherwise, you just get a bunch of people showing up and that could lead to a disaster on its own. It has to be some kind of organized process.

The second thing is, about seventeen years ago, I got involved in healing, spiritual healing, and I brought the notion of a healing service to Congregation Ner Tamid. It was brand-new and the idea was just starting to form in the Reform movement that there was a place for Jewish prayers of healing, which may seem obvious, but at the time they felt it was very Christian and it did not really have its place in Judaism. I have done quite a number of healing services and I've used that model of the healing services that I've created and apply them to situations like this as well.

But I will tell you, the usual resources came up short in terms of helping me. I got calls from all over, "Whatever you need I can do; whatever you need." Really what I wanted was

examples of vigils from other shootings or activities, and no one had anything. I think that there is actually a Ph.D. project or a poet's project or a rabbi's project or some kind of interfaith thing, which would be a guide to wholeness and healing in times of crisis, and it would be earthquakes and hurricanes and shootings and terrorism, oh my, and you would just have models of examples on how you create things in an interfaith context.

**It's interesting that one of the discoveries that we have just anecdotally come across, I guess, with this project is how different communities are connecting with other communities through victims, through different parts of that. I think that's what you're saying is a networking that happens and then—a guide? You're thinking something more tangible?**

For example, if you had to plan a service by tomorrow, what prayers in the Jewish tradition would you use? I know, but I have no clue what prayers in the Catholic tradition or Protestant or Muslim. You only have a short amount of time and you don't always have those players at your table immediately because of people's schedules. If you actually had a template, a guide—use these melodies; use these songs; use these poems—at your disposal, it would really help take care of one piece, which is the service itself, and then the leaders can just focus on getting the players together.

**When you and Reverend Williamson got together, was there a particular Catholic priest that was involved?**

Yes.

**What was his name?**

Bob Stoeckig, S-T-O-E-C-K-I-G. Office of the Vicar General of the Diocese of Las Vegas, the Very Reverend Robert E. Stoeckig. He's a good person to talk to.

**Did the three of you sit down?**

There was more than three of us because Bob reached out to people he knew, so there probably at that point was about ten of us. We just gathered by eleven that morning. Whoever could show up, showed up.

**On October first at eleven o'clock—**

This was on Monday.

**Excuse me. October second, you were sitting together. And this was at the diocese?**

Yes. About five o'clock we had a vigil.

**You're putting this program together and I'm sure you picked the time and location so you could tell people.**

Bob picked the time and location for us. He said, "We're doing this today. We're doing it at five. We'd love to have it as an interfaith statement." We said, "Great." He said, "Let's go plan it. We need something from your different faith traditions." We all made a suggestion; I'll speak or I'll bring a prayer or I can play a song. Most of us all know "Amazing Grace." *Let's do Amazing Grace. Okay.* "Amazing Grace" is always good, but it's also almost cliché. Is there something else that would be powerful, but maybe a little less well known? Stuff like that would be helpful. Then I would have no idea what would be appropriate from other faith traditions.

**Did you feel like you did create a template by the time you were done that you could—**

No.

**It still was spontaneous.**

I only created a feeling, like, I wish there was some stuff there, and then it would just be a useful guide. I put it in the back, like, this would be a good project for me.

**Were there notes or anything from the meeting?**

Bob took notes.

**Bob might have notes? That would be interesting to add to the project, the beginnings of a template that people could access.**

**What did you learn about the community because of this event and your participation in the healing that was taking place?**

I think this was really a very catastrophic event, probably one of the worst things you can image in terms of a shooting; that this guy planned it out methodically, so methodically in shooting almost limitless numbers of bullets into a crowd. I thought how strangers helped other people. The very few stories that I heard, either they risked their lives or they just reacted, like, I've got to go help people. Some people obviously fled for their lives, but other people fled to help save lives. That is a remarkable thing. Then the response of the medical community here, where people just showed up in hospitals and said, "I'm a doctor; I'm a nurse; I'm a this; I'm a that; I can help," that was unbelievable, remarkable.

The community, for a very brief time, we're not Democrats or Republicans or whatever and then they just come together out of a sense of Las Vegas. Oftentimes we wondered, does Las Vegas have a feeling of community? I've always felt we do because I'm part of that community and that's what I build is churches, synagogues, when you consider community. But I really felt that there was that feeling of Vegas pride in how we came together.

At least initially, even today, people felt law enforcement did a bang up job. They're always going to look at it in hindsight and say, what can we do better or who screwed up or whatever. As far as I know, there wasn't that major screw up. In Florida, they wondered, *why didn't they go in?* They didn't follow protocol, but I don't think that that happened here. I think Vegas had a very strong protocol and it was followed and it still was something difficult.

I think one of the conclusions was they need a special elevator. Law enforcement had to run up all those steps, thirty floors. They lost time and then they're exhausted by the time they get there. But if they had a certain elevator that they could take and go anywhere in that hotel, it probably would have helped them. That might be one of their lessons learned and there are some other things. I'm sure they're going to look at it.

**You briefly mentioned the word *security*. You also mentioned groups that are targets of hatred. Do you look at security different since October first in the synagogue?**

We look at security constantly. We constantly upgrade it and we constantly are aware of new ways people can target that you just are unprepared for and may always be unprepared for because of your financial or physical limitations. If a guy with a machine gun came into a synagogue, very little can be done to protect us. We have our barriers. We have our bulletproofing in the glass. We have our panic buttons. We have different things. But a lot of damage can be done within a very short period of time, and so sometimes it's frustrating, but it does make you more sensitive. We practice the drills and we take it pretty darn seriously around here.

**You say you practice the drills. Are there specific responder drills, active shooter drills you go through?**

Yes. I've only had one since I've been here. There was a guy we thought was suicidal, so they take that very seriously because they don't know if he is going to kill not only himself but take other people with him. He didn't have a weapon, but we did have a lockdown as a result.

**You mentioned the stone that they put on the crosses. Was that the memorial they went to put the stones on the crosses that were by the sign?**

You can ask cantor where she put them. I think what happened was that there was spontaneous

areas where people left flowers and crosses and different things and it was that general area where for a while people could just walk over there and just view or leave a memorial, and so that's what these guys did and then they left a stone.

**What's the symbolism of the stone?**

In Jewish tradition, when someone dies it's dust to dust, earth to earth. We believe that we don't leave flowers because the flowers are temporary and they'll just go away. But a stone is pretty permanent and it's also symbolic of dust to dust. When we leave a stone behind, it's a statement of saying someone was there; someone visited; someone cares. Whatever money was going to be spent on the flowers, we're supposed to give it to charity. The stone is really an ancient Jewish custom of saying a loved one came by to visit and pay their respect.

**I got the sense you're not pro-gun.**

It's not whether I'm pro-gun or anti-gun. In fact, my feelings have gone in a lot of different directions on this whole thing. I'm for what I feel are stupid, simple responses. You don't need weapons of mass destruction. There's no real reason for that to be in civilian hands. That's easy. You don't really need people whose brains are not fully formed to have this, so we could raise the age. I know politically it's always a problem because we enlist people at age eighteen; and so, therefore, they have to get it in civilian life. But really, if you ask me I would make the age twenty-five or thirty, but that's just me. Some of this is political, which counteracts common sense. I think that the founders of the constitution never dreamed of this type of weapon being in civilian hands, and so it's not a matter of someone being a sportsman or being part of a militia; it's just some of these guns should be restricted.

On the other hand, I'm really going back and forth on whether teachers should be able to have guns, which may surprise you because it surprises me, because there's a low level of

confidence whether a teacher could be prepared and there's also legal issues. But pretend you waved a wand and you said, a teacher who already has a permit and has had training can go to a specialized class by law enforcement on what to do, and if that teacher had that training would be allowed to carry in that school, not required, but allowed to. Is that a good thing? Does it make that school more secure? I don't have the answer, but I hear the yelling on both sides. Then, of course, the legal thing is if the teacher does shoot someone and there's lawsuits; he shoots his student by mistake and then there's lawsuits. But maybe it would create a deterrent of some kind if they knew that you're walking into a school and there are some people there that will have guns; maybe they would go to another place. Kind of like a lock. A lock can be circumvented very easy, but yet we still lock our doors. They'll just go to the next site. So I don't know how I feel about teachers having guns.

**We always ask people if this event changed their attitude.**

It's making me think about that. I've talked to a lot of teachers. "We don't want guns in school; more guns is not the solution to it; less guns is the solution." It's easy to say less guns, but there's so many guns out there, you're not going to take them from people. It's just not going to happen. So now what? You can outlaw certain types of guns; that to me is pretty stupid simple. But maybe we should have some schools where some teachers are allowed to carry. At least give it a try. You probably didn't expect that one from me, did you?

**No, I didn't.**

Have you thought about it, too?

**Oh, big time. But I've had opinions that are deeply rooted, which I'll share that will be for afterwards.**

I just don't know. You're kind of grasping at straws on how to solve this crazy problem.

**When you look at the interfaith opportunities or even just your congregation, has anybody made opportunities for conversations within our community? Especially Parkland, Florida, that really has brought unique attention to the culture issue. Conversations, do they help at all within the community, giving people opportunities to have discourse on this?**

I think it's important because people's views do change when they talk with other people. Right now it just seems like a liberal versus conservative thing where it's really not. It can be, but it's also not. What can we all agree that would make our society safer? There's a cost for every decision. You say, well, fine, when you go into these big massive hotels, we have to x-ray every single bag. There's a cost. Now people have to wait. Or you've got to have dogs that can sniff. Someone's got to get those dogs. If people are in hotel rooms and they have a "do not disturb" sign, well, after twenty-four hours you're allowed to disturb them. There's so many things that you can do as a business, as a hotel, but then they change the culture of that hotel and they change how we respond.

I have people who will never go to an opening of a movie all because of what happened when Batman had its opening and there was that mass shooting. They don't go to the first night of any movie. I guess that's an easy change, but that never even occurred to me.

**Do you worry about going to big events now?**

No.

**It doesn't give you pause or anything?**

No. But if it was my job to worry, yes. Like High Holidays I have to worry because now it's my job, so now we have to decide, how do we keep the place safe? But really you want to keep it safe every single day. What happens in the Jewish community is, of course, it's always focused on the children and High Holidays; those are your two basic. Really everybody should be safe,

but the main focus is on children and High Holidays.

**Did you have people—without breaking confidences; I'm not asking that—in your congregation reach out to you immediately afterwards needing help dealing with it? What was your congregational response?**

That's why we did the healing services here.

**Was because people called you and said—**

No. I anticipated it. I wanted to create a forum immediately. It wasn't like five thousand people came. You had fifty to a hundred, and for those folks it was very important. There's been no other tragedy after 9/11, just certain points that we've seen. In some cities you get massive turnouts at churches or synagogues. Here, you do get a bump of people who really are looking for some solace.

**Anything else you want to share with me about remembering October first?**

I think the most important way to remember is to do because to simply remember without taking lessons and then acting upon those lessons is really a disservice to the memory of those whose lives we seek to memorialize. If it's just same old same old, business as usual, which unfortunately has been the case, I think the dead would say, you're really forgetting us; you're really not remembering us. When we say to remember them, let's get involved in finding some common sense solutions to reining in guns, their use in our society, and making some changes in how we keep people safe. That would be my thought.

**You go to Israel often. Did you draw any comparisons between the presence of guns in Israel versus the presence of guns in the United States?**

Here's the analogy. When you are new to Las Vegas and you get off the airplane, you hear the slot machines. You go, "Oh my God, there's slot machines everywhere." You go in the grocery

store; there's slot machines everywhere. Now that you live here you don't hear them; you don't see them; they're all around you, but it's pretty invisible. Pretty much it's the same in Israel. You have these soldiers everywhere and they've got their rifles and they're walking around. It's just very normal. You walk in a grocery store and they search your bag. It's just very normal, natural. They had to give up some of their freedoms in order to be safe, but that's where our society is inching towards with each one of these things, is giving up some of our freedoms to feel safer. That could be a little scary depending on how many freedoms we give up.

**Yes, for sure. Anything else you want to share with me?**

No.

**I appreciate your time.**

You're welcome.

**[End of recorded interview]**