TERRIBLE vs. TRAGIC
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz – MAY 19, 2017

1. Last week the historic New York Lower East Side Synagogue Beth Hamedrash Hagodol burned down in a fire set by a teenage arsonist.
    a. The synagogue dates back to the 1850s, when it was first erected as a Baptist church.
    b. In the 1880s, the building was purchased by the congregation Beth Hamedrash Hagodol, which occupied the space until it closed in 2007
    c. In 1967, the building became one of New York City's earliest designated historic landmarks, because of its special historical and aesthetic interest.
2. The destruction of any house of worship – especially through the willful act of arson – should upset us. Its terrible.
    a. Thank God no one was hurt by the fire – that would have been tragic.
    b. Walls can be rebuilt BUT human life once ended is, as our Torah teaches; 'but dust and ashes'
    c. Human beings are irreplaceable.
3. This synagogue is important beyond its walls and windows – because of the people that worshiped there for almost 150 years.
    a. Its important to me because its former rabbi, is one of the greatest human beings I have ever known, though sadly never met.
    b. In the early 1950s following WWII the Rabbi of Beth Hamedrash Hagodol was a Lithuanian Jew named Rabbi Ephraim Oshry.
    c. Unless you're a student of relatively obscure Holocaust era Jewish legal texts called Responsa you've probably never heard of Rabbi Ephraim Oshry.
        i. But you should.
        ii. His life and work were the subject of my Rabbinic Thesis

iii. Where all of NY made a landmark of his synagogue, they really should have built a monument in his name.

d. Rabbi Oshry
    i. Oshry was born in Kupiskis, Lithuania, and studied at the Slobodka Yeshivah.
    ii. During the Nazi occupation of Lithuania, he became the rabbi of the Kovno ghetto. As part of his duties, he issued responsa — answers to questions concerning Jewish practice.
        1. Here is the amazing thing.
        2. When someone asked him a question, he would write the details on scraps of paper, along with the responses he provided. He then hid these papers in cans, which he then buried in the ground.
    iii. They asked impossible questions:
        1. Can I still go to the mikvah if there is a curfew? Not can I stay away, but tell how can I go?
        2. Can one save his own life by using falsified documents that attest to him or her being not Jewish?
        3. Is it permissible to have an abortion in the Ghetto?
        4. What blessing do you recite when they take you to the trains?
    iv. The pain of these questions is only out weighed by the magnitude of faith that would compel a Jew in the midst of such horror to seek a closer connection to God through observance of Jewish law and custom.

e. After the war, Rabbi Oshry unearthed the hidden cans. He painstakingly reviewed each and every question.
    i. What we find there in his answers is a depth of spirituality and compassion that brings me to tears even now.
f. Consider one example.
    i. A young boy asked Rabbi Oshry: Even though I am some months away from my thirteenth birthday (the age of bar mitzvah), would you let me put on tefilin?
g. Here is how Oshry began his answer:
    i. When I fathomed the simple sincerity of this boy's request, tears gushed from my eyes. I could not help citing the words of the prophet Jeremiah: "Who would grant that my head be water, my eyes a source of tears…for death has come up in our windows, has entered our houses, to destroy the youth outside, our chosen ones from the streets."
h. This was his response: Yes, the boy could put on tefilin, even though he was below the age of thirteen.
    i. Why?
i. New edicts by the German taskmasters were issued against us every day; especially upon Jewish children. Who could assure this boy that he would ever reach the age of 13 to fulfill the mitzvah?
j. This was why he could not, and should not, wait to don tefilin.
    i. Utter wisdom, and utter compassion.

4. It is terrible that the synagogue burned down. But the loss of human lives of those killed in the Shoah, the death of Rabbi Oshry, though he lived to a ripe old age, that is irreplaceable loss, that is tragic.

5. I share that perspective – which may seem obvious to us sitting here that people come before buildings because of something that happened this past weekend here at temple.
6. Derech L'Torah BM Orientation Program
    a. Thought Experiment: Your Beloved Dog vs Stranger/Old Man
    b. 95% of the kids said they save their dog?
        i. Lots of explanations
            1. Developmental
            2. We teach kids to fear strangers
            3. Their beloved pet vs. someone they don't know
            4. Does a child even conceive that they have the ability to save an adult?
    c. But still fundamentally I felt that I had failed, we had failed if in 7 years of a value based Jewish education we had not anchored the core Jewish teaching that human life takes precedent.
        i. That when faced with the terrible or the tragic, we must prevent the tragic, the irredeemable loss of human life.
7. This week's Torah Portion: Behar-Behukotai further emphasizes this important point, in a way we often forget to see it.
    a. The parasha speaks about the Sabbatical & Jubilee years
        i. In Hebrew: Shemitah & Yovel
    b. To differing degrees each of these periods, every 7 years and every 50 years all debts are forgiven, land lays fallow and slaves are freed.
    c. It's a reset button on the human experience and a reminder that we can get out of wack in our values and how we value things over people.
        i. During Shemitah & Yovel we are forced by tradition to reprioritize people over stuff.

ii. Relationships over the expediency of transactions

8. After the war, Rabbi Orshy's dug up the cans containing the questions and his answers about how to live as a Jew, as a human being when all around them were behaving like animals.
9. In the forward to the book he wrote in part the following:
    a. When we realized that we were the targets of the Germans just because we were Jews - that our Jewishness was being attacked - then our Jewish pride came to the fore
    b. I am not speaking of wonderworking rabbis or of grocers who secretly and humbly had mastered the Talmud and Kabala, but simple Jews whose faith in the Almighty was the core of their being.
    c. Did our enemies, the Germans - many of them church going sons of churchgoing mothers and fathers - ask their priests and ministers how to care for the Jewish dead? Were they concerned to learn whether one may use clothes stolen from a dead Jew, or a curtain ripped from the ark where the Torah-scrolls are kept?
    d. But we Jews did inquire after food when forced to eat on a fast day. We wanted to know the correct form of the blessing a Jew says before going to his death.
10. He continued:
    a. The world at large may not understand this. But the greatness of the Jew can be seen in these very concerns. The enemy does not kill blindly, savagely, like a dog frothing at the mouth, but kills methodically, like a robot, measuring height, weight, years, setting aside plumbers and electricians while determining that doctors and nurse should die. The enemy robs and kills, and the Jew, knowing that he is being killed only because he is a Jew, sanctifies G-d in going to his death,

wants to die with the correct words on his lips, because the Jew, who sanctifies every atom of life, sanctifies dying as well; and a martyr's death must be accompanied by a blessing that is correct.

b. What do you say to a Jew who is a Jew unto death? Can the modern Jew fathom it? Can the world fathom it? Does one laugh perplexed? Does one gasp amazed?

c. Because it is amazing, and at the same time it is a very basic question that requires an answer: What blessing do you recite when you are about to be martyred?

d. It is so elementary that tears are not enough.

11. A burned synagogue is mourned but its great rabbi forgotten.
12. A beloved dog would be saved over the stranger that is somebody's son, brother, husband, father, grandfather.
13. Business, contracts, transactions – they become more important than the people impacted by them when over years we lose connection with each other and its just numbers on a spreadsheet.
14. We must not allow our humanity to escape us – to get too far from us.
    a. Every 50 years, every 7 years, every 7 days, on this holy Sabbath – we need to check in with where we are in relationship to who we aspire to be?
    b. Who we were created to be?
15. Buildings, pets and money can all be replaced – there loss is terrible but not tragic.
    a. Human Beings, those we know and the millions that we don't – each is a unique and irreplaceable blessing. Capable, as the students of Rabbi Oshry of 'humble greatness'
        i. When we lose sight of that we are blind to what it means to be a human being created in the image of God.