

Squirrel Hill: The Tree of Life Synagogue Shooting and the Soul of a Neighborhood

A public lecture by Mark Oppenheimer, Author and Journalist

Introductions by Prof. Marie Griffith and Prof. Fannie Bialek, both Washington University in St. Louis

Emerson Auditorium, Knight Hall, Washington University in St. Louis

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7:00pm-8:30pm

Griffith:

Greetings everyone, and welcome to tonight's lecture by Mark Oppenheimer. Sponsored by the John C. Danforth center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis. I'm Marie Griffith center director and it's great to see all of you here in this room. And come more to welcome all of those of you joining us by zoom at home. This is our final public event of this academic year and you know it's been so good to be back in person with those of you who could be here while still allowing for an online option. And I imagine we'll continue in this mode in the future. We're working on our fall programming now so if you're on our email list you'll get word of that this summer and if you're not on our email list but would like to be on it please sign up at our welcome table outside of this room or shoot us an email at RAP@wustl.edu. After tonight's lecture there will be a reception and book signing with our speaker right outside these doors so we hope you can stay for that as well and now it's my pleasure to invite my colleague Professor Fannie Bialek to introduce our distinguished speaker. Fannie is an assistant professor of religion and politics in the John C. Danforth center. Her teaching focuses on contemporary ethics and political theory with an emphasis on feminist thought, Christian theology and modern forms of power. She is a collaborator of networking site feminist. She earned a PHD in religious studies from Brown University and her bachelor's degree in religious studies from Princeton University and she is working on a book marvelously titled *Love in Time*

Bialek:

Thank you all for being here tonight. It's my great honor and pleasure to introduce Mark Oppenheimer as our speaker this evening. Oppenheimer is an award-winning author and journalist writing about religion in America, American politics and culture, American Judaism, fatherhood and many other topics. He is the director of the Yale Journal Initiative and a professor of religion and political science at Yale where he also earned his bachelor's and doctorate. He is the author of many books including *Wisniewski* on his experiences as a high school debater and argumentative adolescent. He is also a prolific magazine and newspaper writer with bylines in *Slate*, *GQ*, *Christina*, *Tab* magazine where he also sits on the editorial board, and the *New York Times* where I was introduced to him where he wrote a column on religion and believes. He might be best known tonight as one of the cohosts of the popular *Unorthodox* podcast, the most streamed English podcast on Judaism released weekly from . He joins us tonight to discuss his most recent project *Squirrel Hill*, published this past October by Penguin Random House. In the book he approached the horror he approaches the horror of the 2008 shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue as both a leading critic and interpreter of American Jewish life and the son of a longtime Squirrel Hill resident with deep family roots in the neighborhood. The book combines Oppenheimer's characteristic on American politics and Jewish life with a kind of tenderness of the neighborhood even a lightness. The reader has a sense that he treads carefully not only

because of the horror of the events but as one treads carefully in his grandparents' home. Marveling at treasures fascinated by the peculiar familiarity of the unfamiliar that we can find in a family home that . Literally in his grandparents' home or hometown at least but I think that this remarkable style characterized his work more broadly. His writing is critical and unabashedly so but full of tenderness good humor and kindness which emanates from the page not as sarcasm or snark but as joy love or even hope, it is as if he writes to say as might be said of a home or place of worship. Welcome welcome time spent here on these pages will be well spent. Thinking arguing laughing and also in tears, I'm grateful to welcome mark Oppenheimer for here tonight for I'm sure will be a gift to spend together,

Oppenheimer:

Thank you. Thank you, professors Griffith, and Bialek. This is really really great to be here. It's my second time ever in St. Louis and my first time ever at Washington University and I've emailed so many times over the years with he really really faculty here questions that I've often stopped for quotations and I've wanted to be in communication and I've always had one question in mind when I've sent these emails. Which is do they say WUSTL and it turns out they say WUSTL and it cheers me so much and I send the emails to m.griffith@wustl.edu . Now I feel like I'm ? like I'm family because I've been saying it right all these years. I am very grateful to be here and to you who have come out in person. The many of you who I understand are online with us tonight, it has been an interesting season in which to publish a book and I've been really really gratified that wherever I've gone and I'm guessing this is about my 40th and actually my last for some time I think my next speaking engagement ins int eh fall people turned out and whether it was a crowd of 5 or a few hundred people brought questions and compassionate comments. And tonight is no different. Here's what I want to do I want to talk to you for and I want to tell you a little about the morning of ? and I wasn't to just read a few pages form the book. I always fall asleep when people read pages form their book and then I want to show you some photographs and then well circle back and I'll take some questions. And then afterwards I'm so pleased nothing makes me happier than a reception afterwards that really that's kind of everything to me. So, October 27 2018 I was in newton Massachusetts about an hour and a half north of 2 hours north of my hometown of New Haven Connecticut I was with my eldest daughter Rebecca's and we were at the bat mitzvah of one of her friends. This was the year she and all her friends turned 12 and because she goes to camp ? . we had a lot of invitations to Boston and also suburban Maryland and what I said to her was I can really promise I'm going to get you to suburban Maryland but when there's one that's really important to you in Boston, we will get up early and take you over there's. So we ? we were inside at this bat mitzvah for her friend for you know a couple hours 3 hours and then we stayed for the luncheon afterwards and of course we didn't bring our phones inside we try to respect the sabbath at least while we are in services on Saturday. Looking back its kind of astonishing to me because there were hundreds of people there this is one of these synagogues where there are two bat mitzvahs every weekend. And there were? He had a couple hundred people and there was a huge crowd surely there were people who had their phones out and surely someone was whispering about that there was a mass slaughter of Jews in Pittsburgh and also? That extraordinary teaching in Judaism that you don't let the sad rush the joyful ? we always prefer the joyful so people kept their mouth shuts and nobody allowed it to ruin the morning for the bat mitzvah girl so it wasn't until about 1pm in the afternoon and I took out my phone and ? did you hear about Pittsburgh are you going to Pittsburgh and I thought why are all these people texting about Pittsburgh and my daughter must

have noticed something was up and she said dad what's wrong so I opened up one of the news apps on my phone and I must have gotten a stricken look on my face and she got very panicked and said dad what's going on and I explained to her and I said Rebecca there's been a shooting of Jews in synagogue in squirrel hill. And she said squirrel hill dad isn't that where were from. And I don't know how she knew that because she's from squirrel hill and I'm from New Haven Connecticut. and that in fact his father and his father were from squirrel hill and two generations before that were also from Pittsburgh so she got it she somehow inferred that this was family that had connections to this attack and I said to her I said yeah squirrel hill is where were from that exactly right and its funny I don't usually talk about this but I think you'll appreciate this what we did ta that point was there was a party that evening but there were 4 or 5 hours to kill between getting out of the lunch and the part at 6 and ill stay in town and make myself busy and then drive you home. And I said why don't we go to Harvard were twenty minutes from Harvard and let's go to Harvard Hillel just so we can be around other jews and she said OK. And again, I won't usually tell this story but it's on my mind right now. We get to Harvard Hillel and walk in and the only students who are left and purely orthodox students who are laughing and having a good time and I realize they don't have their phones on and they don't know what's happening.? When we sort of got out and flowed back into the main lounge area the students had all gone silent and I realized they just found out what happened. Those next few days were painful and difficult I think not just for Pittsburgh Jews and not just for Jews but I think for human beings who're paying attention and for me it was a very tense and interesting time and for me one of the questions. am I going to write about it. Is there a way in which scholars but especially journalists who often are writing bout contemporary events have to decide when and if they're going to strike out to the place the scene of the happening and get paid to write about it. When do you turn this horrible awful thing that's happened into a professional opportunity and I initially thought I don't want to in this case. For one thing I had no interest in the killer the alleged killer Robert bowers there have been good books looking at the minds of these people the mass murderers one of the books I admire most is columbine about the columbine mass murderers, that is a book that I primarily about the mass murderers killing. Spending time in the ? internet did not strike me as an appealing way to spend a year or two of my life I didn't want to get inside of the mind of Robert bowers nor interestingly did I want to write about the killing of the 11 victims at squirrel hill? It's not that these 11 people re not important all souls are important and these 11 surely each deserve a book but it wasn't the book I wanted to write. No increasingly what I realized was the the book about the neighborhood of squirrely hill the thing my daughter Rebecca identified that this was our neighborhood begin to feel personal and real? My own research as a graduate student and sometimes teacher of American areligious history that the squirrel hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh h is not just any Jewish ? arguably the case it's the oldest stable Jewish neighborhood in the US and ? it has been substantially Jewish for 100 years since it was settled around the time of world war 1 that is not true of any other Jewish neighborhood in the United States. If it was Jewish 100 years ago it's not now and if it is now, it wasn't 100 years ago. Most of these neighborhoods rise and fall and often they rose as Safe havens for Jews after World War 2 but Squirrel Hill had this substantial Jewish population going back until the time of the great war, of world war 1. And that meant that there were multigenerational Jewish families. There were institutions that had been in this neighborhoods for a century in this neighborhood that happens to be a dense tightly knit walkable urban landscape. And it made me think that with all of those advantages maybe this neighborhood would offer an interesting model of how you can cope and how you can

meaningfully move through your grief in the aftermath of one of these mass killings which unfortunately are all too common in the United States. So I began going to squirrel hill a month after the shoot the shooting again was oct 27th 2018 it began going in November I made 32 trips there over about a year and a half and I interviewed about 250 people and y questions were again never about the killer and seldom about the victims but really about ow people on the periphery of the killing in sort of the concentric circles outside it people who knew the victims, people who worked with one of the, people who lived a quarter mile or a half mile from the synagogue. How did it affect them? How were people's lives changed in the month for the year after all of the network cameras had come and gone. What happened to community not in the day after a killing but in the seasons after a killing like this and I thought that maybe squirrel hill would be an especially useful place to study those happenings those eventualities. So, the book I've produced is filled with all of these kinds of usual characters. Remember it's not a book about the murderer

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