

In June of 1999, Rabbi Mona Alfi was vacationing on a quiet little island in Croatia with a former college roommate. It was the first vacation she had taken since her ordination and appointment as assistant rabbi at Congregation B'nai Israel in Sacramento.

For Shabbat that year, her Catholic friend and her did candles, Kuddush and motzi over dinner, and they were going to spend the rest of Shabbat sitting on the beach as there were very few synagogues in Croatia.

At midnight, she decided to call a congregant of hers in California where it was 3 p.m. She was ill, and Mona wanted to check on her welfare. But the conversation they had that night was not what Rabbi Mona expected it would be.

“The temple’s been firebombed,” she said.

In disbelief Mona asked her to say that again.

Her congregant said that theirs along with 2 other synagogues, Beth Shalom and Keneset Israel. It had happened in the middle of the night. That was all she knew

Shock hit Rabbi Mona like a tidal wave. Three synagogues firebombed? In America? She couldn't believe it. Early the following morning, she learned that the attacks had started at about 3 a.m. with Congregation B'nai Israel in Land Park. This was followed within 45 minutes by fires and Congregation Beth Shalom and Keneset Israel Torah Center.

In addition to the damage to the temples, the seven thousand volume library at B'nai Israel had been utterly destroyed. Many of the books were rare and irreplaceable.

Rabbi Mona was devastated, even more so when she was told that her own office had been burned down. She had a small collection of prayer books from pre WWII Germany and Hungary, some of which were given to her by a former landlord who was a Holocaust survivor. She also had her grandparents' Judaica library in her office. She was horrified that books given to her to protect had been destroyed in a hate crime.

It was horrible to hear all of this news when she was sitting on an island in the middle of the Adriatic, so far from home. She felt lonely and desolate, she could hardly imagine what everyone at home was experiencing.

She made immediate plans to return. During the long, lonely journey from Europe she learned more - that the damage to all three synagogues was estimated at about 2 1/2 million dollars, with two million of that damage having been down to B'nai Israel alone. Rabbi Mona also learned that while the FBI was investigating, at that time there were still no suspects.

The one moment of elation for her was that her office had not in fact been burned down though it suffered severe smoke damage. She was also consoled with the fact that in spite of the devastation, not a single Torah in any of the three temples was destroyed. The Aron Hakodesh, the Ark of the Covenant, the chest that holds the scrolls, had held firm.

She got back home only a half hour before a community service was due to begin. She'd just gone 28 hours without sleep, but nothing would stop her from attending.

She entered the Sacramento Community Theater having no idea what to expect. When she walked out onto the stage, what she saw took her breath away. Over 200 people sat on stage. It was like a Who's Who of Sacramento and beyond: there were state officials and legislators, city council members, the chief of police, representatives from the ATF and the fire department, people from the governor's office and clergy from every faith and ethnic background in the entire Sacramento community.

Then the curtain opened, and she was even more astonished. The theater was packed. About 4,500 people were there, including people crowded into overflow rooms watching on a big screen.

In the crowd were Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans and African Americans; Muslims, Catholics and Protestants from many denominations; Buddhists and more, as well as people who might have called themselves non-believers, but who believed that victims of cowardly attacks in the night should not suffer in isolation.

It was the most inspiring program she had ever experienced. The outpouring of love and support she says was overwhelming. Speaker after speaker rose to express their concern, their sorrow and their hope. Each was met with thunderous applause and a standing ovation. Everyone in that theater that night was standing shoulder to shoulder with the Jews of Sacramento and saying, each in his or her own way, "You are not alone."

That night when she came home, she saw signs in her neighbors' windows that said "United We Stand." That gesture touched her deeply. As she thanked each of them, she found out that up to then they had not even known she was a rabbi. It was a small sign to her of how the community was coming together in new, positive ways as a result of the tragedy.

When she was finally able to get into her office, she broke down and cried for the first time. The smell was suffocating. Everything was covered with a thick layer of smoke and ash.

But she was deeply moved that people drove in from as far away as Tahoe, the San Francisco Bay Area and Bakersfield to deliver donations and books and to express sympathy.

The recovery took a long time, but money came in from all over the country. They rebuilt, bigger and better, refusing to hide. In the years since, they've continued to teach and worship and celebrate their Jewish heritage.

Rabbi Mona also says that because of the great wave of support, she and the people of her congregation came to see the attacks as an isolated event and not reflective of the larger community. Whoever had perpetrated them had zero support in the community. And the attacks weren't like so much of the anti-semitism of the past; people in government and in the community all helped.

She closes by saying that while it might sound corny, she is proud to be an American. Proud for the outpouring of support from non-Jews. She was overwhelmed to see so many care, and is proud to be a rabbi because her vocation allows her, she says, to see the best in people, in how her congregation and so many from the community were there to help them rebuild.

In quiet moments, she says she reflects that although people who are filled with hatred may burn down temples and libraries, the human heart, in its capacity to love and to reach out to others in distress, will always endure. As she was taught as a child, love is a more powerful weapon than hate.

In the three days of the Tridium, we will see that weapon be used against hate, and triumph. And it is a love that is given to all.

Though not doing so this year due to the pandemic, Pope Francis would often use the occasion of Holy Thursday to have Mass in a non-traditional place; rather than the Lateran Basilica or Saint Peter's, he'd visit a prison. Here he would wash the feet of people, but most notably men and women alike, and both Catholics and people from other faiths. A few years ago he washed the feet of a Muslim.

In doing this at the Last Supper, Jesus takes on himself the role of a slave. Peter protests, understandably because the foot washing would be done by a slave, though there was an exception; a wife could wash her husband's feet, not because she was his slave, but because they were one body.

Jesus, who is the bread of life, shows us what this means; namely that the washing of the feet is the eucharist and the acting out of eucharistic living, of loving service to each other in the Lord and following his example. The Passion hasn't happened yet, nor has the sending of the disciples that follows, but Jesus anticipates this in the loving gesture of the footwashing and the gift of the Eucharist, the bread of life, a piece of which is given to his betrayer. This is what love means; the incomprehensible love of God who loves us despite our failures and sin.

Saint Paul in our second reading tells his flock in Corinth to carry on this tradition, but he is also aware that his flock has divisions too. He stresses that the disciples are to live the Eucharist they celebrate, because they are sharing in the one cup.

And so as we enter into the Triduum, let us be reminded of 3 things.

First is that God loves us more than we can ever imagine. Saint John tells us Jesus describes the disciples as "his own" whom he loved "to the end." Something worth thinking about when we get down on ourselves or frustrated with our mistakes; we need not hide anything from the God who is love.

Second, I think today more than ever we need to be aware of the role hate has in the world. We can never think we've overcome it; because it will always be there due to the effects of original sin. Only a few people were involved in the fire bombings of 1999, namely Benjamin Matthew and James Tyler Williams, brothers who were white supremacists who also murdered a gay couple shortly after those firebombings occurred. We need to be aware that while we can and should have disagreements and be passionate about our beliefs, religious and political and stand up for what we believe in, hate can creep into our soul. We can hate over race, over political disagreements, over people being different than us. We can hold grudges and resentments. And I think this has only increased due to social media. So as we receive Communion, it's worth thinking about who do we hate or have a hard time loving, for even Jesus loved Judas and gave him the Eucharist. We can pray about these feelings, ask God to help us deal with them, and accept that there are differences between us and other people. Hate has the power to destroy, and it can creep into our souls so subtly; a little anger here leads to some comments here and there and then gradually can cause us to no longer see people through the eyes of Jesus.

The Eucharist needs to open our eyes to this reality that is in us all, and we need to reach out and ask our Lord to help us overcome it.

Lastly, to return to the example of the community response to those synagogue firebombings and to the example of Pope Francis washing the feet of a Muslim woman at a prison in Rome a few years ago, Jesus challenges us to love one another as He has loved us. We've seen that this past year in how people have grocery shopped for the elderly, checked in on neighbors, tried to lift spirits through car parades at the height of the pandemic last summer. But as we receive our Lord, let's also think about what challenge He is giving us. Who's feet are we called to wash? It doesn't take much. A phone call to someone you've had a falling out with to bury the hatchet. Doing household chores with a good attitude. Writing a note and mailing it. Giving someone the gift of your time. Doing something kind for a neighbor or your sibling. There are so many acts of mercy we can do to help others see God - on a night in 1999 in Sacramento for Rabbi Mona, just the presence of so many people at the community rally and the signs and notes of thanks did so much to lift her spirits. So what can we do for one another is something we should think about every time we receive Holy Communion.

At times when we want to get negative about the world and people, let us again remind ourselves God does not forget the world, He does something about it and responds to evil with love. Let us do the same. The job of bringing light and hope into this world never ends, and let's never forget that just as emerged from the rubble of the burned synagogues in Sacramento that day came hope and love, so too can we go into the lives of people in this world and bring them out of the rubble of sin into the loving arms of Jesus.