It is not a secret that our Temple has recently struggled financially-and the impact of the pandemic did not help. You may recall that at one point we even discussed the possibility of a merger with Adath Shalom. We also contemplated selling the building in order to downsize and reduce expenses.

Among the many arguments against selling our building was the fact that we have an amazing glass memorial in honor of the victims of the Pittsburgh shooting at The Tree of Life - Or Chadash synagogue. The committee headed by Dr. Howie Goodkin, worked incredibly hard to bring this impressive project to fruition. You may also remember that we had a beautiful service on January 10, 2020, to unveil the memorial. Among the 300 people at the service, there were many honorable guests and politicians.

This beautiful memorial continues to serve as a reminder of the tragic events on October 27, 2018 when eleven people were killed during Shabbat morning service by Robert Bowers. The horror was compounded as he spewed his anger in social media posts, calling immigrants “invaders,” distributing racist memes, and asserting that Jews were the “enemy of white people.”

Our lovely memorial serves as a stark reminder that the 2018 attack was one of the deadliest in the history of the United States against the Jewish community. And there is an important lesson to be learned in how this case is being handled.

As I hope you are well aware, yesterday Robert Bowers was charged with 29 criminal counts. The charges included obstructing the free exercise of religious beliefs — a hate crime — and using a firearm to commit murder. He also faces state charges, including 11 counts of criminal homicide, six counts of aggravated assault and 13 counts of ethnic intimidation. He is also eligible for the death sentence.

One may think that choosing a death penalty for such a crime would be a no-brainer. The relatives of nine victims are among those who demand this outcome.

And yet, there are Jews, among them clergy, who disagree. For example, according to “Forward”, a Jewish progressive magazine, “Rabbi Jonathan Perlman, who leads a congregation that met in the same building and was there the day of the massacre, urged the U.S. Attorney General not to pursue the ultimate punishment against Bowers, saying instead, of the pain he caused, “Let him live with it forever.””

As Jews, we traditionally struggle with the implementation and the implications of capital punishment. This is a dilemma, because there are many places in the Torah where punishment by death is mentioned (36 in total). Several examples come to mind. Punishment by death is accepted in the cases of desecrating Shabbat, of practicing idolatry, of disobedience toward parents and most recently, in the last week’s Torah portion “Pinchus,” of killing an Israelite for laying with a Midianite woman (a non- Jew from the enemy tribe). While these situations allow for capital punishment, the actual implementation is not easily achieved.

Throughout Jewish history, tradition allowed the Sanhedrin, the ancient Jewish court, to condemn a person to death. It was to be done with great seriousness, ample evidence, witnesses, and an understanding of the consequences. The sages had great debates about whether or not the death penalty should ever be carried out (Makkot 1:10).

In the Talmud also, there are multiple debates regarding capital punishment - and frankly, most of the time, the conclusion is to use it rarely if ever.

But in the case of Robert Bowers, there is no lack (even based on the most conservative approach) to the amount of evidence or the number of eye witnesses. So why then are some still opposing the possibility of sentencing this killer to death by lethal injection?

Some say that the agony of waiting months or years for the day of your death and, not knowing when it will come, is enough torture. Well, isn’t that exactly what we want the man who committed an unspeakable crime to feel - tortured? If, God forbid, you were the child, parent, sibling or a friend of one of the victims, wouldn’t you seek revenge? Wouldn’t you want Bowers to suffer the agony of feeling tortured?

In fact, revenge is exactly what God commands the Israelites in this week’s Torah portion Matot - Massei, as it is said: "Take revenge for the children of Israel against the Midianites…” So Moses spoke to the people, saying, "Arm from among you men for the army, that they can be against Midian, and carry out the revenge of the Lord against Midian.” (Bamidbar, Chapter 31:2).

Now, in this Torah portion, revenge here means to kill. Is this revenge warranted because the Midianites (and Moabites - as we recall Balak’s unfulfilled curse) deliberately set out to destroy the Israelites through their idolatrous religious practices?

Friends, according to the Torah, God does not hesitate to punish those, who “deserve” punishment by death. So why do we struggle with this concept?

I am not going to take a poll now, asking who among us is ‘for’ or ‘against’ carrying out the death penalty against Robert Bower. Neither will I share my own opinion with you. But I urge you when you head for home tonight, look deep inside yourself and try to answer this question.

There is much to consider when seeing all the angles of any scenario. Last year I taught a confirmation class where the students were given several stories. In each story, there were two sides – two points of view. The students felt that in the situated presented, they could understand both sides of the arguments. The students then were asked to write their own story, showing two perspective conclusions.

It was not an easy exercise, but our daily lives are filled with such examples. Rarely is any situation black or white. Knowing this, we should always strive to look deeper into the essence of the circumstance and understand our own feelings and what compels us to reach our final decision.