Barry Werber came to shul with two rings on his finger. It was a special day. Werber, 77, had yahrzeit for his mother, so he marked the occasion by placing her wedding band above his own.

“On meaningful days like that I try to wear something from all of our families,” he said.

Werber wasn’t a regular on Shabbat mornings. He often came on Sundays, as those services were followed by a breakfast of bagels, eggs and lox prepared by Dan Stein, New Light Congregation’s Men’s Club president. For Werber, Saturdays were for sleeping in, but he wanted to say kaddish for his mother, Sylvia, so he rose up early and headed toward Squirrel Hill and the Tree of Life building.

Werber grew up attending Congregation B’nai Israel in East Liberty, but about 25 years ago, before the congregation closed, he joined New Light Congregation and became an active member.

He was among those who, on a brisk November 2016 day, accompanied New Light’s Torahs down Denniston Street in a procession marking new beginnings — after occupying the corner of Forbes Avenue and Beechwood Boulevard since 1957, New Light sold its building and became a tenant at Tree of Life*Or L’Simcha.
Werber captured the occasion by photographing a beaming Richard Gottfried, the congregation’s religious committee head, and Stein proudly hoisting Torahs in the streets of Squirrel Hill. Once inside the building, Werber photographed New Light Rabbi Jonathan Perlman ceremonially affixing a mezuzah and the smiles of joyous congregants from Tree of Life and Dor Hadash who came to welcome their new neighbors. Rose Mallinger was there, as were Bernice and Sylvan Simon. Cecil Rosenthal stood in the back near Dan Leger. Audrey Glickman and Joe Charney were a few tables from Mel Wax, who stood to the side of a singing Rabbi Jeffrey Myers.

Werber took their photographs on his small point-and-shoot camera, edited the images at his Stanton Heights home and sent the pictures to friends, fellow congregants and others interested in the congregation.

Doing so was nothing more than helping preserve what he saw: “history,” he said.

Werber emails late into the night, but he is still punctual. He doesn’t operate on “Jewish Standard Time,” he explained, so on the morning of Oct. 27, 2018, Werber arrived at the Tree of Life building for services well before the 9:45 a.m. scheduled start.

He made his way downstairs around 9:30 a.m. to New Light’s sanctuary and spotted Cecil Rosenthal, a member of Tree of Life, seated by the front. Near Rosenthal was Wax, a New Light member. Werber prepared himself for Shabbat morning worship. As he donned a tallit and reached for a siddur, he noticed Wax entertaining Rosenthal.

“Mel always was telling jokes, always had a smile on his face,” Werber said. “Cecil was trying to get him to explain his jokes, and Mel couldn’t hear Cecil. And Cecil was looking at him with a blank stare and Mel kept on going with his jokes. Finally, when it got closer to services, Cecil went to their services and Mel got ready to do ours,” said Werber. “That’s when the tumult started.”
After what seemed to be a crashing noise, Werber, Gottfried’s sister Carol Black and Perlman headed toward the sanctuary’s entrance.

Upon opening the doors, “that’s when the rabbi realized what was going on and pushed us into that dark storeroom: myself, Mel and Carol,” said Werber. “What I remember is it was so dark in there. We couldn’t see each other.”

Werber reached for his flip phone, dialed 911 and connected to an operator. The conversation continued until it was no longer safe to speak. By then, Werber’s eyes adjusted to the opaque setting. The gunman, who’d terrorized others throughout the building, then approached the closeted hideout.

He opened the barrier and “I could see him when he walked through the door, very vaguely, because the door closed right away,” said Werber.

Separated by mere feet, the shooter and the congregants stood together in the dark. From Werber’s vantage point the blackness became an ally, because when the shooter turned and pushed against the door to exit, he was struck by an immediate rush of light.

Because of the brightness, the gunman “couldn’t see anything inside” the storage room, said Werber.

Whether that’s the reason Werber survived or something else, he isn’t sure. While recounting the episode at his home, Werber recalled more of what he saw that day: the bullet-riddled bodies of his friends, the back of the closet and the exit Perlman helped discover, the SWAT team who ushered the survivors out, the officer who returned his fallen yarmulke.

While telling his story, Werber extended his finger. The ring that had belonged to his mother still rested above his own.

“I keep on thinking that I was not only in God’s house, but I was thinking about my mother of blessed memory may be looking out for me.”
Werber rarely cried for months after the attack. Other thoughts and actions occupied his mind. Then, a few days ago, while watching interviews he’d given after Oct. 27, he burst into tears.

“I just started sobbing. And as quickly as it came, it went, and it almost happened just now again,” he said.

Werber downplayed the matter, but his wife, Brenda, seated on a nearby couch, disagreed.

“He gets emotional,” she said.

The comment led to a lighthearted spat that spoke to their 46 years of marriage — a period most recently marked by Werber’s role as caregiver. Werber organizes medications, prepares Brenda a cup of tea or hot chocolate, makes their bed in the morning, does laundry, purchases groceries and drives Brenda to and from West Penn Hospital for regular cancer treatment and blood work.

He often wears a green pin with the words “I hate cancer” above a black “Stronger Than Hate” T-shirt. In a sense, it’s become his signature garb. When he went to Harrisburg for a joint historic legislative session, he wore it. When he went to the City-County Building for a special proclamation regarding Oct. 27, he wore it. At press conferences, social gatherings and almost every function other than Shabbat services, Werber wears the pin and shirt. And he usually has a camera in hand.

Carrying that camera has allowed him to preserve much of what he’s seen this year: meetings with politicians, visits from foreign and domestic guests, reunification with the officers who rescued him, even complementary trips to the zoo for congregants from New Light, Dor Hadash and Tree of Life. Werber has tried to capture these moments and reduce them to images, while continuing to volunteer at Family House Shadyside, sing in choirs at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh and at New Light, serve on the board of the congregation and attend meetings of the Zone 5 Police Organization and Stanton Heights Neighborhood Association.
Since Oct. 27, the almost endless engagements and interactions have demonstrated “how many people really care,” he said.

Even so, one observation helped reframe them all. Five months after the attack, Werber went to the JCC and heard Leger, a fellow survivor of the shooting, being asked about reentering the Tree of Life building. Leger said he would try and go back, “and that stuck with me,” said Werber. “I hadn’t been back in there.”

Werber had returned for Chanukah candle lighting and other outdoor services, but hadn’t entered since last year’s attack. After listening to Leger, “I said to myself, ‘I can’t let the shooter have any control of my life, or as little control as possible.’”

Werber called Janet Cohen, of New Light, who made arrangements with Alan Hausman, of Tree of Life. In April, Werber returned to the building with Hausman, Brenda and his psychologist.

Once inside, Werber made his way downstairs. On the left was the kitchen where Stein used to prepare bagels, eggs and lox for Sunday morning breakfasts. On the right was the entrance where Perlman affixed a mezuzah. Werber walked in and looked around New Light’s former sanctuary, a setting once consecrated by gatherings and songs. He headed toward the front and withdrew a photograph wrapped in plastic.

“I put the picture on the bimah, Richard’s picture, and I said a few words, a blessing of some sort.” Werber then turned toward the one place he still needed to see. “I went into that storeroom,” he said. “And this time, I left the doors open.” PJC

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