

Triumphing over Hate in America

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to accompany an 8<sup>th</sup> grade class from Anacapa Middle School to the Museum of Tolerance. Most every child was of Hispanic origin. The highlight of the visit was a presentation by two men- one a former neo-Nazi, and the other, a gay man. The former neo-Nazi related that, many years before, he was part of a group of skinheads who beat up a young homeless gay kid at a park in L.A. Now volunteering at the Museum of Tolerance, he had come face to face with another man, and they recognized each other as victim and perpetrator. The reformed neo-Nazi and the gay man had embarked on a process of reconciliation, and now, they were able to come together and speak about the evils of hatred. Would that every neo-Nazi repented, would that tolerance could win the day.

We Jews are committed to teaching about the Holocaust, not solely because we want to teach about history, but because we believe in learning the lessons of history. “Those who cannot learn the past are doomed to repeat it,” philosopher George Santayana famously said. We teach the Holocaust so that all people will know how to recognize hatred, and how fascism infiltrates a society. We teach so that we see how stoking fears about economic security, and perceived threats to one’s culture are tools for those who want to topple democracies. We teach how governments can be corrupted by those who sow seeds of racism in order to brew discontent and gain power. We teach the Holocaust in order to be wiser people, to recognize troubling trends in society and to not fall victim to those who traffic in hate.

But history doesn't repeat itself. It morphs and takes on new forms, with new tools, and new weaknesses to exploit. We can only imagine how quickly the Holocaust would have unfolded if the Nazis had the internet.

The moment that we are at right now in the United States is a moment we have never been at it before. What we see before us is not a re-hash of 19<sup>th</sup> century segregationists, or the 20<sup>th</sup> century's KKKers, or Bundists or John Birchers, dressing old messages of racism in new rags. For us to combat the extremism that exists today, we must first understand exactly what it is and what its goals are.

There are two separate white ideologies. White Supremacy has a long, dark history in America dedicated to the ideology that whites should subjugate blacks. Their goal is to ensure that white men are always at the helm, creating the rules and laws and enforcing them. White Nationalism is a separate ideology that has sprung forth from white supremacy. Eric Ward, a national expert on hate violence at the Southern Poverty Law Center, explains the emergence of white Nationalism this way. In the 1960s, in the midst of civil rights successes and the overturning of Jim Crow laws, white Supremacists had to confront an uncomfortable question. If blacks are intellectually inferior to us, if they are lazy and uncreative, how did we lose our power over them? They answered with this rationale: the success of the civil rights movement is part of the Jewish conspiracy to take over America, and put down the whites. To Supremacists, the success of every other ethnicity in the United States is part of a Jewish conspiracy against white America. Marilyn Mayo, who has monitored extremists for the ADL for the last two decades, explains that in this warped thinking, it is the Jews who are to be blamed for helping minorities, promoting third world immigration, and encouraging refugees to come to the United States. This, then, is the birth of a new ideology, the White Nationalist

movement, whose agenda is very clear- to seize state power and create a white ethnostate. The white Nationalist goal is to remove people of color from the body politic. Yes, I am telling you that their goal is the ethnic cleansing of America.

I want to say a word about politics. We cannot say that hatred was born during the last election cycle. But it certainly found the opportunity during the presidential campaign to move from being on the fringes of the internet to real-world activity, and the lack of condemnation and concern from the highest office—indeed stating that there are some very good people who were marching with white supremacists in Charlottesville- allows what was once on the fringe to move into the center. When Eric Ward says that in his 30 years of fighting hate groups in America, we have never seen this level of sophistication and successful recruitment, we must wake up. Indeed, today “woke” is exactly the term used to becoming aware of issues of social and racial justice that we are now ready to respond to. *Consider Charlottesville our woke moment.* We must not turn away because it sickens us to the core. If we have voiced the phrase “never again” even once in our lives, then we have to recognize that this is the moment we make those words count.

Am I over-reacting? A year ago, who would have thought that we would be witnessing the increase in anti-Semitism that we have seen in the last 10 months? In the ten days following last November’s election, there was an average of 87 hate incidents each day, 5 times the daily average from a year before. A year ago, who thought we’d see what we saw in Charlottesville in August, extremist thugs, nazi flags, a sea of confederate flags, heil hitler salutes. Hate-filled people walking on the streets, calling every black person that drove by the N word. A torch-carrying mob chanting “Jews will not replace us” and “burn down the synagogue.”

There was death and violence. If we are not afraid, then we are in deep denial. And history has taught us as Jews not to be in denial.

Let me stop for a moment and say to you, how very hard it is to be talking about these things. We want to believe that these are fringe movements, as the white supremacists always have been. There, but manageable- let the ADL deal with it. But in the week after Charlottesville, ABC NEWS and the Washington Post took a poll. 10% of respondents support the alt-right movement, which is a white supremacist movement. 9% of respondents said that holding neo-Nazi views is acceptable. That translates to 22 million Americans. And another 8% didn't have an opinion, when asked about Nazism.

Do I think America is about to topple to these thugs? No, I don't. But I do think we are at a moment of a moral conversation about the soul of our country and about America's very identity, no less than the moral identity crisis we were at 50 years ago when we could no longer countenance segregation and the denial of civil rights to our neighbors based on their skin color. MLK dreamed of a place where the color of our skin would not matter, but our character would. That is the moment we are at- a reckoning of our national character, a willingness to call out racism, and bigotry, and prejudice and affirm that there is no place for that in America. We have done that before, and moral character has prevailed. We have done that as a nation, affirming the right and freedoms of gay men and women to be part of the equal fabric of America. We have fought racial discrimination for people of color. We have been struggling to thread that needle with American Muslims, and set aside our fears of Islamic extremism to judge a person by the soul that is under the hijab, and not by the headcovering. We have weathered difficult times before, that have asked us to determine the character of our

country, and this is one of those times. This is not an issue that will be gone by next year, an aberration-- a “year of intolerance” -- and then over with. There will no doubt be many issues that will claim the front page of our newspapers in these tumultuous times, but we cannot be lulled into thinking that the problem is not still there because it’s not on the front page. Indeed this issue of race, racism and anti-Semitism is the underpinning to so many of the social issues we face, and must be addressed. And the rest of the world is watching us, because they too are struggling with extremism, nationalist movements, and fascism. This is our moment for America to be a beacon to the world. This is how we make America great again.

This is a moment that calls for us to stand up and speak out. How do we do that? By thwarting the goals of the white Nationalists.

They have three goals:

- 1) To use fear and intimidation to gain media attention and to grow their movement; we must show that we are not intimidated by thuggery.
- 2) To undermine America as a multi-racial society. We must show that America’s strength has always been our diversity.
- 3) And lastly, to undermine our democracy by sowing distrust in our institutions so that they can be elected to those institutions. The National Socialist party succeeded in doing this in Germany in 1933. We must be committed to transparent democracy and candidates and elections, for all that is the safety net of democracy.

I believe that we can triumph over hate. We fight racism, not with their tactics, but with our strengths. Our strengths are love for each other and for our democracy. This past year, Richard Spencer, who coined the term alt-right, used

the internet to harass a Jewish family in Whitefish, MT. You did not read about it in the media, because the town chose to not play to the alt-right's goal to gain widespread media attention. Clergy of every stripe and background came to Whitefish, as did elected officials across the state, and stood with the people of Whitefish in fighting anti-semitism. Shopkeepers put pictures of menorahs in their windows, just like the store owners in Billings MT did in 1989 when neo-Nazis marched there. Rabbis came and supported local businesses that the alt-right had defamed on the internet. Residents created an organization to fight hate, called Love Lives in the Flathead Valley. That is how you fight anti-Semitism. The German town of Wunseidel found that neo-Nazis wanted to march in their town, because Rudolph Hess was buried there. They exhumed the body, but the neo-Nazis kept coming. So the town chose to deflate the Nazis and their message. They welcomed the Nazis, and for every portion of the march the Nazis completed, residents and corporations pledged donations to "Nazis Against Nazis", a non-profit that helps neo-Nazis leave Nazism. We triumph over hate by asking good people who recognize that white Supremacists use the tools of democracy to undermine the values of democracy, to stand up for our country. I've invited clergy and city officials to be part of a conversation to make certain that if racists ever want a public venue here in Ventura, we know exactly how to deliver our message that Ventura is a place of Love, not Hate. We know from history, that all it takes for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing. That is not an option. And we know this, too, from our history:

Love your Neighbor as yourself, from Leviticus 19.

What is hateful to you, do not do to another, from Hillel the Sage, 2,000 years ago.

We must become drum majors for justice, (peace) and righteousness, from the Rev. MLK.

And it had been said, “The true test of the American ideal is whether we are able to recognize our failings and then rise together to meet the challenges of our time.” (Sen Obama, 2005)

We will rise. The challenge of our time is a moral challenge. This is not a political issue, nor a partisan issue, nor a legal issue, but a moral issue playing out on the political stage. Racism is colorblind for racists hate anyone who is not them- brown, black, white, yellow, red or Jew. For white supremacists, the Jew is the culprit behind all the others who they see threatening their way of life. We will rise because this moment is a challenge to the promise of America, the words of our Constitution, and the future of democracy. Let us stand up and speak out against racism wherever it dwells, whomever it targets. This is our covenant with America- where All are created equal, and there is Liberty and justice for All.  
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