

Otherness/Intolerance

You may have missed the sausage throwing incident in a vegan restaurant last May, when two dozen men, wearing sausage necklaces and carrying skewers of meat descended on the hipster Kiwi Café in the Georgian capital of T-BIL-i-si, and harassed the diners and staff by throwing fish and meat onto their plates, eating meat in front of them, and finally, after refusing to leave, taking out cigarettes and smoking in the non-smoking restaurant. We might be tempted to dismiss this as pranksterism, but about a month before the attack, men had come into the neighborhood, asking if gays and lesbians frequented the Kiwi Café. After the sausage incident, the local human rights watch director said, “the Kiwi Café attracts hipsters, gays, people who are different, locals and foreigners, and they symbolize liberal Western values.” Indeed during the attack, neighbors from the street joined the ultra-right nationalists, who were believed to be the attackers.

The attack on the Kiwi Café was not a unique incident- last April, riot police in Berlin were called to break up a crowd at the opening of the Dandy Diner, a new vegan restaurant. The growing intolerance of vegan cafes throughout Europe reflects a mindset that they are counter to the prevailing culture, and thereby bad. And lest we be tempted to think, well, that’s Europe, you won’t believe the vitriolic emails Emily Byrd encountered in response to an online petition to ask In-N-Out to add a veggie burger to their menu.

Who cares how a person chooses to eat?! But to those who feel their way of life is being threatened, Vegans have now become “the Other.”

As a Jew, I am particularly concerned with language or actions of intolerance, the language that speaks of a group of people as “other.” As an American, I am particularly concerned when I hear “We the people” become “Us” and “Them.”

Take for example, Black Lives Matter. It is undeniable that American society must address the inequitable ways that black Americans are encountered by police, when blacks represent 13% of society but more than 1/3 of those killed by the police. How can we not be bothered when we see what has become a weekly parade of young black victims: Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin. Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Alfred Olango, Terence Crutcher- the list goes on. Race is a societal problem not a black problem. As group organizers state, the name “black lives matter” is clearly implying, “black lives matter, too,” suggesting that we must show the same concern for blacks and minorities as society does for whites. Activists ask us to address inherent racism in police brutality, but in other areas as well, as in the justice and prison system, in poor economic, housing and educational opportunities. Now one might legitimately agree or disagree with the issues or behavior of the movement. But when the response to the movement is couched in mischaracterizing it as being anti-white, anti-police, pro-violence, then we must recognize the intolerant strains that are working to define African-American advocates as being “the other”. It is wrong to dismiss those who are passionate about these issues of injustice as radicals who are wrong for challenging the status quo in our country. How do we insure that we hear the message, despite our feelings about the tactics of the messenger?

Indeed, there is a whole list of those who are seen as Other, not just different, by virtue of race, or geography, religion or sexual preference, but Other in that they in some way are threatening to one’s way of life.

Syrian refugees flooding through Europe bring the fear that they are spreading radical Islam, and the fear that their presence is upsetting the ethnic balance of these countries.

Muslim women in burkinis, whose religious garb is seen as threatening the secular, democratic French culture and France's affirmation of gender equality.

Indeed, the issue of Otherness that has been unleashed in deeply destructive ways through this election season, has revealed a divide that goes far deeper and will last far longer than any specific political candidate on the public stage.

As an American, and especially as a Jew, I am particularly concerned.

11 million undocumented Latinos, living relatively peaceful and productive lives are seen as taking American jobs, or undermining American culture.

American Muslims are the Other, their mosques are all suspect and their clergy all radical.

Transgendered people are seen as sexual predators, wanting to infiltrate our public bathrooms.

You are Other by virtue of your political party affiliation. You watch the Other news channels, read the Other news papers and online journals. No longer do we have a difference of opinion; you are Other than me, dangerous because your political beliefs threaten my country.

And in the Jewish world, you are Other if you see the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with a different heart than I do.

This Distrust of the Other, of the stranger, this growing intolerance has touched off culture wars, religious wars, played up ethnic differences, breathed new life into racism, and anti-Semitism. Our former High Holy Day prayerbook, the Gates of Repentance, had a name for all of it, a sin we had to be diligent not to commit: xenophobia. Fear of the stranger.

Otherness is not unknown to us as Jews- and I believe that is why so many of us are so bothered by the strains we hear in American society today. In the core of our being is a familiar trope that harkens us back to the days when we served as faceless slave laborers under a demagogue Pharaoh. From the moment of our Exodus from Egypt, we have internalized the lesson to speak out when a people is oppressed- whether that is physical oppression, political oppression, or spiritual oppression. Torah gives us the language: You shall not oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You know the heart of the stranger. We know what it is like to be "the other" who resides in a land, the one who is not the true heir of all that the state promises its citizens. To live 1,000 years in Polish lands and then be decimated. To dwell for 2,600 years in Babylonia and see only 7 Jews remain in Baghdad, a city that was 1/3 Jewish 100 years ago. To be a Sephardic Jew, heir to a 500 year Golden Age for Spanish Jews yet to know a Jewish Museum doesn't even exist in that country, because your ancestors were expelled so long ago. We know what it is like to have your identity swept away, to be seen only as a whole people and to be vilified as such, for being "the Other." As American Jews, we have a particular seat- and a particular responsibility- as we watch this show of intolerance unfold in our country.

It is not just our gut that tells us that there is a growing intolerance- but actual surveys. Even as tolerance for gays and lesbians has increased dramatically in the last decade, and there has been more societal openness toward people and families across the racial spectrum, at the same time, the rate of intolerance for Muslims and blacks in the US

has increased. What is notable too, is the willingness to be public and express those feelings which, a short while ago, people would have been much more reserved to share. As anyone who has ever read an acerbic online comment, or who has ever reeled at a vitriolic rant by a friend on facebook knows, researchers find that surveys on computer allow people to unleash prejudices that they might not reveal in face-to-face interviews. Acceptable hate has flourished on the Internet.

In 2012, the Associated Press wanted to see if we were becoming more intolerant of minorities. In a survey that tested for both explicit and inner attitudes, they found that between 50-60% of Americans hold anti-black sentiments, and anti-Hispanic sentiments. These negative trends appears to be part of a growing intolerance toward all minority groups in America: Asian-Americans, Catholics, Christian fundamentalists, feminists, and undocumented immigrants, with Muslims showing the greatest decline in being tolerated. (American National Election Studies, 2004-2012).

There is hate, and there is hate. We are well aware of the extremist hate groups- close to 1,000 of them active last year, that trade in separatist, racist, extreme bigotry, and for which there is no civil discourse just vigilant legal response. But what of the more acceptable hate, that is part of the political discourse- the couching of racism, bigotry, intolerance under the guise of debating political issues such as immigration, violence against African Americans, rights for women, equality for gay people, minorities in sentencing disparities and more. America of the post-civil rights decades at least gave the appearance of striving toward bigotry-free policies. We strove toward civil, issues-based discussion. But as Ann Coulter's despicable chapters about rapist Mexicans proves, now racism doesn't make you a pariah of society, it can make you a best seller.

Imagine if I sent you an email next week and said, listen, don't come to Temple on Shabbat because there will be 30 anti-Jewish rallies across the country organized by hate mongers online, taking place in front of 30 synagogues. Don't bring your children to Torah school because there will be anti-Semitic protesters standing with placards in front of Temple that say "Hate Judaism". Don't look for goons, wearing white hoods. These are the people who live next door, and who will get their fair share of national media attention. What does that feel like in the pit of your stomach? That is what it feels like to be an American Muslim- because that is their experience. What might it feel like to have to remind your 16 year old grandson every time he gets in a car to be careful- not of other drivers, but of doing anything that will get you noticed by police- and to pray that he comes home late at night from a job safe? That is what it feels like to be an African-American grandmother. What might it feel like to be a Sikh man who wears a turban, and be insulted when mistakenly identified as a Muslim, but knowing that the barbs of intolerance are meant for him as well? So how can we let others face that reality, here in America, without speaking out? To do nothing is to confirm that indeed, they are "other" than me. And the moment we let anyone be defined as Other, we begin to sin, by ignoring their humanity, their pain, their experience, their fear. The problem with defining people as "the Other" is that we now judge them as a group, not as an individual. We reserve the right to condemn an individual or an action-- none of us can reserve the right to condemn an entire people by class, and to do so is racist.

In July, we lost one of the great moral voices, whose life stood as a reminder to us to speak out when we see a group being oppressed by rhetoric, politics, or violence. Elie Wiesel was 15 years old when he was sent from Romania to Auschwitz, laboring at a work

camp there under deplorable, inhumane conditions. Imprinted on his soul were the scars of watching the ultimate degradation of people and the sick ravages of racism. Before his eyes were the deaths of prisoners who were hung, starved, gassed- and the loss of his beloved father, before his own liberation from Buchenwald. Wiesel emerged in his adult years to be a presence when minorities found themselves crying for society's response. He taught us in Cambodia, South Africa, Rwanda, Bosnia, Darfur, Argentina, with the Kurds, and with Soviet Jews- that a Jew must witness, and a Jew must lift up her voice, and that a Jew must not be indifferent to the suffering around him. Wiesel wrote, " No human race is superior; no religious faith is inferior. All collective judgments are wrong. Only racists make them." And he taught: "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference."

There are great examples of taking a stand against intolerance. When a church, synagogue and mosque jointly purchased property in Omaha to build houses of worship for all three together as a Tri-Faith Initiative, they are saying to their community: we are more alike than different. Our fates are bound together. When Heartland Church in Memphis offered their building to the Islamic fellowship to meet in, while their mosque was being built, they said: we reject the idea that we shouldn't get to know you. Six years later, they now share an annual Thanksgiving Dinner, celebrating their relationships that have grown. When First Christian Church here in Ventura approached us and asked if they could rent space from TBT and, unable to accommodate their needs, we were able to partner them with Am HaYam and foster a friendship that enriches both communities, our Jewish community was saying- you are not Other. We don't need to keep each other at arm's length. Defeating Otherness is as easy as opening our front door.

This is the moment we stand at, as Americans, and as Jews. Our growing racism is more than an election issue. It may be defeated on election night, but the threat of intolerance, racism, and xenophobia will not be diminished in morning's light. The challenge to speak out against Otherness is ours.

All African- Americans in hoodies are not gang-members.

All Muslims are not radicals.

All Jews are not wealthy.

Va'ahvta l'reicha Camocha. Love your Neighbor as yourself.

All Palestinians are not terrorists.

All black teens aren't carrying weapons.

All Jews aren't stingy.

Va'ahvta l'reicha Camocha. Love your Neighbor as yourself.

All Latinos are not undocumented.

All Arabs do not hate Jews.

All Conservatives or all liberals are not wrong.

Jews don't control all the banks.

Va'ahvta l'reicha Camocha. Love your Neighbor as yourself.

Let this be the year that we vanquish our indifference. Former Secretary of State Madeline Albright said "Our challenge is to match words to deeds, stop allowing the unacceptable." Let this be the year our Jewish voices are heard in every corner of this country saying: this is unacceptable. Amen.