

Start Acting: Our Response to Poway

From Rabbi Lisa Hochberg-Miller, Temple Beth Torah, Ventura

Last Sunday, as the rabbi representing Temple Beth Torah, I attended a Buddhist memorial service at the An Lac Mission, for the 290 victims who died during Easter suicide bombings in Sri Lanka. Killed were members of the island's Catholic community who were gathering in churches and hotels to celebrate the holiest of Christian holidays. Reverend Sutadhara began the Buddhist memorial acknowledging the religious violence in Poway just 24 hours earlier, as a white nationalist gunman entered a Chabad synagogue, terrorizing a congregation, shooting 4 people and killing Lori Gilbert-Kaye. Is this our new normal, that we cannot even memorialize victims of one act of religious extremist violence before it is time for the next memorial?

I am tired of crying out. After nine people were shot by a white racist while praying in their African-American church in Charleston, we cried out. After a gunman killed six at a Sikh temple in Oak Park, Wisconsin, we spoke out. After Neo-Nazis marched through Charlottesville, where Heather Heyer was killed, we cried out. After 11 Jews died at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, we held rallies. Then it was 50 Muslims in Christchurch, killed by an anti-immigrant racist. The 19-year old perpetrator of the shooting in Poway last week said in his manifesto that he was inspired by the shooters in Pittsburgh and Christchurch. We don't know where tomorrow's tragedy will be, but we do know one thing: there will be a tragedy tomorrow unless we stop crying and start acting. We have been taught: evil will perpetuate when good people do nothing.

There is a response to the Pandora's box of anti-Semitism, racism, xenophobia and religious intolerance that has found fertile ground in recent years and has grown in our country and in the world. We may not be able to stop the spread of white nationalism, the alienation of white men who feel something that belongs to them is imperiled by the existence of people who do not share their race or religion. But we can address the means that would-be-terrorists use to put their beliefs into actions. In other words, if we cannot change what racists believe, we can change the damage they are able to do.

In every crime of racial or religious extremism these two factors exist: 1) the use of social media to spread hatred, connect the alienated, fuel the alt-right, and incite violence, including the dark web of 4-chan and 8-chan, and 2) access to firearms. We have the right and the ability to access these resources.

Our right to freedom of speech is not without limits. U.S. Attorney Thomas Cullen, responding to the guilty plea of a Redondo Beach man for inciting violence

at the alt-right rally in Charlottesville in August 2017, said, “The 1st Amendment protects an individual or organization’s right to speak, assemble and espouse political views, but it does not license insensate acts of violence committed under the guise of 1st Amendment expression.” Social media platforms are being used extensively to recruit, teach, plan and encourage racial violence and white solidarity. Hate speech may be a protected right, but incitement speech is not. When one tells others how to create bombs, how to perpetrate violence, it constitutes a threat and becomes actionable. This is the new front of law enforcement that we must be funding and expecting from our law agencies.

Similarly, our right to acquire firearms is not without limits. A Bipartisan Background Check Expansion Act passed the House in February. Last year the Senate passed gun legislation but did not expand the reach of background checks. A recent Quinnipiac poll reports that 89% of Republicans, 94% of Independents, and 95% of Democrats strongly support background checks. Our country overwhelmingly wants people to be deemed competent to own weapons and understands that we must respond proactively to curtail the preponderance toward violence and inciteful rhetoric which abound.

It is not beyond us to react decisively against white supremacists, racism, anti-Semitism, and religious hatred. American history reminds us that we have triumphed over the KKK, fascism, nativism and Nazism both at home and in the world, turning back the waves of intolerance, fear and tribalism. These challenges to our democratic principles always exist. But we must raise our voices, do our part and help strengthen the resolve at all levels of government not to offer condolences but to offer solutions.

The shooting at the Chabad synagogue came on the last day of Passover, a festival where Jews retell the story of slavery in Egypt and the ten plagues that afflicted Egypt. Our own country is fighting to be free from the plagues of violence, racial superiority and religious hatred. We can be freed, but not if we stand idly by.