

Diversity Thoughts: Antisemitism

November 10, 2018

The night from November 9th to 10th, 2018 marks the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht, a night of hate and violence toward Jews in Germany which many call the beginning of the Holocaust. On October 27th, a hater of Jews opened fire and killed 11 congregants at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh and injured 6 more. This event frightened and saddened many in our country as the worst anti-Semitic attack in US History to date. Jews and their allies had visceral reawakening of collective historic trauma of events like Pogroms and the Holocaust.

Diverse Jewish communities and denominations came together and participation in vigils and synagogue attendance has been strong since October 27th. Heartwarming support came from friends and other religious organizations.

But in the aftermath, there was also a lot of silence from non-Jews. It was as if speaking about antisemitism was either too difficult or not necessary. Non Jewish parents from my daughter's school, as well as coworkers, with one exception, did not mention the incident or inquire about how I was doing the week after the murders, even though I have been very open about my Judaism at work. I am curious about the silence. I also wonder whether antisemitism is a different kind of hatred than other forms of racism.

Is it also possible that we are generally silent and unsupportive, and I merely got a more personal taste of hate based violence this time? The experience of silence and lack of discussion or comfort also propelled me to question myself more and I noticed my own likely failure to reach out sufficiently to members of other target/victimized groups when there have been attacks. I must try to do better.

Even though silence and lack of support may go farther than anti-Semitic incidents, I would like to share a few reflections about a few of the dynamics that specifically inform antisemitism:

1. The hatred for Jews as "other" who will not conform or assimilate is many hundred years old. Antisemitism is often blamed on Jews for having a history of keeping to themselves. (Blame the victim for not trying harder to assimilate.)
2. Remember that Jews, though many have "white privilege," have only recently begun to be considered "white" and were, until a few decades ago, explicitly excluded from certain housing areas, social clubs, or limited by quotas for university admission.
3. Even though throughout most of history, diaspora Jewry has been oppressed and poor, the visible economic successes and social prominence of some Jews in the Western World (in science, the arts, journalism and finance for example) have made Jews look more privileged than targeted--thus not seen as deserving or needing underdog advocacy.
4. Dormant antisemitism can easily rise up to offer a racist narrative of conspiring or conniving Jews, as seen in the anti-Semitic expression "he Jewed you down," the advice to "always have a Jewish lawyer," and a paranoia that Jews are secretly "ruling the world."
5. There has been "antisemitism from the left" in the pressure that Israel uphold a higher standard than other nations in implementing social justice, which has been difficult while threatened in its existence. Zionism has been judged and shamed for the oppression by Israel toward Palestinians. It is difficult to

hold the tension between Israel needing to do better towards Palestinian and yet being a unique, irreplaceable, and lovable country.

6. The religious right and “alt-right” have a dilemma in their opinion about Jews: a) on the one hand, they hold a historical hatred towards Jews as “other,” not quite white, murderers of Jesus, often liberal, and possibly communist, but b) on the other hand they value Israel as the place of an anticipated rising of the dead and second coming of the Messiah, (though only Jews who convert to Christianity will be saved). Christian fundamentalist pragmatism fuels financial and military backing. Some Jews and Israelis have started to believe that the American Christian right is Israel’s valued ally. This can cause a “throw the baby out with the bathwater” response by liberals and result in more antisemitism.
7. There has been an increase in hate speech modeling at a country leadership level, which promotes the scapegoating of many target groups, including Jews. Hate speeches by leaders normalize and legitimize the uninhibited expression of hate and prejudice, and promote violence.

The above are likely just a small portion of the thoughts to be had about antisemitism. There are many more thoughts to be had about racism and targeting.

For my part, I endeavor to do a better job at humbly inquiring and offering support more intentionally when I know of a friend’s, colleague’s or patient’s target status membership and something bad happens to anyone in their self-identified group.