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Facing Hatred in our Midst

The events in Charlottesville, Virginia on August 11 and 12 loom large for our country. On that weekend, neo-Nazis, various militias and White Supremacists came together for what is described as one of the largest “Unite the Right” rallies in recent US history. They protested that whites are losing control of the country. Richard Spencer, a white nationalist leader who was there says, “America, at the end of the day, belongs to white men...we own it.” The groups shouted slogans such as, “Jews will not replace us.” They held swastika and Confederate flags and signs like one that said, “Jews are Satan’s children.” They spoke against African Americans and against immigrants. You may not know that three men armed with semi-automatic rifles came on that Friday night and stood across the street from the Reform Jewish congregation in Charlottesville. Alan Zimmerman, the president of the Jewish congregation, told its members who were in the building for Shabbat services to leave by the back door for their safety. How sad is that? In our country, for Jews to have to sneak out of their own building? It was, of course, just one of the many displays of intolerance and hate that weekend.

Rabbi David Stern, president of the CCAR, the American Reform rabbinic organization, said, “what knocked the wind out of me was that the racism and anti-Semitism on display were so brazen. The marchers of today’s KKK and their ilk weren’t even embarrassed or clandestine- no more hoods, no more concealment, no midnight meetings in the woods...and part of what knocked the wind out of me was that so many were so young – we were watching a new generation of hatred spread its wings.”

The Southern Poverty Law Center defines a hate group as one that has “beliefs or practices that attack or malign an entire class of people, typically for their immutable characteristics.” If you are a Jew, or a Moslem or an African American – you simply cannot be good enough! You are flawed... irreparably different.

Charlottesville was just the most visible display of hatred that simmers in our country. These individuals have been emboldened lately. Vandals have since shattered windows at the Boston Holocaust memorial, painted swastikas on a synagogue in California, broken windows at a synagogue in Queens, and the list goes on. Neo-Nazi and white Supremacists’ flyers have recently been found on a number of college campuses, including KSU. According to the ADL, anti-Semitic incidents were up 86% in the first quarter of 2017 compared to the year before. And the Southern Poverty Law Center says the number of hate groups has risen 17% since 2014. They now count 917 hate groups in the United States. 7 of those are in Kansas. The majority are in the Southern US, but no part of our country is exempt from hate groups.

The United States doesn’t exist in a vacuum. After decades of increased globalization and appreciation for diverse cultures, we are seeing a rise in nationalist ideologies in Europe, too, in recent years. In fact, in Germany’s parliamentary election this week the far right, anti-immigration party received 13 % of the vote. This gave them 94 seats in the 709 seat Parliament. One leading candidate of this party vowed that his group would “take back our country and our people.” These words are worrisome to many of us who hear in them an echo of Holocaust rhetoric. In France, Great Britain, Poland, Hungary, the Netherlands, and Italy, a harsh ethnocentric nationalism is also on the rise. We need to stay alert to this international trend, both out of concern for freedoms at stake elsewhere

and because each nation influences every other nation. While being aware of this, it is our actions here at home that I want to focus my remarks on today.

Hundreds of Reform rabbis are speaking out against hate speech, racism and anti-Semitism during this High Holy Day season. With input from many rabbis, a document was created with the hope that many of us would use at least part of it in a sermon or use it as a reading over this period. As its title suggests, **One Voice for the New Year** articulates our shared concerns and our desire for our congregations to find both courage and conviction to act.

It begins with two paragraphs that I would like to share with you: “The Talmud teaches, “If you see wrongdoing by a member of your household and you do not protest – you are held accountable. And so it is in relation to the members of your city. And so it is in relation to the world.” As Jews, we are held accountable in ever-widening circles of responsibility to rebuke transgressors within our homes, in our country, in our world. One chutzpadik medieval commentator teaches we must voice hard truths even to those with great power, for “the whole people are punished for the sins of the king, if they do not protest the king’s actions to him.”

And the 2nd paragraph, “Today I speak words of protest, joining hundreds of my Reform rabbinic colleagues across the nation in fulfillment of our sacred obligation. We will not be silent. We will, without hesitation, decry the moral abdication of those who fuel hatred and division in our beloved country. This is not a political statement. We, like the prophets before us, draw from the deepest wisdom of our tradition to deliver a stern warning against complacency and an impassioned call for action. We call on you to rise up and say in thousands of ways, every day, as proud Jews and proud Americans: “You cannot dehumanize, degrade and stigmatize whole categories of people in this nation. Every Jew, every Muslim, every gay, transgender, disabled, black, brown, white, woman, man and

child is beloved of God and precious in the Holy One's sight. We the people, all the people, are created *b'tzelem elohim*, in the image of the Divine. All the people are worthy of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

So what are the lessons for us from this hatred and hate speech? First, it is important that we remember and truly understand that we have a lot of community support today! Every time there is a well-publicized anti-Semitic act, such as the shooting at the KC Jewish Community Center a few years ago or this rally in Charlottesville, I always hear from fellow clergy and other people in our city who want to voice their solidarity with us. After the white supremacists' rally in Charlottesville, you should know that CCC who is sharing space with us reached out to me to ask what they could do to stand with us. And you tell me that your friends too – reach out to let you know that they are appalled by the hate speech and will stand with us against any hatred thrown our way. Jews in other cities report the same thing. In fact, Rachel Schmelkin who is a Rabbi in Charlottesville, wrote beautifully about how a Christian colleague promised to stand at her side and make sure she was safe as she joined one of the counter protests. He and his parishioners stood with her the whole time to protect her. And other clergy, she said, offered to surround the synagogue for Shabbat morning services. As she points out, we Jews today are not alone. We have many, many friends. How good it feels to know that so many others, the majority, I believe, understand as we do that all people are God's people. In Boston, 15,000 peaceful anti-Nazi and anti-racist marchers gathered to counter protest against 50 or so white supremacists!... This is not Nazi Germany. Most people in our country today are not anti-Semitic. In fact, I encounter far more admiration for our community than disdain. Let this calm our fears – because we know how fears can become irrational. I really hope that the assurance of support from others, helps us to think calmly and rationally

about the best ways to respond to hate when it does occasionally rear its ugly head in our direction.

Secondly, for heaven sakes, let us proudly wear our Stars of David, our Jewish t-shirts, and celebrate our holidays. Yes, it is sometimes uncomfortable to stick out and be different, but we do not need to give hate a victory! The desire by some to rid the world of Jews should strengthen our resolve to be proudly Jewish. And how will we teach about diversity, if we fear being different?! Just finding the courage to be our own true selves can be a powerful statement that helps us and other minority groups. Someone has to exemplify diversity if we want a more diverse world! And after centuries of practicing our faith despite living under sometimes harsh and repressive regimes, we should certainly not shrink now from being openly and resolutely Jewish in a country that prides itself on religious freedom for all.

Third, but equally important, just as we appreciate having people stand with us, we need to do the right thing and stand with others! Many people are the targets of bigotry and prejudice in our country. We are privileged in America today. Most Jews have good jobs and a good education, and we are fortunate to have good civil rights institutions that we helped create that help protect us. Now we need to speak out against bigotry that assaults others AND continue to support civil rights organizations that work to protect everyone. There is still too much prejudice in our country. **Racism** is still a huge issue. Too many African Americans are afraid for their safety and are not given opportunities to excel. **Religious tolerance** is still under attack. Too many peace-loving Moslems are suffering from a charge that we Jews have known well historically – the sin of being unfamiliar. And **immigrants** – legal as well as illegal – suffer in our country. A Hispanic woman I know talked to me two weeks ago with tears in her

eyes about the struggles she has had here in Topeka. She is a legal US citizen. She lives with her family by 29th Street and Westport. A neighbor yelled at her as she drove by so she thought something was wrong. Though she was running late for an appointment, she turned her car back around to find out what was the matter. The woman yelled at her – ‘you people do not belong here. Go back to your country!’ And when she and her children walk in their neighborhood, some people cross to the other side of the street to avoid them. There is not a sweeter, more hard-working person anywhere, and she has had to face this hatred even on her own street. And now she has taken her youngest son (8 years old) out of school and is trying to home school him, so that he will not be subjected to more school taunts. I know we do not want our city or our country to be this way.

Elie Wiesel taught us, “we must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere.” Martin Luther King Jr taught, “we are all tied together in a single garment of destiny.” Let us remember that what effects one of us, effects all of us. And that to live as a Jew is to care for all of God’s children. As Rabbi David Stern said recently, “we cannot hit snooze!” The stakes are too high.

There are many large and small ways for us to mobilize and have an impact.

Here are a few very important ones:

Elect wise leaders who speak out against hatred and try to help all segments of the population

Communicate our concerns to our elected officials

Speak up against hate rhetoric

Be proudly and actively Jewish

Acknowledge our own biases and work to change them

Help immigrants

I am proud that our congregation is involved in these issues. Our congregation and our local T-M Jewish Federation give financial support to regional organizations that fight bigotry – like the ADL and JCRB and Kansas Interfaith Action. Our congregation is involved in several local interfaith efforts that encourage tolerance and teach about diversity. We also have a relatively new initiative building connections with our Moslem community. And we are looking into ways to help recent immigrants. I hope you will get involved in these initiatives.

I would like to end with “A Prayer of Courage and Consolation,” by Rabbi Karyn Kedar.

Holy One of Blessing
Grant us the will to stand firm
in the face of evil and hostility,
not be silent or afraid.
To work diligently and faithfully
to banish wickedness from the earth. ...

Because there is hate, dear God,
help us heal our fractured and broken world.

Because there is fear, dear God,
grant courage and faith to those in need.

Because there is pain, dear God,
bring healing to the shattered and wounded.

Because there is hope, dear God,
teach us to be a force for justice and kindness.

Because there is love, dear God,
help us to be a beacon of light and compassion.

As it is written, be strong and let your heart have courage (Joshua 31:6)
depart from evil, do good, seek peace and pursue it. (Psalm 34:15)

-Rabbi Karyn Kedar

Ken Yehi Ratzon – may this be God’s will. - Amen
