

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Response to anti-Semitism presents a challenge



Douglas Kindschi director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute

"I hate talking about anti-Semitism. When we focus on the hate, it can become the defining element of Jewish life, when that should be living lives of moral and spiritual greatness."

So writes Rabbi Donniel Hartman, in a featured post on New Year's Day in *The Times of Israel*. He is the president of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, an Orthodox rabbi with a Ph.D. in Jewish philosophy from Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and degrees in political philosophy and religion from New York University and Temple University. Hartman has been a frequent speaker at Kaufman Institute events.

Hartman hates talking about anti-Semitism because it exaggerates the problem while diminishing the successes and strengths of Jewish life. He would rather discuss "what Judaism can learn from and contribute to the modern world, and not merely how we can survive it." He further writes, "I was raised on the belief that contemporary Jewish life, whether in Israel or North America, had a critical choice to make between Auschwitz and Sinai, as to which was to guide our lives and shape our core identity. Auschwitz was to be remembered and mourned, but it is Sinai and the teachings of the Jewish tradition over the millennia that give Jewish life meaning and value, and consequently, a future."

But, he admits, he hates anti-Semitism even more because of what it does to Jews. He hates the pain and fear that it causes. And recent events demand a response. First, Jews must remember that it is not government endorsed anti-Semitism, but government at local levels and beyond are helping to fight the attacks on synagogues and neighborhoods. We can work together to combat these threats. Hartman also acknowledges that Jews are not the only ones being attacked.

The recent attacks in New York against Jewish businesses and worshipping communities are a part of the historic increase of vandalism, assaults and attacks on Jewish schools, synagogues, and temples in the past few years. The deadliest attack on Jews in U.S. history occurred just over a year ago in 2018 at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. We are also reminded of the 2017 white supremacist group in Charlottesville, Virginia, waving swastika flags and shouting "Jews will not replace us."

It has been a chilling decade of hate-based violence, with other events such as the white supremacist shooting in El Paso, Texas; the massacre in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, North Carolina, in 2015; and the 2012 shooting in the Sikh Gurdwara in Wisconsin, as well as the Christ Church mosques shooting in New Zealand last year.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi in Great Britain, also addressed anti-Semitism in light of the recent horrifying knife attack during a Hanukkah service in Monsey, New York, and the other events in America and throughout Europe. He is shocked that this is happening within memory of the Holocaust and following decades of Holocaust education and anti-racist legislation. He notes that the internet has provided a platform for various conspiracy theories, resentments and hate. Individuals, in the privacy of their own homes, can become radicalized and motivated to carry out such horrific attacks without anybody seeing the warning signs.

Sacks writes, "Historically though, the most important factor in the rise of anti-Semitism is the sense among a group that the world as it is now is not the way it used to be, or ought to be. ... The far right feels threatened by the changing com-



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position of Western societies, because of immigration on an unprecedented scale and low birth rates among the native population. Hence white supremacists."

He continues, "When bad things happen, good people ask, 'What did I do wrong?' They put their house in order. But bad people ask, 'Who did this to me?' They cast themselves as victims and search for scapegoats to blame. The scapegoat of choice has long been the Jews."

Sacks points out that the so-called "lone wolves" look for soft targets, and vigilance is needed, especially in Jewish centers, to prepare against such attacks. He also notes that this is not just a Jewish problem; entire communities must aid and help lead the fight: "Anti-Semitism endangers everyone, because the hate that begins with Jews never ends with Jews."

He concludes, "Lastly, we must never forget the message of Hanukkah: Fight back. Never be afraid. Whatever the threats, be proud to be Jewish and share this pride with others. ... Our spirit, symbolized by the Hanukkah candles, is indomitable. Where others spread darkness, let us bring light."

Rabbi Hartman also concludes with a positive challenge. "Our responsibility is to protect and ensure the survival of the Jewish people, but our mission is to create a people guided by a tradition which challenges us to live lives of meaning and value and which can be a light both to ourselves and others. We need to fight anti-Semitism wherever it appears, but fighting anti-Semitism must not exhaust or define the purpose of Jewish life. ... The principle lesson of Auschwitz is 'Never Again.' The principle lesson of Sinai is the challenge to become a holy people."

From these two rabbis, we are challenged to learn from our own traditions, support those who are threatened, and find mission and purpose that brings respect, acceptance and love to our communities.

In my own worshipping community, we conclude each service by sharing the words of the charge which include, "Go into the world in peace. Have courage. Hold on to all that is good. Return no one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint hearted. Support the weak and help the suffering. Honor all people."

Whatever your faith tradition or philosophy, we challenge each other to seek the good, respect all people, work for justice and in all things, seek peace and love.

interfaith@gvsu.edu

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