

Weekly Teaching

February 3, 2017

Our country and world are confronting serious challenges, and yet we are suspending our legal and religious principles because we are frightened.

As a result of heinous acts by individuals, we have witnessed a ratcheting up of anti-Muslim political speech, and wholesale targeted actions against an entire religious group. The recent refugee ban targeting Muslims, and the shooting at the Canadian Mosque, are subsequent results that foster a world torn more apart.

In January, two Texas mosques were burned to the ground. The Islamic Center of Victoria was destroyed by a massive fire last week, less than three weeks after the partly constructed Islamic Center of Lake Travis suffered the same fate.

Muslim communities across our country are frightened for their families, and confronting an environment that is becoming more and more toxic each day.

Amidst the devastation of the Islamic Center of Victoria, the Jewish community can be proud of the immediate response of the local synagogue which gave them the keys to their own house of worship, and have joined in the efforts to help rebuild the mosque.

Growing up in Palo Alto, California, I personally witnessed the burning of the nearby synagogue, Beth Jacob, in Redwood City. Amidst the ashes rose immediate hope because numerous houses of worship from different faiths assisted with fundraising and other much-needed support. This proactive response made an indelible impression on me.

Each of us has a moral obligation to share our time and resources with others who are in need. When lives are literally in peril, our own obligation to respond with charity, and acts of love and kindness is imperative.

Our Judaism can be especially helpful to us as we choose how to move forward, because, unfortunately, within our Jewish history we know too painfully the results of bias, prejudice, etc.

Almost two thousand years ago the Chazal (Sages of Blessed Memory) declared, "Be moderate and measured in the judgments you make." Their fundamental warning was to avoid the pitfalls that come from making extreme characterizations about others.

Judaism asserts that we have an obligation to be very careful when making judgments and to always avoid classifying anyone, except when there are proven facts specific to an individual.

"Innocent until proven guilty" is not just a prudent societal safeguard by which to protect individuals from false convictions. It is a religious mandate.

"Love your neighbor as yourself" is of similar intentions. If you took yourself and switched places with another, how would you expect to be treated?

It is also why the Ethics of our Fathers declared, "Judge every individual on the positive side of the scale."

Fear, anger, worry, etc...are all understandable feelings. But, they cannot rule one's obligation as to how we appropriately judge others.

First impressions cannot be taken as facts. If our first, second and even third judgments are negative about others, we need to consciously set aside the negative(s) and see if we can perceive or find the positive(s).

We imagine that God can “see all” and look into our hearts and minds. We expect that God can be the “honest” judge. We hope that when we stand before God in judgment, that God will weigh our positives more heavily than our negatives. What we want God to do for us within a context of mercy is not what we often want for someone else. We expect stricter Divine justice.

We want other people to first extend us mercy. But, when we feel personally wronged, we first want “justice.”

I raise these concerns because for our entire collective history there have been those who have wished us to simply not exist, and when these people have had the power to implement actions as a follow up to their hate, they have caused some of the greatest tragedies in human history.

And, too many of us at times are neither being moderate and measured in our judgments, nor avoiding the sin of extreme characterizations about others.

We have forgotten that our language can either build or destroy, and when our anger is allowed to serve as an extra catalyst, there will almost always be a bad result.

Recently, the town of Greenwich held a leadership diversity training session led by the Anti-Defamation League. The essence of the dialogue was first in recognizing the “Pyramid of Hate,” and then finding effective mechanisms by which to lessen the power of this significant human challenge.

The Pyramid of Hate demonstrates how the seeds of hatred are planted, and how easily it can blossom into senseless violence. At the bottom of the pyramid is “Bias.” Within human interactions this can be defined as occurring when we fall prey to words and/or actions that are not deliberate and measured; that starts in substitution for our looking first for the positives in others.

Bias is commonplace in our lives, and we give into our own bias, and/or the bias of others, when we utilize stereotypes, indulge in non-verification of the facts, and/or make insensitive remarks. Bias unchecked nurtures the possibility for acts of prejudice; the second level of the Pyramid.

When people cultivate bias their prejudicial feelings and attitudes grow, and the permissiveness increases for bullying, ridiculing and scapegoating. Prejudice is the putting of bias into action.

When prejudice is permitted then a community or society that tolerates this will permit or even endorse discriminatory actions as the third level on the Pyramid of Hate. After which, the fourth level of the Pyramid becomes viable, which is the condoning and/or participating in acts of violence against those who are the “other.”

The fifth level is of course the worst. It is the time and place when wholesale violence and hatred is channeled so as to eliminate the perceived threats.

The Holocaust was possible because Nazi Germany was able to implement the Pyramid of Hate and others either stayed silent because of their own biases, or they simply didn’t have the moral courage to combat the hatred in a timely enough manner.

Specific to the contemporary challenges within America today we have to ask ourselves a series of questions?

- Am I moderate and measured in the judgments I make, and are those who lead me, and those I listen to, moderate and measured in the judgments they make?
- Am I avoiding the pitfalls that come from making extreme characterizations about others, and are those who lead me, and those I listen to, moderate and measured in the judgments they make?
- Do I indulge in bias or even prejudice? Do those who lead me, and those I listen to, indulge in bias or even prejudice?

- Am I participating in actions of prejudice and/or silently standing idly by as others participates in actions of prejudice?

When we give honest answers to these questions we can then carefully choose our next steps. We can become the agents of change by which we recognize the emergence of the Pyramid of Hate and we become enabled to effectively interrupt the progression toward the higher levels of the Pyramid.

Jewish history and human history have too many examples where bias has ultimately led to hateful acts. The greatest accomplice towards the evil done towards others was the indulgence in either indifference or silence.

We all have an opportunity to speak out.

Our religious principles are not limited to partisan political affiliations, and in fact the most effective change agents will be the individuals who within their own political affiliations help others to recognize the dangers that come from permitting within society the construction of the Pyramid of Hate.

Let's all take direct personal action in some way: volunteer with a refugee agency; contact elected representatives; become more engaged with mission driven organizations that combat hate and prejudice.

You can begin by volunteering to become activists with our own Temple Sholom Social Action Committee, or our Sholom Center for Interfaith Learning and Fellowship.

Additionally, there are numerous institutions which are worthy of our time and support. Below is a small sample list of effective organizations by which to become active and make your voice heard. I encourage us all to seek out every opportunity to speak out against hate before, God forbid, it's too late.

I further encourage everyone to investigate any vehicle which can help us make a difference, and perhaps literally save lives.

Shabbat Shalom,
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<http://www.adl.org>

<http://www.ajc.org>

<https://ajws.org>

<http://www.bnaibrith.org>

<http://www.civilrights.org>

<http://www.chn.org>

<https://equaljusticesociety.org>

<http://www.hias.org>

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