

## **Gather the Jewish People Together**

*Confronting the New Anti-Semitism, from Charlottesville to Ilhan Omar*

As we, along with all civic minded citizens of this most exceptional land, reflect on the blessings of America this Presidents' Day weekend, and the extraordinary leadership of those individuals who ensured that this country would, in most instances, be the great haven for our People seeking refuge from the bloodsoaked earth of the Old World, our collective sentiment is perhaps best described as that of profound gratitude for the past tempered by a measure of apprehension regarding the present, and outright concern for the future.

Let us begin with the very recent past.

In August of 2017, when we heard the reports of a Friday night march in Charlottesville by neo-Nazis and white nationalists, and saw images that seemed more likely to have taken place in Nuremberg in the mid 1930's than in the Commonwealth of Virginia in the second decade of the twenty-first century, we were all deeply alarmed.

We feared that vicious, vitriolic, and vituperative chants of "Jews will not replace us" might not end with mere rhetoric, but that violence might, at some point, emerge from this community built on a foundation of malice and hate.

And so, to our great pain, it was. Just over fourteen months later, this very community of ultra right wing nationalists produced a deviant

individual who perpetrated the worst anti-semitic massacre in the history of this republic, at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh.

Of course, we would be remiss if we were to fail to note that the very fact that the horrible events in Pittsburgh represent the worst anti-semitic attack in American history is itself clear evident that this exceptional nation, has, in great measure, done justice to those words that George Washington included in his remarkable letter to the Touro Synagogue and Jewish community of Newport, authored in August of 1790, some two hundred and twenty seven years before the vile heard in Charlottesville, that *“the Government of the United States...gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.”*

And yet, we would be naive to think that anti-semitism has an affiliation with any particular party. It is not the province of the right nor of the left. For, as we were reminded this week, in the pernicious anti-semitic remarks made by Representative Ilhan Omar of Minnesota’s fifth congressional district, asserting that “Jewish money”, or the “Benjamins”, as she crudely put it, was responsible for the longstanding bipartisan support that the world’s greatest democracy has for the world’s only Jewish state, the radical left has its own problems.

While we deplore her remarks, we fully applaud the leadership of the Democratic party, and at the forefront, the Speaker of the House, for their unequivocal and swift condemnation of this blatant anti-semitism, who certainly put country and values above party in their statement that

“Anti-Semitism must be called out, confronted and condemned whenever it is encountered, without exception. We are and will always

be strong supporters of Israel in Congress because we understand that our support is based on shared values and strategic interests....Congresswoman Omar's use of anti-Semitic tropes and prejudicial accusations about Israel's supporters is deeply offensive. We condemn these remarks and we call upon Congresswoman Omar to immediately apologize for these hurtful comments."

Our local representative, Congressman Gottheimer, must also be applauded for being out in front of this issue, and once again, putting country and values above party affiliation. Personally, I called both the Speaker's office and Congressman Gottheimer to thank them for their swift response. I told Congressman Gottheimer directly how proud he made us when he stated that attacks against the loyalty of Jewish Americans to this nation are intolerable.

We are a people that has a deep seated belief in personal redemption and repentance, teshuvah, and we acknowledge that Congresswoman Omar did subsequently apologize, in her own terms, "unequivocally." And yet, personally, while, unlike the Almighty, who sees into the hearts of all flesh, I cannot possibly know what is in the heart of another person, I find myself deeply ambivalent about the sincerity of this apology.

Please allow me to explain. Just a number of weeks ago, when a college classmate of mine, Bari Weiss, who now writes for the New York Times, criticized Representative Omar for her 2012 remarks accusing Israel of having "hypnotized the world", a classical anti-semitic trope, Representative Omar thanked Ms. Weiss for helping her understand the deeply troubling nature of her own comments. As we find ourselves not even one month removed from that incident, it is truly hard to know what to make of an

apology that once again, cites ignorance regarding the painful history of such comments. At the very least, in the spirit of our own national pastime, this is quite definitively strike two.

And, let it equally be said that our condemnation of such hate speech by Representative Omar has nothing whatsoever to do with her own religion and ethnic background. On the contrary, it is profoundly disappointing that someone who gave to this country as a refugee from terrible strife in Somalia of the early 1990's, who has had to drink from the bitter chalice of tribal and clan animosity, would spread bigotry in this land of liberty.

While, as is only natural, our chief concern regarding the rise of anti-semitism is local, we are certainly aware that we are confronting a global phenomenon. In 2018, France saw an increase of 74% in anti-semitic attacks relative to 2017, while Germany saw an increase of some 60% over that time period. Here at home, the ADL reported a 57% increase in anti-semitic attacks in 2017 over 2016, as we await 2018 statistics. Of course, as we already mentioned, 2018 was of course the year of the worst anti-semitic attack in American history.

As we find ourselves in the month of Adar, our collective response is absolutely clear. When, in ancient Persia, our people faced the threat of annihilation itself, a young orphan girl turned queen proclaimed to Mordechai, in her day, but for all of Jewish history as well, “go, gather all of the Jews”, **לך כנוס את כל היהודים הנמצאים בשושן**.

In confronting the pernicious threat of Haman, who despised the Jewish, **צרר היהודים**, and anyone so disposed today, we must stand shoulder

to shoulder with all of our brothers and sisters, as well as decent people of all faiths, in confronting the world's most ancient form of hatred.

As we read about the *ketoret* this morning, the special incense offering brought twice daily, we are reminded that, as the Talmud explains, that the *ketoret* specifically included one spice, the *chelbinah*, which actually had an offensive aroma, to remind us that, when faced with an external crisis, all Jews must stand together, even those who, spiritually speaking, may leave something to be desired, so that we confront those who wish us harm with one voice.

We do not know what the future holds, but we surely know that we must never be passive in confronting threats.

We surely know that speech can translate into action, a lesson re-learned on the road from Charlottesville to Pittsburgh.

We surely know that anti-semitism has no party affiliation, as the radical left and the ultra-nationalist right share very little in common, with the exception of their animus towards our people and the Jewish state.

We surely know that we have a responsibility to these United States and to the Jewish State to do everything in our power to strengthen the bonds between these nations, to the betterment of all humanity.

We surely know that criticism of any particular government of the State of Israel, or any particular policy is legitimate, and consistent with our values of free speech, and yet we equally know that when Israel is singled out

above Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba, China, Russia, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, where human rights are an utter farce, that there is a name for that: anti-semitism.

And, let us equally remember, that, as we read this morning, the incense was always offered in conjunction with the service of the menorah, ובהעלות אהרן את הנרות בין הערבים יקטירה, to remind us, that, should we stand together as brothers and sisters, in accordance with the symbolism of the *ketoret*, as we were called to two and one half millennia ago by Esther, we will not only bring forth that most pleasing aroma of tolerance and acceptance, in place of the acrid odor of bigotry and hatred, but, we will, as the menorah did, continue to illuminate this great nation with the glorious light of our founding principles, as our first President said, whom we remember this President's weekend, *the Government of the United States...gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.*