

“Don’t Stand Idly By!”
Parashat Achrei Mot-Kedoshim
April 28, 2018
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During the past week, the leaders of two European countries, France and Germany, visited the White House. These visits were very different ... but that’s not what I want to talk about. I want to talk about incidents that have recently taken place in these two countries and share some reflections on what I think this can teach us about a central teaching in this week’s *parashah*.

The teaching is a simple one: “*LO TA-AMOD AL DAM REYEICHAH!*” -- DON’T STAND BY THE BLOOD OF YOUR NEIGHBOR!” It’s simple to say, but what does it mean? How do we express it? How do we fulfill it?

Europe, as we know, isn’t just the magical foreign locale that Americans have long enjoyed visiting; it’s where Jews lived in large numbers in communities that were, it’s true, beset by many, many challenges, but which survived for over a thousand years. The Hebrew term, “Ashkenaz,” is applied to the areas where, roughly, France and Germany exist today. Many of the great Jewish leaders of the Middle Ages: Rashi, Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg, and many others, lived and thrived in Ashkenaz.

For most of those years, Jews constituted a separate polity. That began to change in the late 1700’s with the French Revolution, which resulted in the emancipation of the Jews in France. Jews in Germany were emancipated in stages in the 19th century.

Even though Jews were emancipated in both of these countries, they continued to be treated as “other”, and they continued to suffer periodic persecution throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. As we may recall, in France, the Dreyfus Affair in the late 1800’s inspired Theodor Herzl to create the Zionist Movement, and in



Germany anti-Semitism remained strong, notwithstanding the tremendous strides that Jews took to assimilate into German society.

All this came to a head, of course, in the 1930's and 40's when an all-out war on the Jews took place, during the period we describe with the word, the "*Shoah*."

In the aftermath of World War II, Jews returned to and have prospered in France and Germany, and yet, especially since the year 2000, recently have increasingly been the targets of blatant, explicit, anti-Semitic attacks. Although some of these attacks have arisen among skin-heads and others who are identified as neo-Nazis, these who claim a solidarity with Hitler, and who identified with the nativist populations that originally supported him, others -- increasingly, the majority, apparently -- have come from communities of North Africans who migrated to Europe during the decades since the Second World War, and whose gripe with "the Jews" includes anti-Israel sentiment as well as anti-Semitism.

Fast forward to April of last year. On April 4, 2017, a 67-year-old Jewish woman in Paris named Sarah Halimi was beaten to death and thrown off the balcony of her third-story apartment in a public housing complex by a neighbor who shouted "Allahu Akbar." It took **ten months** before authorities labelled it a hate crime.

Last Friday, Mireille Knoll, an 85-year-old Holocaust survivor, was stabbed repeatedly and set on fire. Almost immediately, the authorities labelled it an anti-Semitic attack. In the space of a year, awareness of the depth and pervasiveness of the problem has clearly grown. And in response to the gruesome, shameful attack, there was a rally in Paris. And yet, even at the rally, there was a certain hesitation. The reason has to do with a strong aversion, in French society, toward identity politics, toward seeing individuals as representatives of the ethnic or religious groups of which they are a part. This dates back to the French Revolution. When Jews were emancipated, the slogan was, "to Jews, everything; to the Jewish Nation, nothing." In other words, freedom in France was purchased at the cost of religious or ethnic identification and solidarity.

And so, at this rally, there was resistance, even from the Jewish leaders present, to the idea that this was an act of anti-Semitism that needed a unique response.

Instead, the attack was considered a brutal act against “a person in France.” Richard Glucksmann, a journalist, wrote that he was attending, not because he was heeding the call of the Jewish community in France, but “because millions of people, Jews and non-Jews, people who belong to one community or none, feel the same anguish that I do, and feel in some way that they also lost their grandmother on March 23, 2018.” And Rabbi Delphine Horvilleur, tweeted, “I dream of a France that knows that someone killed a grandmother, *and not just “mine”* (emphasis added). The country, in the words of Rachel Donadio, in an article in the Atlantic, is “slowly ... try[ing] to grapple with seemingly intractable problems” rather than ignoring them, as it had in the past.”

The problem remains grave. As Elisabeth Badinter, a French intellectual, put it, “I think that the more immigrants who arrive in Europe from Muslim countries, the more difficult it will be.” Integration will be difficult, and they’ll be unhappy, Badinter continued. “And who does one immediately point the finger at? Americans and Israelis, with this radical conflation between Israeli citizens and diaspora Jews, which they see as the same. So I have to confess that one, I have no idea how we’re going to fight this cancer of anti-Semitism. And two, I’m worried.”

In Germany, something a little different happened. There too, there has recently been a series of violent anti-Semitic attacks. In 2017, there were almost 1,000 anti-Semitic attacks in Berlin alone. (This is an increase of 60% from the previous year.) The most notorious recent one occurred in Berlin. Two men wearing *kippot* were set upon, and one of them was whipped with a belt by a group of three men who shouted “Yahudi,” the Arabic word for Jew. You can view this attack on YouTube.

In the wake of the attack, Josef Schuster, the head of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, advised people to avoid wearing *kippot* in public in major German cities. (Three years ago, he’d warned against doing so in Muslim majority neighborhoods, but this time, he extended the warning.)

For some reason, this attack galvanized public opinion in Germany. Perhaps it’s because the victim, the man who was beaten with the belt, was not Jewish. He was

an Israeli Arab who'd put on a *kippah* after someone had told him that you couldn't safely walk around Berlin with a *kippah* on. And so he put one on, ... and was attacked.

Several thousand -- not a huge number, but not a small number either -- put on *kippot* and attended rallies in several German cities the other day (You can read about it [here](#)). German media outlets supported the initiative. Berlin's "Tagesspiegel" newspaper printed a cut-out, make-your-own *kippah* for readers to wear in solidarity.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas hailed the initiative. "If young men are threatened just because they wear a *kippah*," he said, "we must show them: they are not alone. Every attack on Jewish life is an attack on us all."

Among those who gathered were not only German Christians, but Muslims as well. Men, women, and children. Muslim women wore *kippot* over their head scarves.

And so we can see that both France and Germany, the two countries whose leaders visited the White House this week, are grappling with anti-Semitism. They're also grappling with what it means **not to stand idly by**.

This is a tough mitzvah to fulfill. When do we know that we're really fulfilling it? Did that Israeli Arab who wore a *kippah* fulfill it? Did those Muslim women who wore *kippot* over their head scarves fulfill it?

How about us? That, after all, is the purpose of a sermon, right? Not to point fingers at others, but to look at ourselves in the mirror. What have we done in the face of attacks in our country, not on Jews, but on others? Have we done the equivalent of putting on a *kippah*? Have we put ourselves out there in support and in solidarity with those who are the targets of discrimination or persecution?

What's good for the goose is good for the gander. Let's heed this *mitzvah*, and heed the way it's been observed and practiced by others, and let's consider ways that we can live up to its demands, in our own way, and thereby stand in solidarity with those whose blood is on the line.

Shabbat Shalom.