Close to Home: Bigotry puts everyone at risk

A memorial for the 11 victims of the Oct. 31, 2018 mass shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in PIttsburgh. (HILARY SWIFT / New York Times)

BY GEORGE GITTLEMAN
GEORGE GITTLEMAN IS RABBI AT CONGREGATION SHOMREI TORAH IN SANTA ROSA.
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When my father grew up in Louisville, Kentucky, in the 1940s, bigotry toward Jews was ubiquitous. He shared with me painful memories of restaurant and hotel signs reading, "No n------, dogs or Jews." Farther north in Chicago, my mother had similar childhood encounters.

Unfortunately, my parents' experiences were common for Jews across America before the civil rights movement. Only after the 1960s did overt anti-Semitism become publicly unacceptable and institutional discrimination against Jews illegal. Fairly rapidly since then the Jewish community seemed to have become an accepted important part of the American landscape.

There were still places that excluded Jews, and anti- Jewish sentiment persisted, but in recent decades it seemed like we had found a true home in America. At least that was how it felt to me. I even once naively announced to

group of adult children of Holocaust survivors that "in America today, anti- Semitism is dead." They were skeptical, and as it turns out, I was wrong.

Since the 2016 elections, expressions of anti-Jewish bigotry in America have more than doubled. The 2018 attack at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, where 11 people were murdered and four seriously wounded, contributed to the bloodiest period ever for American Jews. And the tragedies mount. The 2019 numbers aren't yet available, but halfway through the year 780 violent attacks had already been documented against Jews in the U.S.

It's hard to feel safe knowing that, whether you were worshiping in a synagogue near San Diego, shopping in a kosher grocery in Jersey City or attending a Hanukkah candle lighting at a rabbi's home in Monsey, New York, you could be killed or seriously wounded just for being Jewish. Yet many were.

Sociologists and historians may be able to explain such a dramatic increase in anti- Jewish bigotry. But as a spiritual and communal leader of the Jewish community, I feel compelled to address this crisis from both religious and practical perspectives.

In Hebrew, "adam" means earth and in the biblical book of Genesis we are taught that Adam, the earthling, was created in God's image. That means all of us are created in God's image. All of us, regardless of our sex, gender identity, skin color, religion, sexual orientation. If we are "b'nai adam," children of Adam, if we are earthlings, if we are humans, we are, according to Genesis, images of God. That means that diminishing any human being in any way is an affront to God. Bigotry toward anyone is bigotry toward everyone. And, once it becomes acceptable to attack the image of God in one form, the path is opened to attack the image of God in any form.

This profound religious truth leads to an equally important political reality: If any one of us can be attacked with impunity, all of us can be attacked with impunity. The German Protestant minister, Martin Neimoller, famously expressed this when he wrote: "First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out — because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out — because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out, because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me."

Bigotry toward Jews is not just a problem for the Jewish community. Our vulnerability reflects the fragile state of American society. How America responds to attacks against the Jewish community will be the bellwether of our democracy's health and of the decency of American society.

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