

After Charlottesville

Dear Friends:

On August 21, 1790, George Washington wrote to the Jewish community of Newport, Rhode Island:

“...the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support....May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants-while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.” — G. Washington

Yesterday was a tragic day in American history. It was a horrific Shabbat in America. Charlottesville was the site of a neo-Nazi, alt-right, white nationalist, Ku Klux Klan rally whose only purpose was to spew hatred and bigotry. The rally was planned under the title, “Unite the Right.” There can be no doubt about its purpose and ideology. The slogans they shouted were hateful and frightening, and they included, “You will not replace us. Jew will not replace us.”

The underlying agenda at the root of yesterday’s riots is clear, and it needs to be named. This was domestic terrorism, perpetrated by radical white supremacists. Whether liberal or conservative, we must all demand explicit condemnation and criminal prosecution of those who intentionally sought to harm others. Thankfully, the Justice Department has opened a civil rights investigation into the violence and death yesterday.

This is not a partisan political issue. Indeed, we have heard strong moral voices of condemnation from Republican and Democratic leaders. But, at the top, there has been a stunning inability and unwillingness to condemn explicitly the white nationalist extremism that led to yesterday’s national tragedy.

With winks and nods, some groups have been given permission to attack people of color, African Americans, Muslims, Jews, women and LGBTQ Americans. We must not go back to a time when voices of hatred were given free rein to frighten, intimidate, and attack others. There can be no nostalgia for an America that denied equality, civil rights, and freedom to all its citizens. Since the end of World War II, we have fought those great fights for social justice, and many of us thought we had won the battle. But we must not be complacent, and those forces of evil and hatred must be defeated forever.

In times when the morals and values of our country are tested, we must gather together as a community to denounce hatred and support each other. We hope that you will join us Friday for a special Beach Shabbat – a time for us to gather in prayer and fellowship and simply “check in” with each other. The clergy team is available should you want to process the events of this weekend. Wishing all of you and our nation a week of peace.

Rabbi Sam Gordon

