

Rabbi Lewis' Message for October 2007

Today (Sept. 24, 2007) Iranian President Ahmadinejad spoke at Columbia University. I think the school was right to let him speak and the students were right to protest. Demagogues don't go away if we ignore them. He is a Holocaust-denier and has been quoted as saying that Israel should be wiped off the map. It is due to people like him that I gave the following sermon on Sept. 8.

The month of Elul is a time of introspection. We don't wait until we walk into the sanctuary on Rosh Hashanah to begin the process of repentance. It's like trying to play a sport without warming up first. We have to prepare so that when we walk into this sanctuary on Rosh Hashanah, we have already been self-reflective. Our hearts are open. We are ready to repent. Part of my annual personal preparation involves studying so that I can write holiday sermons.

In my preparation this year, I copied down the words of Rabbi David Ellenson, the President of Hebrew Union College. "I believe that theology is ultimately an expression of autobiography and that how we think about God and how we think about our ultimate commitments are bound up with our personal story." I wrote down those words because I agree with Rabbi Ellenson and I have been planning to talk about it during the next few weeks. But due to the events of the last week, I have also applied his idea to anti-Semitism. I believe that how we respond to anti-Semitism is ultimately an expression of autobiography, too. It is bound up with our personal story. So let me tell you a bit of my autobiography, as it is relevant to anti-Semitism.

My parents moved to Westfield when I was two. They bought a house that was in walking distance of the synagogue so that when I was old enough to go to Hebrew school, I could walk. It never occurred to them that no Jews lived anywhere near that temple. It turned out that my sisters and I were the only Jewish kids in Washington Grammar School on the north side of Westfield. A lot of you here know what it is like to be the only Jewish kid in your class. It was lonely. I felt invisible a lot of the time.

When I was in 4th grade, it came time for me to walk to Hebrew School on Monday and Wednesday afternoons. I walked straight from Washington School to the Temple. There were some big old chestnut trees on that street on the way to the Temple. There were kids who picked up those chestnuts and threw them at me. They made fun of me. They laughed and asked me if I was going to wear a skullcap. For a 10-year-old kid, it was like walking the gauntlet twice a week. I actually don't remember whether I told anyone about it except that my parents tell me I refused to go back to Hebrew School the following year.

I was telling a friend this story the other night and she was shocked. I shrugged my shoulders and said to her: in Westfield in the 1950's and 1960's, there were neighborhoods Jews couldn't live in, one of them right across from the Temple. Realtors wouldn't show you houses there. There was a tennis club Jews couldn't belong to, a golf club Jews couldn't belong to. My mother wasn't even allowed to volunteer for the PTA. It isn't the way Westfield is today but that is what was "normal" then. That's what was normal. I don't think that that part of my personal story is the only reason I hate injustice but I do think it played a large role. No one spoke up for me. I learned that if you want something done about injustice, you have to be the one to do something.

My own autobiography may also explain why I wasn't surprised to hear about the swastika painted on our building. Disgusted? Yes. Saddened? Of course. Afraid? No, not at all. But not surprised. Because I learned many years ago that people do things like that. And people do worse. Painting a swastika on a synagogue is plenty bad; but being physically attacked is worse, being forced into ghettos is worse, being killed for being Jewish is worse. Sometimes, anti-Semitic graffiti leads to worse; and sometimes it doesn't. And that's why we have to talk about how to respond to incidents like this.

I want to tell you about two different New Jersey high schools and two different ways they responded to an anti-Semitic incident. Some years back, there was an incident at Watchung Hills Regional High School. Someone had painted swastikas on some lockers. At the time, the principal told me that they were careful about their immediate response because they suspected it was done by one particular teen who was known to have emotional problems. They didn't think it would be a helpful punishment to bring charges against him. What the principal did do was to invite ten seniors a day to his office to talk to them about how comfortable they felt in the high school. Were there issues he should know about? Were there problems in inclusion and people being left out? He found out that, yes, the African-American students - or was it the Asian-American students - were feeling left out. The principal brought them together in groups so they could talk about it. I think that was the right response. You don't want to over-react and respond inappropriately in a particular situation.

But some year or two after that, there was an incident at Chatham high school. The school was preparing for a pep rally. The kids made giant posters of the "Chatham Choo Choo" and taped them up in the lunchroom. For two days, no one noticed that one of the train cars looked different from the others. It had bars on the windows and a Jewish man wearing a black hat, sporting paiyas and holding a bagel leaning out of that train car. There was nothing innocent or misguided about that poster. When someone finally noticed and insisted it be taken down, the situation was handled about as poorly as I have ever seen a situation handled. It blew up in a way that raised to the surface what had been latent anti-Semitism. Eventually, the kids responsible were

charged with a hate crime. They had to do community service and attend diversity training. That was a different situation that required a different solution.

When I first came to this Temple, some 13 or 14 years ago, I picked up a message on the Temple machine. I don't remember the words now, but it was anti-Semitic. It sounded like a bunch of teenage kids who had gotten drunk and thought it would be funny to call up the Temple and leave a message. I taped the message off the machine. At the time, I was ready to call the police. But we discussed it and for whatever reason, decided not to pursue it. That may have been the right thing to do at the time. I don't really know. But the question is how we understand what happened this week and what do we do now.

It may be that kids were the ones that did this to the temple. It is even likely. That is for the police to discover. It is not for us to assume. I will say that even if it is kids, painting a swastika on a temple is no accidental innocent act. It is deliberately hurtful. That's why they call it a hate crime. And if it is kids, there is education that needs to be done. If they catch them. There were, by the way, 4 anti-Semitic incidents in Warren County last year according to the [Anti-Defamation League](#) (ADL) website. I hadn't heard of any of them; I wonder if any of you know. The regional director ADL is looking into them for us.

When the board met last week and discussed all the issues, there was no question about the police knowing. There was no question that we would investigate what kind of additional security we should have for the building. There was also no question that we should talk to the relevant people in the Jewish community - the regional [Union for Reform Judaism](#) office, the [regional Jewish Federation office](#), and the ADL - so that they too can act to protect themselves, so that they can offer us solidarity and so that they can offer us their expertise.

The question on which there was no immediate resolution was: Should this anti-Semitic act be publicized in the newspapers? This is a judgment call, not a question of right and wrong. There was legitimate concern about inspiring copycat behavior if we publicized it. Because of my personal story, if it were up to me alone, I would go to the papers. But this is not my congregation; it is our congregation. You have heard me say that we are the best-kept secret in Warren County when it comes to Jews knowing about us; we don't seem to be a secret to people who paint swastikas. Maybe a little publicity would wake up those Jews who live around here but don't affiliate; maybe it would make them feel more strongly that they should join us. And maybe a little publicity would let our good Christian neighbors feel outraged and also want to support us.

I often think we don't give our neighbors the opportunity to do the right thing when we don't give them the full information. Our member Susan McNamara told me back in the spring that her school district had scheduled Meet the Teacher Night for Rosh Hashanah. At the time, she went in and talked to the principal who was adamant about not changing it. Susan was understandably upset. She sent me an update email yesterday:

School started on Tuesday and the calendar came out with the "meet the teacher night" scheduled right above Rosh Hashanah. The next day I approached a woman who is Jewish and asked her if she saw the date. She was sooo upset- she said she was up all night over it. She had already spoken to another Jewish family in our school and they were both going to call. The woman at my bus stop had her husband call. The principal gave her whole speech to him like she did to me. He then got really angry with her and told her she was discriminating [against] the Jewish families in the school. She said nothing and they both hung up with each other. Ten minutes later she called him and said she changed the date. This was yesterday- this morning I got a call from the school secretary - her message was that she wanted to give me a heads up that the date was changed and a notice was going out."

Scheduling issues like that one are not examples of anti-Semitism, just ignorance, but they offer us examples of what can happen when members of a community speak up.

In our case, the board will decide what to do; they would like your input. Talk to them tonight, talk to them Sunday, and on Monday night at the open board meeting, come talk then, too. This community should make these decisions after much discussion. There are other actions for us to take, too, in response to this act. In addition to protecting ourselves, we need to teach our children about anti-Semitism. I wish we didn't have to. But it is better for them to learn in a loving context from people who love them than to learn the hard way. We will talk about it with them in school on Sunday morning.

I once knew a woman who converted to Judaism who said her only fear was that she wouldn't know how to help her children respond to anti-Semitism since she herself had never been faced with it. Frankly, I don't think you have to have experienced anti-Semitism to know what to do. Good human beings are good human beings. Those members of our families who are not Jewish are just as hurt and wounded by this act as those of us who are Jewish. And I think that many of the people who live on this street would feel that way, too, if they knew. We also need to reach out to our neighbors on the street and invite them inside our temple. We need to be friends in order to make friends.

There is one way to respond that would be the wrong way and that is to hide being Jewish or to stop being Jewish. A colleague of mine wrote about an anti-Semitic incident on a campus where his daughter was a student. His response was to say: "Jews are not hard. Jews are not cold. Jews are not indifferent. Jews are not insular. Jews are not uncaring; Jews are not angry. Jews are not hateful. No matter who hates us. No matter what they do to us. The worst way for Jews to respond to hate is to stop being Jewish. When we face hate, we step forward toward a Promised Land. A greater miracle than splitting the sea is opening the heart to hope." So the best response is to be the best Jews we know how to be, to be better Jews, in fact, than we have been.

Our portion this week tells us how to do that. It says the Torah is not in the heavens; it is not too far from us. Rather it is *bfinu uvilvavenu* in our hearts and in our mouths. It tells us that when our ancestors stood at Sinai centuries ago, we stood with them; and as we stand together today, they stand with us. That is what we do. We stand together.

Ken yehi ratzon. May it be God's will.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis