

My friends, only a short week ago the title of this sermon would have made no sense to anyone. Now, not a soul in this sanctuary will not understand it. The title of my sermon tonight is “Charlottesville.”

I am not going to talk much about what happened in Charlottesville. You probably know as much as I do, especially if you are our guest tonight, come from the Reform movement, and read ReformJudaism.org. If you do not know to what I am referring, worry not. That is the one piece of what happened that I will address directly.

That part of the terrible events in Charlottesville was actually a nonevent. It is noteworthy because of how close it came to being a tragic, maybe even deadly event for the members of Congregation Beth Israel, a Reform congregation in Charlottesville. Alan Zimmerman is the president of Beth Israel, and he wrote a chilling article on ReformJudaism.org about neo-Nazis marching past his synagogue, yelling, “There’s the synagogue!” and calling for it to be burned down. Thankfully, nothing did happen at the synagogue, but I urge you to find and read this powerful piece after Shabbat. You’ll read about a man stalking the synagogue who was, most likely, the terrorist who murdered Heather Heyer with his vehicle. And yes, that was a terrorist attack. ISIS has detailed instructions online how to carry out an act of terrorism with a rented truck. I went online, expecting to have a hard time finding those instructions. To my dismay, I found them almost immediately. Now it is no longer necessary for those seduced by the idea of being a terrorist to travel to someplace like Afghanistan to be trained. Now any wannabe terrorist need only go online and learn how to maximize the number of victims of any act this person subsequently carries out. You will also read about the pain of

Alan Zimmerman at having to recommend that Beth Israel's congregants leave the synagogue through a back door, and only in groups.

Two statements have been issued locally in the past two days about Charlottesville, one by the JCRC and one by the Indiana Board of Rabbis. The JCRC statement is longer and I had nothing to do with writing it, so it will not be part of my talk. I do urge everyone to go on their Facebook page and read the statement. The statement from IBOR will conclude this sermon. But before I conclude, I want to address the question of why there are responses to the Charlottesville events by these two Jewish organizations. Charlottesville was a tragedy, but was it something that called for a Jewish response?

Perhaps you are thinking that I already gave you the reason that this is a Jewish issue: the experience of the members of Beth Israel. But now I'm going to ask you to pretend that there was no synagogue in Charlottesville; pretend there were absolutely no Jews in Charlottesville at all. What then? Is it still an event about which our JCRC and BoRs should be speaking?

Unlike some of the questions I pose in my sermons as food for thought, this one has a right answer and a wrong answer. Of course this is a Jewish issue. Why? Because it is a moral issue, and all moral issues are Jewish issues. Believe it or not, my introduction to the concept of morality came after watching a speech by President Kennedy, which I loved to do despite understanding almost nothing at that age, and asking my parents, may they rest in peace, why they were so happy that regarding segregation, another concept they had to explain to me that night, President Kennedy said, "We are confronted primarily by a moral issue."

My friends, we are confronted again by a moral issue. In this regard, let me say that while it must be acknowledged that people on both sides of the Charlottesville debacle lost their tempers and engaged in violence, there can be no moral equivalence between those who promote hate and those who oppose it. Yes, there is a place for blame on both sides, but that does not change the reality that one side was fundamentally decent, and the other—let us not mince words—was fundamentally evil.

We the Jewish people have a mission. Our mission, in the words of the Biblical prophets, is to be a light to the nations. We are to be a moral voice in a world that desperately needs moral voices. We do not claim to be the only moral voice in the world—of course not. But the day we stop fulfilling our holy task of making the world better and confronting evil, it is time to close down our synagogues and cease our existence. If ever, God forbid, our moral voice is voluntarily silenced, we will have abandoned our primary reason for being.

Therefore, my friends, I conclude with the statement of the Indiana Board of Rabbis, a statement I am proud to have helped craft.

We, the Indiana Board of Rabbis, decry the hateful acts of terrorism in Charlottesville in the strongest possible terms.

To the people of Charlottesville, we are one with you. Indiana is Charlottesville. Your pain is our pain and your struggle is our struggle. We stand with you against violent speech and deeds which have no place in our states, towns, or nation. We proudly represent the Jewish teaching that every human being, regardless of race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation, is created b'tzelem Elohim, in the Divine image.

To the family of Heather Heyer, who was killed in the automobile attack against those protesting white supremacists, we grieve with you and we pledge not to let her death be a focus for more hatred, but a rallying cry for justice, equality, and compassion.

To the families of Lt. H. Jay Cullen and Trooper Berke M. M. Bates, state troopers who died in the line of duty in a helicopter crash as they were en route to protect the innocent from the violence, we weep with you as well.

To President Trump, we call upon you to continue to unambiguously denounce and distance yourself from expressions of hatred and bigotry and to help bring about healing, harmony and peace to America.

The white supremacist message of hatred and racial superiority is wholly un-American. Americans of all persuasions are united in our contempt for the values espoused by a small minority of bigots among us. We will vigorously oppose racism and all forms of bigotry whenever and wherever it appears. We vow not to allow it to be normalized in American society. As Elie Wiesel said, "Silence helps the oppressors, never the oppressed." We will never remain silent in the face of bigotry. We will raise our voices loudly and proudly. As the Bible tells us, we may not stand idly by when our fellows are in danger. Instead, we stand shoulder to shoulder with victims of intolerance, and always will, until the day that love and mutual respect drive the scourge of senseless hatred from our nation.

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