

## JCRC Annual Meeting

June 21, 2018

### Chair's Report

Ann Jacobs

My name is Ann Jacobs and I am honored to serve as Chair of the Milwaukee Jewish Community Relations Council.

In an ordinary year, the chair of the Milwaukee Jewish Community Relations Council has the privilege of addressing you all, and providing an update on the previous year's activities, work we have done, and plans for the future.

But this is not an ordinary year.

In August of last year, actual torch-bearing Nazis led marches in Charlottesville, shouting "Jews will not replace us." Our government leaders commented that there were very fine people on "both sides" of that march.

One of the duties of our Milwaukee JCRC is to document and catalogue anti-Semitic incidents in our community. It is a task that is taken on with profound seriousness by our members. With heavy hearts, we list and assess attacks against our community and its members.

This year was not an ordinary year. In the wake of Charlottesville, our local community marked the largest number of reported anti-Semitic incidents in our history of documenting

them. A shocking number of them involving our children. This is something that strikes some fear into our hearts. Perhaps this is a selfish fear – a fear only of what could and does affect us directly.

But I don't think so. It is a universal fear. A fear of what evil looks like.

And now – now – we are faced with children being torn from their parents who are told they are being taken to bathe.

We all recognize the horrifying echoes of our past in those words.

Who are being taken to “camps.” With wire fences.

Another echo.

We could look away. We could tell ourselves, “they are not Jewish children.” Which is true, they are not. We could say, “They shouldn't be there.” Which may be true, maybe they shouldn't.

But at moments like these, these are moments where we recall the words of the Torah - Leviticus, as we recite yearly at our Passover Seders:

“When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong.”

“When strangers sojourn with you in your land, you shall not do them wrong. The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall

love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

The Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism explains,

“In [these] passage[s] and others, the Torah uses the word “גֵר (ger),” which can be alternatively translated as stranger, sojourner, immigrant or foreigner—generally understood as someone not born in the land where one lives, but living there now. Leviticus later commands, “Ye shall have one law, for the ger as for the home-born”. We are commanded to treat the ger as an equal under the law.”

Rabbi Eliyahu Safran of the Orthodox Union writes:

“Too often, we have “tamed” [the commandment to care for the stranger] to fit our needs rather than confront the profound – and gracious – imposition that it places upon us. But listen to this command with fresh ears, with the ears of our ancestors, with the ears of a people and a world for whom communal identity was fundamental to self and existence. This command tells us to go against everything that our instincts teach us. It tells us to look beyond the familiar and the safe and to see in the one who is different and alien the same fundamental goodness and holiness that God bestows upon all His creatures.”

As the Jewish Community Relations Council, we have the privilege of speaking with a Jewish voice – a voice for our community. It is not a partisan voice. At times it is not even a religious voice. It is the strong voice of our collective people. I am proud to say that our community has repeatedly and

unwaveringly supported the rights of the oppressed, the asylum seeker, the immigrant, and the refugee.

Let me read to you the JCRC's position on Sanctuary, adopted 45 years ago:

The Milwaukee Jewish Council believes that the moral concept of sanctuary for those who fear death at the hand of repressive regimes is ingrained in the Jewish tradition. To this extent, we support the spirit of the acts of churches and synagogues who provide places of refuge to political refugees from Latin America.

Or an excerpt from our 2015 position on the Syrian refugee crisis:

We cannot, however, accept the demonization and fear of the "other" that has become common rhetoric in talking about refugees. The notion of religious tests for refugees or registration from certain countries is repugnant. Calls to close our borders to asylum seekers are a stark betrayal of American and Jewish values. Partisan politics and xenophobia have no place in this debate. We cannot allow hatred and fear to determine policy; we must be motivated by aspirations of freedom and tolerance. America has the creativity and compassion to successfully address competing considerations.

So this is not an ordinary year. It is a year where we are again called upon to be voices for the stranger in our midst. To remain vigilant for those who would seek to terrorize us and our neighbors. For this is what our Jewish Community represents.

And I am proud to lead the organization which is given the extraordinary privilege of expressing those voices.