

Ann Jacobs, Chair
 JCRC Annual Meeting 2019
 June 20, 2019

Last year, when we came together, we talked about the echoes of hatred, of fear, of antisemitism.

This year, the echoes we thought we heard are full-throated shouts.

We have learned that antisemitism is wily - it morphs, it hides, and reappears, sometimes when we least expect it.

Consider the students of Baraboo. Baraboo! Whose gestures brought the attention of the nation to that small community and our state. Largely in condemnation, but also with some accolades.

Or Paul Nehlen, a one-man treasure trove of hate speech, banned from Twitter and Facebook, who garnered 11% of the primary congressional vote in Wisconsin's first congressional district.

Our annual audit saw another rise in antisemitic incidents, for the 5th year in a row. Incidents were up 20%. But more than numbers, the nature and tone of those incidents were different. Violent, hateful, using the language of days gone by to both casually demean, and to violently threaten.

When we look at this issue writ larger, what we also see is the increased weaponization of antisemitism in political attacks. Where calling out antisemitism is not in defense of our Jewish community, but is instead yet another cudgel to wield against a political opponent.

It is important that we not reduce this to a matter of 'sides.' We are surrounded by anti-Jewish rhetoric feigning to be a political disagreement with the government of Israel. We are told that merely raising concerns of antisemitism causes antisemitism, so we should be quiet. We are told that as Jews, we are seeing, defining, and protesting against antisemitism incorrectly.

In fact, today, in addressing a 40 foot tall Christian-cross war monument, the Supreme Court ruled that Crosses are not religious symbols, but are "secular." Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg dissented from the bench, quoting the brief written by the Jewish War Veterans of America:

Just as a Star of David is not suitable to honor Christians who died serving their country, so a cross is not suitable to honor those of other faiths who died defending their nation. Soldiers of all faiths "are united by their love of country, but they are not united by the cross."

While Justices Gorsuch and Thomas opined that nobody who is "offended" by religious symbols should even have the right to bring a suit.

So, apparently, we just are interpreting things wrong.

We are at a time where we risk becoming observers to, rather than participants in, discussions about our own identity.

But we cannot allow ourselves to be distracted by this.

Our commandment, our mitzvah, of Tikkun Olam – repairing the world – means that while we can have (and are having right now) robust discussions about whether we call them internment camps, labor camps, detention camps, concentration camps or summer camps, we cannot allow that discussion to excuse us from the difficult discussions about the camps we are putting migrants and asylum seekers in. From talking about the children forcibly separated from their parents. And addressing what we can and should do for the people being held there.

We must talk about Israel, and the Palestinians, even in the face of antisemitic statements and actions pretending to be political commentary. And recognize the diversity of opinions in our own community on the actions of the Israeli government, while repeating the fact that 97% of Jews support the right of Israel to exist.

We need to talk about the future of European Jewry even as we recognize that their reality is different than ours.

And we need to be thankful for the home that is America - that is Milwaukee.

Milwaukee, where we came together to mourn for Pittsburgh. For that senseless slaughter. For the violation of a house of worship. And we did come together. (SHOW PHOTO FROM BROCHURE)

And when worshippers in New Zealand were killed in their mosque, we joined our Muslim friends and neighbors in mourning them.

Because in the face of hate, we must stand united. We cannot only condemn those who seek our destruction. We must stand for more than that.

And we do.

What does this mean in the context of community relations? Paraphrasing the Yom Kippur liturgy, it is not punishment we seek, but that they should turn from their ways. In the face of Baraboo, we saw a bad thing and worked to create a better place. We supported learning and understanding – both for the schools and the community. I want to show you what turning something bad into something beautiful looks like: (PLAY VIDEO)

This is what community relations looks like.

This year, I exhort all of us to fight the desire to turn inward. To not treat our friends and neighbors as the other. And instead to continue our work in our community so that when the ugly and hateful happen, we are a source of light and blessing.