

MJCS PRESIDENT'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

February 2017

In my last monthly message, I talked about the importance of showing up and the benefits of being active in our community. In that light, please make the time to meet and hear visiting rabbinical candidate Rabbi Micha Becker-Klein on the weekend of February 17, 18 and 19. A schedule of events will be sent out as we get closer to that weekend.

This month I want to share with you my thoughts about a different kind of showing up. Please read on.

We start with the simple fact that a community isn't a community unless its members actively participate. The concept of a synagogue in a Jewish community traditionally has been a place where its members regularly congregate (that's why we're called a congregation!) and not just for religious services, but for celebrations, educational events, live events, and sharing lives.

We've been very fortunate at MJCS – people who have shown up have found life partners, new business partners and wonderful new friends, and have found the spirituality that was missing from their lives. The diversity of our membership is quite extraordinary, and is demonstrative of our open and embracing nature.

We are a community of communities, filled with diversity, yet sharing a history reaching back thousands of years embodied in the Torah, that for tens of centuries has been read by our ancestors and brethren all over the world for the same reasons every week. And we share a common set of truly beautiful ethics and goals – to heal the world (tikkun olam) and be give back (tzadakah), guided by the principles of loving gratitude and kindness.

Sadly, throughout history, millions upon millions of our ancestors have been victimized, ostracized and killed for being Jewish. Much as we would like to separate ourselves from those memories and acts, and live our modern lives in sunshine without those shadows, they unfortunately persist. Much as we want to be assimilated and free from the stain that others would want to place on us for being Jewish, it's a real fact that there has been a visible rise of anti-Semitism in the world.

We have been fortunate here in America, and certainly here in Malibu, where even with family and friends in Israel and other countries in which anti-Semitism is tangible and ever-present, we here have felt protected against that evil. I have been aware of anti-Semitic movements in the US like White Supremacist and alt.right groups, but they have always been a strange, vague minority living in remote places I need never visit. I also have been aware of evangelic Christian groups who label as evil and want to make unlawful ideas, beliefs, actions and groups of people who I believe and as Reconstructionists we believe have every right under our laws to be as they are, without the threat of being ignored, made unlawful, being incarcerated

or physically or legally bullied, or denied their Constitutional rights. Over the last few years, however, these radical fundamentalist groups have not been on the radar, and so I didn't focus on them, and instead went on my merry way here in Malibu.

But recent events in our country are signaling a shift in the wind, a shift we cannot ignore. The self-styled leading voice of the alt.right, an admittedly anti-Semitic, misogynistic, White Supremacist group, now not only has the ear of the President but its self-styled leader, Steven Bannon, is the President's chief advisor -- these once fringe groups now have a very loud voice and support at the highest level of our government and a seat on the National Security Council. An admitted supporter and colleague of Mr. Bannon, Jeff Sessions, will soon head up the largest and most powerful law enforcement agency in our government, which he views as not being independent from the wishes of the President and his closest advisor. And so now a leading voice of anti-Semitism has a home on Pennsylvania Avenue. Its presence is subtle, like not mentioning anti-Semitism or Jews on Holocaust Remembrance Day and then doubling down in defense of these omissions. And sometimes not so subtle, like the shouting out at political rallies the German word "lugenpresse," a term that historically has had anti-Semitic connotations-- and now its English translation, "evil media," is muttered nearly every day from the White House.

Coupled with these sadly real facts is the new-found power and voice of pro-White evangelical Christian fundamentalists in the new administration. There is an unambiguous movement afoot to insert evangelic Christian beliefs into our politics and our laws -- the goal being that America officially be a white, fundamental Christian country. The administration is threatening to repeal the Johnson Amendment to the federal tax laws, which is a prime force against allowing religion to become a dominant political power. Our vice president is a poster child of the evangelical movement, and has made it quite clear that LGBTQ people should not have equal rights. The proposed head of the Department of Education is an evangelical and believes that public schools should disappear and that her brand of Christianity should be taught in the schools as part of being "American." The proposed head of HUD is also evangelical, and doesn't believe in evolution. The proposed next Supreme Court justice wrote the Hobby Lobby decision that was upheld by the Supreme Court, and gave power to Christian owners of businesses to discriminate on the basis of religious "principles."

If you want to learn more about all of this, please listen to last week's NPR interview of investigative reporter Sarah Posner:

<http://www.npr.org/2017/02/02/513041005/exploring-the-nationalistic-and-christian-right-influences-on-trump>.

As President of MJCS, I want to make it very clear that I am **not** commenting on the Presidential election -- we have members, my friends and colleagues, who voted for each candidate. A democratic republic requires debate, differences in opinion and exercising the right to vote.

What I *am* commenting on is this: as members of a Jewish community we need to see, and hear, and discuss and be vigilant when the signs of anti-Semitism, racism and potential threats to members of our community are present. We have members of different gender identities and sexual preferences and of different ethnicities and races. We have gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, African-American and Iranian members and children and friends. We celebrate our diversity and embrace it. We need to be aware of trends that could bring harm to our friends and community members and to our beliefs and our freedom to practice our faith safely. We need to, and I believe must, be able as a Jewish community to speak up and with each other about these issues.

We need to show up as American Jews. To be proud of our heritage and diversity and protective of the important gains we have made during the last few decades. And while it's easy for any of us to ignore all of this or deny it and go on living an innocent, protected, pain-avoidance fantasy life, history has not been kind to Jews who seek safety in a bubble.

I invite you to show up and be active members of our community. Please join us and speak up and attend our events and help us plan and do more. Upcoming events are posted here: <https://www.mjcs.org/calendar>, and I can be reached at president@mjcs.org.

As always, thanks for listening.

Steve Weinberg