

Justice and Charlottesville, VA

“Several times, parades of Nazis passed our building, shouting, “There's the synagogue!” followed by chants of “Seig Heil” and other anti-Semitic language. Some carried flags with swastikas and other Nazi symbols.

A guy in a white polo shirt walked by the synagogue a few times, arousing suspicion. Was he casing the building, or trying to build up courage to commit a crime? We didn't know. Later, I noticed that the man accused in the automobile terror attack wore the same polo shirt as the man who kept walking by our synagogue; apparently, it's the uniform of a white supremacist group. Even now, that gives me a chill.

When services ended, my heart broke as I advised congregants that it would be safer to leave the temple through the back entrance rather than through the front, and to please go in groups.

This is 2017 in the United States of America.

Later that day, I arrived on the scene shortly after the car plowed into peaceful protesters. It was a horrific and bloody scene.

Soon, we learned that Nazi websites had posted a call to burn our synagogue. I sat with one of our rabbis and wondered whether we should go back to the temple to protect the building. What could I do if I were there? Fortunately, it was just talk – but we had already deemed such an attack within the realm of possibilities, taking the precautionary step of removing our Torahs, including a Holocaust scroll, from the premises.”

These were some of the words written by Alan Zimmerman, the president of Congregation Beth Israel in Charlottesville, Virginia. Who would think we would have to be witness to such brazen demonstrations of hate in our country in 2017.

In the aftermath of violent demonstrations by hate groups and their sympathizers, the Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism issued the following statement:

“The Rabbinical Assembly is shocked and horrified by the violent demonstrations of white supremacists, neo-Nazis and their sympathizers in Charlottesville, Virginia this past Saturday which resulted directly in the deaths of one civilian and two state police officers and in many other serious injuries. We applaud the swift and effective actions of Mayor Mike Signer of Charlottesville and Gov. Terry McAuliffe of Virginia, as well as their appropriate condemnations of the bigotry, antisemitism and hatred that inspired the rally itself. Many leaders have taken the indispensable step of naming the dangerous philosophies and movements that united these demonstrators. These events have been rightly labeled as incidents of domestic terror by both Democrats and Republicans.

We call upon United States officials including President Donald Trump and Attorney General Jeff Sessions to condemn neo-Nazi, white supremacist and alt-right movements by name. The repeated failure to do so by top U.S. officials has fueled their growth and poses an imminent threat to all Americans as Saturday's violent rallies showed. History has demonstrated that where a country's leaders fail to condemn these philosophies, violence and hatred can quickly and exponentially consume the fabric of civil society. Our leaders must act now. Let us continue to pray for and to work for the day when all shall "sit under his/her vine and fig tree and none shall make them afraid."

It's important to note that whichever political party you support, the election of the current president was fueled by white supremacy. The blatant political rhetoric used in this election went beyond any we have seen before. It's obvious that even the horrible events in Charlottesville have not lead to any clear and unwavering denouncement of the hate groups who were at the center of last Saturday's protests. We need to make our voices heard and to hold this administration accountable for its lack of moral leadership.

Stoking fear is precisely the goal of these groups. The sight of torches and hooded robes in Virginia reenacts dreaded historical scenes of a painful history of racial violence. To describe the motivations and actions of the white supremacists and protesters of hate groups on equal moral footing is appalling at a time when we need strong leadership to send the message that hate has no home in our country.

The statistics are alarming. 917 hate groups have been documented across the country. CNN reports that the total number of hate groups from the presidential campaign season in 2014 to today is up by 17%.

Regardless of your race, political affiliation, socioeconomic class, religion, or sex, these facts should shake us to our core. The blatant challenge of hate groups to the promise of equality and unity should be unequivocally condemned.

"If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention"

That was the final Facebook post of Heather Heyer who died in that senseless attack last weekend. Ms. Heyer reminded us that we cannot sit quietly in the face of hatred and bigotry. The vast majority of Americans possess the noble human instinct against injustice but often people feel overwhelmed and simply don't know how to respond.

It's people like Heather and others who organize and educate and rally for justice that can inspire us to pay attention and to use our feeling of outrage by channeling it constructively to have the conversations and bring awareness to our communities. But another young activist (named Ethan Buckner) who is a passionate worker for social justice reminds us that racism is systemic in our society:

"My heart is with Charlottesville today. And I am thinking about how the events of this weekend serve as a painful but critical mirror for us all. Especially those of us who benefit every day from our whiteness.

How do our actions (or silence) reinforce white supremacy? What are we doing, actively or passively, to either reinforce the status quo or work towards justice and equity?

Charlottesville is not an anomaly. There is a growing movement of people who are shedding fear to propagate the SAME BELIEF SYSTEM that continues to generate systemic inequality in our society.

It's up to us to challenge the horrific outward expression of that belief system - but that is not enough. It is easy to denounce the most extreme expression of the most violent and hateful forces in our culture. But that is not enough.

We also must look - AND NOT LOOK AWAY - at how white supremacy operates in our day to day lives, and work to dismantle it. In our homes, neighborhoods,

schools, houses of worship, and our workplaces. Among our friends, in our local government, in our broader social, political, and economic institutions. That is the only way we will heal. That is the path towards justice. It is up to us."

Most people think when they hear the words white supremacy only of the most extreme forms of hatred and violence against non-whites and Jews propagated by the neo-Nazis the KKK and other hate groups. But white supremacy is in fact an ideology built on the idea that white people are superior to nonwhites and should retain cultural, economic, and political dominance.

Experts in racism teach us that white superiority is built into our institutions in this country and in many places around the world. We, who are enraged by the horrific events in Charlottesville consider ourselves, moral, decent open minded people, and so we believe that we are not participants in racism. We may believe that all people are created equal, but from birth the institutions in this country condition us in subtle and not-so-subtle ways to believe in the myth of race that has been perpetuated, originally instituted to rationalize slavery and other forms of oppression for economic gain. Racism is embedded into our country's living history, within the fabric of our institutions and indeed our culture. Let's take some examples:

- Let's start with education: A recent government report on discipline in public schools demonstrates that black students, starting from preschool, are far more likely to be suspended or caught up in the juvenile justice system than white students – even when the infractions are the same.
- We can turn to disparities in our criminal justice system: Although white and black folks statistically both sell and use drugs at similar rates, African-Americans comprise 74% of those imprisoned for drug possession.
- Or employment: Studies have shown that job applicants with black-sounding names are much less likely to be called back for interviews than applicants with white-sounding names – even when using the *same exact resumé*s.
- It shouldn't surprise us when incidents like the police shooting of Philando Castille happen. As a study by the Center for Public Equity reports, black people are twice as likely to be pulled over as whites – and three times more likely to experience the use of force afterward.

I could list many more examples of the vast racial inequities in the United States, embedded in our social, political, and economic institutions.

I share this NOT with the intention of evoking guilt or shame. Feeling guilty over the ways in which racism benefits us turns the attention away from the question “what can I do to work towards justice?” and instead shuts us down and prevents us from taking meaningful action.

Instead, let us open our eyes and our hearts and allow our understanding of racism compel us to action. Let us do the lifelong work of understanding our own conscious and unconscious biases, and with that awareness seize the opportunity to *choose* how we act. Let us have the difficult conversations in our homes, in our workplaces, in this synagogue. Let us get to know and support our neighbors of color. I invite all of us to continue this conversation, and as a congregation explore how we can together work towards a more just and equitable world.

May we, who have the means to speak up and work for justice, obligated by our own tradition and the moral compass it provides, open our eyes to our own biases and raise our voices for all who are oppressed. Next week’s Torah portion, Shoftim includes the phrase: Justice, Justice shall you pursue. Why is the word justice repeated in this quote from the Torah? Perhaps the Torah is telling us we must look internally first and understand our own biases and the ways in which we participate in a society which is not colorblind. Then, and only then can we move onto the second iteration of the word justice and bridge the great divides that seem to be widening in our country and our world.