Speech to the InterFaith Works Round Table of Faith Leaders

By Michael Balanoff

Antisemitism is the world’s oldest hate. At the same time, antisemitism is a reliable bellwether of the moral health of a nation. When antisemitism appears and spreads, it signals that something is very wrong. Currently, in the United States of America, according to the Anti-Defamation League, assault, harassment and vandalism against Jews are at near-historic levels.

The danger of antisemitism, for those who are not Jews, is that it endangers everyone. The hate that begins with Jews never ends with Jews. Hitler killed 6 million Jews, but he also killed 6 million other people: Catholics, Roma, the disabled, Slavs, Ukrainians, Russians, Afro-Germans, Freemasons; the list goes on and on.

German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemoller, who initially supported Hitler, turned against him when he experienced the Nazification of German Protestant churches. He captured the dangers of not opposing antisemitism in a confessional prose poem:

“First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a socialist.
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

This is why we need to stand together, speak out together, fight hatred together. Jews cannot fight anti-Semitism alone. The victim cannot cure the crime. We need and appreciate friends who will stand with us and help lead the fight.

As the faith leaders of our community, it is essential that you affirm the belief that all humankind is made in God’s image. We may have different theological positions, different metaphysical views, different understandings of the pathways to enlightenment, but we all share basic ethical commitments, including compassion and concern for and connection with other people. Thus our faiths compel us to speak up, to defend truth, to celebrate both our diversity and our common humanity, to be a voice for those in need and to seek the common good.

All major world religions share a belief in community, because community provides group cohesion and identity, as well as a way for rituals and traditions to be passed down from generation to generation. Today, in our Central New York community, whatever our faith tradition, we must act to preserve the ability of all people to live in freedom in their communities, to maintain their identity, to observe their faith, and to be safe and secure in their homes, schools, places of work and places of worship whatever their beliefs.
People of faith must act together to promote religious and cultural understanding and eliminate religious and racial prejudice through education, dialogue, and social action. I appreciate your asking me to speak before you this morning, and I urge you with the utmost passion and urgency to help put an end to the hatred of “the other.”

People look to their faith leaders to provide moral guidance. This is perhaps your most unique and critical role. As the faith leaders of our community, it falls to you to inspire people unequivocally and conspicuously to act to eradicate antisemitism from society, along with all other forms of religious, ethnic and racial hatred.

I therefore call upon you – our faith leaders, people of God, exemplars of morality, of values and ethics – to remember, there is no “them.” There is only “us.”

Let us teach what is right, condemn what is wrong, and speak out for justice and decency. Thank you.

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