

ROSH HASHANA 5780 – FIRST DAY

Nostalgia is wonderful! We look back at the “good old days” and think of how much better things were, while conveniently forgetting a lot of the details.

For many years, one of my favorite nostalgia shows on TV was “Seinfeld,” the series which Netflix just purchased the rights to broadcast for over \$500 million. That’s a lot of chocolate bobka!

Nostalgia, yes, the way it used to be . . . in our minds, if not in reality. Actually, it was pretty recently, up until just a few years ago, that I would talk about how sad it was that synagogues in Europe still had to be protected by armed guards, some seventy years after the Holocaust. By contrast, I would note the decades-long reduction in anti-Semitic activity here in America, where Jewish life had become about as carefree as it had ever been in Jewish history.

Then, America seemed to change. Racist and anti-Semitic attitudes and actions began to increase. The formerly, confident attitude of American Jews began to waver with shootings at the Kansas City JCC in 2014, various attacks of individuals and then came Pittsburgh. The bloodshed at Tree of Life synagogue last October stunned the American Jewish community.

The subsequent shooting at a Poway, California synagogue and other reports of violence around the country, especially in the New York metropolitan area, led synagogues of every denomination to discuss serious security measures, often for the first time.

As the moderator of RAVKAV, the online forum for 850 Reform rabbis nationally and internationally, I had prime access to the struggles of tiny congregations who worried that security costs would bankrupt them.

I read of congregations installing bulletproof glass and engaging in active-shooter instructions before worship services. Temple boards discussed whether or not members would be allowed to carry weapons to services. God, Torah and Israel were shoved aside by discussions of security measures, safety instructions and shooting scenarios.

Was our Jewish community overreacting? It certainly has been known to happen. Still, as the 1971 film "Catch 22" noted "just because you're paranoid, doesn't mean they aren't after you."

In just a few years, our nation has gone from most of its citizens feeling secure to individuals and groups, espousing hate, feeling secure. Our nation has given those who hate an open forum to spew their poison and

the results have been terrifying. Not only those on the internet, but those in our government have tolerated and promoted hatred, racism and overt anti-Semitism, from the federal level to the local level.

It was only two years ago that Rockland County's current County Executive ran a campaign video entitled "A Storm is Brewing." The intent was very clear, yet not as blunt as this year's Rockland Republican Party video with the same title and a similar, unspoken message: Don't let the Hasidic Jews take over Rockland County, like they have taken over Ramapo!

The video was widely condemned as anti-Semitic, by a group as diverse as New York State Attorney General Letitia James to the Republican Jewish Coalition.

As you came to Temple today, you probably passed signs put up by candidates for public office with slogans like "What Happened In Ramapo Will Not Stop In Ramapo," "Confronting the Ramapo Mafia" and more.

These fear tactics are unwarranted and extraordinarily dangerous. While overdevelopment and corruption in Ramapo and beyond are legitimate issues, the focus on "Ramapo," a term which has become a code word for "Hasidic Jews," is not appropriate.

The level of anti-Hasidic hysteria which has developed among local residents was clearly seen in a video from last November showing Nanuet residents verbally abusing the principal of a modern Orthodox, girl's high school, which sought to purchase a Nanuet church to house its school.

Unlike some Hasidic schools, this modern Orthodox school met all state standards for teaching secular subjects. The stated concern was "traffic congestion," but we all know that the problem was not the buses, but rather, who would be on the buses.

Though this modern Orthodox school was far from Hasidic, it was caught up in the current anti-Hasidic hysteria, as other synagogues and schools will be if this trend is allowed to continue.

We have already seen local school districts buying up vacant land and moving their offices following rumors that Hasidic Jews were interested in purchasing the property.

And lest any of us sit smugly and say, well, it is their ox which is being gored, not mine, let us remember that for those who hate, there is little to no difference between Hasidic Jews and us.

Even for those who do not hate, there is a serious lack of knowledge. A large segment of the non-Jewish community and even a significant segment of the Jewish community do not understand the difference between Hasidic Jews and modern Orthodox Jews, between an Orthodox rabbi wearing a kippah and a Reform rabbi wearing a kippah, between a Hasidic Jew and you. For all too many, a Jew is a Jew.

For over thirty years, I have listened to students in Orangetown, Clarkstown and Bergen counties complain about the anti-Semitic taunts and insults they have had to endure in the public schools. Virtually all of them, as well as their parents, didn't want anything done because they didn't want to stand out.

While such an attitude is understandable, it means that we have also been enabling this type of attitude to develop. The problem, my friends, is that far too many of us do not want to confront the forces of hatred. One of our Temple members, Evan Karzhevsky, has courageously sought to do so with her Facebook site "Rockland is One," which I encourage you to visit.

Complicating this entire situation is that the Hasidic community is grossly misunderstood. To begin with, it is not one community, but many. Some Hasidic communities are strongly antagonistic towards other Hasidic communities.

In addition, many Hasidic Jews live an insular life, not wanting to be integrated into the larger, general community or even the larger Jewish community. Their desire is for privacy, not pluralism.

Our local Town of Orangetown Supervisor Chris Day has said “anyone who wants to live in Orangetown can live in Orangetown, as long as they follow our laws.”

Chris Day is correct. This is America. Every American citizen, including Hasidic Jews, has the right to live where s/he wants to live, as long as they follow the laws. The fact that someone who is black, Jewish, LGBTQ, Muslim, Latino or a Hasid makes someone else uncomfortable simply by virtue of their existence does not give that person the right to discriminate against them.

Similarly, every American citizen, has the right to advocate for legislation which benefits them. From the National Rifle Association to the local PTA, they freely do so. There is no scandal with the Hasidic community doing what other advocacy groups do.

Hasidic Jews live all around the country and all around the world. In most places, they cause little to no disruption. However, New York is a different animal and Ramapo has become a most troubled community.

It certainly is easier to take pot shots and to vilify people, than it is to sit down with them and dialogue. However, if we hope to prevent the continued growth of anti-Semitism in our area, we cannot continue to stand by idly while our neighbor bleeds. The time to confront the reality of this climate change is now, before the effects become irreversible. It will take all of our efforts and it all begins with understanding.

To that end, I want to encourage you to watch, either at home or in our Adult Education series which begins on Monday nights in two weeks, the Netflix series Shtisel. It's about the day to day experiences of a Hasidic family in Jerusalem. It is both entertaining and educational.

I want you to watch the wonderful film Ushpizin, about a childless, Hasidic couple in Jerusalem during the upcoming festival of Sukkot. We will be screening the film in the near future.

These are two very easy and wonderful ways to begin to understand a world which is very foreign to many of us, yet maybe not as foreign as we fear, once we begin to understand it

Few of us will enter this world in our own lives, but through these powerful and entertaining media presentations, we can begin to know the unknown. That is the beginning of understanding, which is the beginning of eliminating prejudice.

Yes, we have a messy and uncomfortable situation in Ramapo. The local Hasidic communities played a role in this, but so did local political leaders. The answer is not to vilify the religious identity of some of the residents, but rather to deal with the very real issues that are the problem, including the corruption which sent Ramapo's non-Jewish, Town Supervisor to prison.

Unlike the French Revolution, which promised freedom, liberty and equality to all . . . except for Jews, in America, all of us, including Hasidic Jews, are entitled to the rights of all Americans.

The American Jewish community has fought very long for many years to gain acceptance and equality in America. This right extends to all Jews, whether they look like us or not, whether they accept us or not.

For when we allow one group of Jews to be vilified because of the actions of some, we allow all groups of Jews to be vilified. Our responsibility is to

do the right thing, not only that which makes us comfortable. It is just as wrong to deny civil rights to Jews who may make us squirm as it is wrong to deny a seat in a restaurant to someone whose appearance makes us squirm. The Torah proclaims “justice, justice, shall you pursue.”

On this day of renewal, may we actively shine light on and combat the darkness of hatred and prejudice. May we show other Jews, non Jews and even ourselves, that despite our very real differences, the words we speak on these holy days truly represent our values as a progressive community. We will be there for them, whether or not they are there for us. . . simply because it is the right thing to do.

We can . . . and we should . . . always make the effort to live together in peace. We may not be able to recreate the nostalgic past, but we certainly are capable of building a better future. AMEN