



Rabbi Jeffrey Myers, Tree of Life Congregation

Address to Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Hearing on “Responding to Hate: The Role of Religious Actors

Members of Congress, I thank you for the privilege of testifying before you today. I am a victim, witness and survivor of the worst attack in a synagogue in the history of the United States, and the Jewish community has been present on these shores since 1654. Since that fateful day of October 27, 2018, I, the congregants of Tree of Life (along with two other congregations that shared our building—New Light and Dor Hadash) and the city of Pittsburgh have been overwhelmed by expressions of love from across the planet. People of all faiths, colors and sexual orientation have enveloped us in a vast global hug that continues unabated. Their message is very clear: the acts of one person are not representative of all of humanity. But alas, the acts of brutality and cruelty can overwhelm us. And, when coupled with incessant anti-Semitic words and dastardly deeds across the United States and around the world, we are reminded almost daily that a pernicious, ancient evil flourishes.

What most Americans don't know or appreciate is the warmth and togetherness that is Pittsburgh. I can state this objectively, as I too am an immigrant to Pittsburgh, having spent most of my life in the New York and New Jersey area. I live in Mr. Rogers' neighborhood, and the love and care from people of all walks of life in my city post-October 27 were typical prior to this date, only more intense afterwards. Religious leaders of all faiths have reached out to me, affording me a unique opportunity to get to know them and find commonalities where we can work together to better our community.

The metaphor of America as a melting pot is a beautiful image, but sadly, it is not true. We do not know our neighbors. We live in silos, with no bridges connecting them. Many choose to live in their own private silos, not wanting “others” to enter their silo. Some people just don’t know how to build a bridge. This is where religious leaders like me make a difference: I’m a bridge builder. When the Muslim community extended an olive branch to me, I responded by offering an olive tree. The same goes for the Roman Catholic, various Protestant denominations, the Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Baptist, AME, and so many more that I apologize if I have omitted. We have so much in common that we must work together. The modest baby steps that we are taking will mature into adult steps, hopefully yielding bushels of olives. Opportunities to partner with local government, and the police department, continue to grow as well. We can be the nation’s laboratory to model actions that may work throughout the country, without me minimizing the efforts of those already working to achieve these same goals. We—as clergy and congregants—are striving to find ways beyond visiting each other’s worship services, to really getting to know our neighbors, to consider their needs, and to determine how we can work together to realize positive outcomes. Please know that this was happening in Pittsburgh before October 27, but this date—and the atrocity that it brought—created a new sense of urgency. We must see to it that all children in all schools throughout this country learn about their neighbors, and strive to understand them, in an effort to appreciate their faith, not merely tolerate them. We must provide the tools for all people to honor and respect their neighbors, and right now, we as a nation, are not being successful in doing this.

Just two weeks after October 27, the city of Pittsburgh held a rally at Point State Park, and I was asked to speak. It was here that I made a pledge not to use the word “hate,” which I will say here only once for demonstration purposes. The H word, as I call it, is a four-letter word, an obscenity that deserves to be in our mental waste baskets. If you truly must say that you H something, just say that you don’t like it. H speech is a severe choice of words that often leads to violent actions, as was the case in the Tree of

Life shootings. When you don't understand your neighbor, it can lead to mistrust, fear, loathing and H speech, which ultimately leads you to unconscionable and deadly actions.

Our nation right now is suffering an epidemic of uncivil discourse. People cannot hold civil conversations with their neighbors, be it in person or through social media. As our elected leaders, I call you to task for this epidemic. When you use H speech against one another, you model uncivil discourse for all Americans. As our leaders, you are teaching us that it is acceptable to behave this way, and it's simply not. Is it any wonder that my fellow citizens speak in uncivil terms and use H speech? You condone it and model it. It is time for a different direction. The path towards civil discourse must start with all of you, our elected leaders. When you model civil discourse, you teach us appropriate ways to speak to one another. This does not require any legislation on your part. It requires you to think about the impact of your words, for as the Jewish tradition teaches, the most powerful weapon a human being possesses are words. They can wound or they can heal. There is way too much wounding emanating out of Washington, D.C. Whom among you will be brave enough to say to the American people: "I pledge that I will not use the H word. I call upon my fellow legislators to do the same, to help restore civil discourse in America?" Our eyes and ears turn to you. What will you do?

I thank you for your time and attention.