



Rabbi Jeffrey Saxe
Rosh Hashanah 2017/5778
What Can We Do About Hate

Even the idea that he would be standing in our Social Hall was scary. He had once been the charismatic leader of an anti-Semitic and white supremacist group in Chicago. He had trained and mentored some of the very people we saw gathered last month in Charlottesville. But still, over 300 of us, and our interfaith partners, came to see him. He was here to tell us how he got out of that group, and how he is now helping others do the same. Together, we relived Christian Picciolini's journey with him. We saw the picture of him as a sweet, 14-year-old, Italian-American boy. He joked that he looked like Chachi from *Happy Days*, and it was true. Then we saw him after he had been recruited and transformed—angry, tough, unrecognizable. And there he was in front of us, as he is now and must have always been at his core: a genuine, kind and approachable person.

I'm sure each of us who listened to this former skinhead took a different feeling away from the experience. All, I think, were grateful for the work he is now doing, the personal risks he takes every time he appears before a group like ours. But some may have been more ready than others to forgive this man and to see him as their friend. There were those of us who were haunted, wondering what acts he committed while a skinhead, and how many people's minds he poisoned, wondering whether any number of acts of *teshuvah*, or repentance, could make up for his transgressions.

I'll tell you the most important parts of Christian Picciolini's story in case you weren't there to hear it. He is the son of struggling Italian immigrant parents, and as a child he felt alienated and lost. The head of the local hate group approached him alone in an alley one night, and he was the perfect recruit—unhappy, vulnerable and impressionable. After two years, at 16, he became the new leader. He left the skinheads eight years later. It took him another five years to recover and get back on his feet. He described to us his fear that people would forever judge him, just as he had judged others so destructively. He told us about the time he got up

the courage to say the words, “I’m sorry,” to the Black high school security guard he had attacked years earlier—an emotional moment that ended with the security guard making him promise that he would tell his story. That’s not what anyone wants to do when they are trying to move on from a life they are ashamed of. But now, he spends his time doing just that, and flying around the country to help others leave the world of hate.

As troubling as it was, I personally found Christian’s presentation inspiring and instructive. No matter how terrible the things he did, we need to know about what he is doing now and how needed that work is. It’s been difficult for all of us to watch what happened 100 miles from here last month, and to feel so much hate around us at this moment in our country. If it were only the extremist hate groups, *dayeinu*—that would be more than enough to frighten and dismay us all. But it’s so much more than that. It feels as if hate and displaced anger have seeped into whole communities and all over our society. What can we do about it? How do we fight against it, and how can we be part of the solution? I believe Christian Picciolini’s story can teach us how to begin. I’d like to explore with you some of its lessons, echoed by Jewish teachings, and I hope this will inspire us also to redouble our efforts to engage this year in Tikkun Olam, repairing our broken world.

Words from Pirkei Avot seems made for exactly the kind of moment we saw from afar in Charlottesville. “*Bamakom she’ein anashim, hishtadeil l’hiyot ish.*” In a place where there are no human beings, strive to be human. In this moment in America, there are so many perceived divisions. The human connection gets lost. This teaching reminds us that seeing and treating the other as a human being, created in the image of God, is essential. That is the way we are supposed to act, and no matter how inhuman a situation may seem, it is always possible.

Christian Picciolini didn’t change his mind about white supremacy because someone argued with him or tried to reason with him, even though these things had happened. Rather, it was something much more basic, and at the same time, more incredible. He had opened a record store to sell White Power music. But, after a while, he expanded to include some rare hip hop and punk. Black, Hispanic and Jewish customers began to come into the store. Christian was guarded at first, almost drawing his gun at one point. But, gradually, through simple transactions, then bonding over music, then exchanging details about personal lives, he began

to see that his hatred was based on a falsehood. These people were just people. The skinheads had succeeded in replacing in his mind real life with an image of evil, but when he allowed himself to look long enough at the faces of the people he hated, the image lost its power. In a place where there is no humanity, strive to be human.

The violent acts and violent words around us right now are harmful in so many ways, but at their most basic level, they keep us from being human to one another. When Dr. King reminded us that, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that,” he was teaching that responding to hate with anger only takes us so far, and not far enough. There is most definitely a place for anger: we need strong words from our leaders and whatever measures are consistent with free speech to keep this kind of hate from being normalized in America. But these things won’t get us where we need to go. What will is the building of human relationships, and that is what changes minds. We need to see the humanity of people in other communities, and give them a chance to see us.

That is why we at Temple Rodef Shalom have put so much effort into work that crosses racial and religious boundaries. It’s why we honored the Jewish Islamic Dialogue Society last year with the Rabbi Richard Sternberger Social Justice Award, and why we value so much our friendship with the McLean Islamic Center. It’s the reason we are members of VOICE, Virginians Organized for Interfaith Community Engagement, as well as the Sanctuary Movement of the Washington area, so that our justice work is done together with African Americans, Latinos, Christians and Muslims. And, while these relationships are strong, we need more people at the Temple to engage in them. If you are wondering what you can do to combat hate, please join us.

The second text is the Haftarah we will hear next week on Yom Kippur, when the Prophet Isaiah vents his frustration with the Israelites. They are occupied with their rituals and wrapped up in their lives, ignoring the broken society in which they live. Isaiah tells them the fast they are observing is not the one God is looking for. Rather, he challenges them, “Is not this the fast I desire—to break the bonds of injustice and remove the heavy yoke; to let the oppressed go free and release all those enslaved? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, to take the homeless poor into home, and never to neglect your own flesh and blood?”

The Israelites are engaging in the religious practices they have been taught, to the best of their ability. But it is not enough, because they are not responding to the suffering of the people around them. They have failed to understand that they cannot be redeemed until they see their society's problems as their own.

If everything we do to fight anti-Semitism is focused on self-protection, then I believe we, like Isaiah's Israelites, are missing the point. Columnist Peter Beinart recently wrote in the *Jewish Forward* a crucial difference between the anti-Semitism of today and that of 100 years ago. Then, we were shunned by the elites in country clubs and universities. But not today. Now, both Trump and Clinton count Jews in their immediate families. We are among the privileged class, and anti-Semitism comes more from resentment by elements of the disenfranchised. Among the profiles of young people who marched in Charlottesville are victims of job losses, falling wages and overwhelming student loans. Beinart argues that if you want to combat anti-Semitism, the best thing you could do, in addition to "band[ing] together for self-protection," is to "confront the dysfunction and despair that leads some of our fellow Americans to scapegoat us."

As I mentioned, Christian Picciolini's work now is to help individual members of hate groups extract themselves. One crucial step is to expose that individual to an actual person he or she has been taught to hate. But that will never work without the other essential step: his first goal is to find the person a job, or a better one—a way out of the hole they are in that has them looking for someone else to blame.

In other words, as Isaiah tells us, help people. There are many service projects through the Temple addressing hunger and homelessness, and if you sign up with TRS social action, it's easy to get involved. We are also searching for more efforts that take us into deeper engagement and bring us into new relationships, such as our latest partnership with Shiloh Baptist Church of McLean, to research and act on ways to help citizens exiting Virginia's prisons rebuild their lives. In July, we sat with two formerly-incarcerated African-Americans to learn what it's like after one is released, with almost no money, guidance or help. One Virginia man was dropped off in Springfield with just enough money to take the bus to downtown Alexandria. He tells the story of getting off the bus with three huge boxes he couldn't carry

himself. He had to move the boxes ten feet at a time all the way to the probation office.”ⁱ That is not the way one should have to spend his first day of freedom.

This work is especially important as we try to respond to Isaiah’s warning to face head-on our society’s brokenness. As African-American leaders have pointed out before Charlottesville and since, no response to white supremacy is adequate unless it includes a commitment to looking at issues like this one and trying to address them. The group at TRS that is working on this issue includes people both politically liberal and conservative. They share in common a desire to do something real to help. We are in a unique position as Jews, undeniably under threat, but still relatively secure and affluent. That position enables us—it requires us—do that work.

Finally, the Torah warns us that, especially in situations where we have the choice to remain invisible, we have the obligation to step out. *“Lo Tuchal l’hit’alem.”* This commandment in Deuteronomy is often translated, “You must not remain indifferent” —but, more literally, it implores us, “You must not disappear.” Even in the midst of seemingly immovable barriers and a public debate that drowns out so many voices, we have to advocate for what we see as the right path, for our country and our communities. Christian Picciolini told us that a person who hates whole groups of people will not be moved by a public statement or an argument from an opposing view. For that he turns to a more personal approach. But, his public appearances and his advocacy are crucial as a powerful stand against hate. He gives courage to others who are going through what he experienced, and he brings to the world an important message. We are a politically engaged congregation with diverse opinions. No one’s point of view can be discounted or shut out. Instead, our many insightful and strong voices can lead to robust discussions on issues that have to be addressed. The forum here this spring with the Jewish Community Relations Council, where we welcomed all the primary candidates in the Virginia Governor’s race, is the kind of event that brings different views to the table. And, we are also committed to advocating for causes that are core to the Reform Movement and to the interfaith communities of which we are a part.

In fact, this kind of advocacy by our congregation is more important than ever. That is why our lay leadership has embraced an initiative this year we are calling Eighteen in ’18, in

which groups from all over the Temple community are encouraged to lead an advocacy effort. Our goal is to make sure Temple members come together to coordinate, between us, at least 18 acts of social justice advocacy during program year 2018. (The number 18 also symbolizes life in Jewish tradition.) The project will begin in October with a congregational event focused on the issues of immigration, racial justice and climate change.

We hope that this year's emphasis on social justice work at the Temple will energize the community around these core issues, make a real difference in people's lives, and bring us into new and deeper relationships. And, if there are differences of opinion on the issues we choose and the positions we take, let's talk about them. We may not always agree, but we can still find ways to work together.

In speaking with a friend about our congregation's time with Christian Picciolini, a provocative question arose about the nature of *teshuvah*, the very work of reflection, repair and repentance we are commanded to do on the High Holidays. We noticed that at no point did this man turn to us with the words "I'm sorry" for the years he spent hating us and leading others to do the same. For some, that might have been a missing piece, something they wish they had heard from him more directly.

I had a different reaction. The sin of sowing hate among people is like releasing the feathers of a pillow, as some of you will remember from the old story about harmful speech. Once you have spread hate like those feathers, and they have taken to the wind, it's impossible to collect them back again, or to repair precisely what you have broken. The damage is done and will continue to spread. Christian' Picciolini's *teshuvah* cannot be accomplished by apology. He can't seek any one person's offering of forgiveness. His *teshuvah* is to take action against hate, to reach out and offer help, and to be a force for peace. As Jews, part of our own work of *teshuvah* must be the same: to take action against hate, to reach out and offer help, and to be a force for peace.

ⁱ Nicole Flatow, "The Prison Doors Are Open And You're Released. You Have No Money Or Transportation. Now What?" *Think Progress Online*, June 21, 2015