

Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: A Shabbat of Dialogue with
Myers Park Baptist Church and Masjid Ash Shaheed
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We are about to sing the song at the sea, the song we first sang thousands of years ago, when we first broke free of Pharaoh's tight grasp of oppression and crossed the sea to freedom. Sadly that subjugation was not the last we would know as Jews.

Negative stereotyping, hostility, discrimination, generalizing about a whole from a few – that is anti-Semitism. That is also Islamophobia, racism, homophobia. Fill in the blank for any “-ism” of hatred you have known or seen.

Fifty synagogues and fifty mosques across our country are coming together this weekend to discuss this difficult topic. For us here in Charlotte, we have a church to add to the power of this night of conversation. We come together to use words not to divide but to unite, to use words not to hurt but to heal.

As religious communities we have seen humanity at its worst and we have seen humanity at its best. In preparation for tonight, I listened to the hours of tapes filmed by the Spielberg Foundation of my father recalling his childhood in Germany. Because my grandparents held Polish passports, my father found himself in 1936, as the only Jewish child in his German school. Each morning in class a prayer would be offered “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” and then the students would add, “Whom the Jews killed” and they would look back at my father.

My dad had a shining soul. As an adult, everyone loved him and embraced him. As a ten year old, he had not one friend. He could not play outside after school, lest he be abducted. Every subject taught in his class was used to instill Nazi ideology into the minds of the students. Hatred was taught in history, murder in math. “If you have ten Jews and shoot four,” the teacher would ask, “How many do you have left?”

In Germany, education led people off the path. Today in Charlotte education can lead people on the right path: acceptance, inclusion, valuing diversity. The words we use to describe our neighbors, our friends, our co-religionists and those of different faiths, races, and orientation, have power.

In our schools, in our sanctuaries, in our streets we need to teach our kids how to choose the right words. For sadly some our fellow Charlotteans, sometimes intentionally and sometimes without knowledge, use the wrong words. In the past year we've had High School student who has been told, “You should have burned with the rest.” We've had one couple when trying to negotiate to buy a couch and another couple when buying a car who've been told by salespeople, “Don't try to Jew me down.” We've had many children who have been told on playgrounds that they are they are going to hell because they do not believe in Jesus as the son of God.

We must teach our children to use their words with care. We must teach our children to find unity through diversity. We must teach them that all targets of discrimination and hate are bound together by a common fate, that what happens to one will inevitably happen to the next. It does not matter who is the object of the intolerance. We must teach them to defend every person's rights, for we are all dependent one upon the next.

The positive moments of interfaith bridge building and understanding in our community far outweigh the negative – as three faiths (and more) we pray together, we build houses together, we work together in our high poverty schools, we engage in dialogue, we march for causes of social justice, we stand up one for the other.

The well-known story is told of a man who said awful things about his rabbi and then recognizing his wrongdoing sought forgiveness. The rabbi instructed the repentant soul to take a pillow, cut it and cast its feathers into the wind. Next the rabbi instructed him to gather up those feathers but the man explained that he could not, for they were gone. The same holds true for our utterances --both the negative and positive statements we speak have a lasting impact. Let us choose our words wisely.

I will never forget the first time I prayed in a mosque. It was 1992 in Spain. I was waved over by a Moslem woman to stand next to her in prayer so that “no gaps would stand between us.” That is our goal tonight, to have no gaps stand between us. Tonight we stand as one against bigotry and resolve to resist it together.

When we stood at the Sea of Reeds in the book of Exodus, according to legend only one person had the courage and faith to jump in first, his name was Nachshon ben Aminidav. Today, no one of us needs to jump in the waters of justice and freedom alone, for we have each other.

When we crossed through that sea, our celebration was only partial. Our goal was stand at Sinai, to create freedom not just for ourselves but to create the structures of equality for all.

Tonight, let us metaphorically jump into that sea, not just as Israelites escaping oppression but as Jews and Christians and Muslims, all yearning to cross through the sea to a more promised place. Amen.