



Sarasota's 'courageous conversations' are making a difference |
Opinion

Rabbi Jennifer Singer, Alliance member

Every year on Jan. 20, we thrill to the words of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. He placed himself firmly in the shoes of the prophet Moses, who also stood on the mountain top, who also looked into the promised land and who also never experienced the joy of reaching the goal.

The journey is never over.

No matter how much we remember history, hoping to not repeat it, we find ourselves in a cycle of pain and celebration and pain yet again.

Today we find ourselves halfway through a decade that began with a nightmarish exercise in fear and illness. COVID had us hiding in our homes, afraid to venture out, afraid that a stranger might infect us. The effects of that fear linger even today.

Now we must leave that fear behind. It is time to turn the tide of this decade into one of interdependence and open communication, instead of fear of the other.

It won't be easy. Change never is. But I am convinced that we Sarasotans can turn our backs on hatred and strife and work together for the common good.

One form of hatred that haunts me and so many others is antisemitism. Any Jew can tell you that antisemitism is alive and well in the United States. Since the Hamas attacks on Oct. 7, 2023, and the war that followed, anti-Israel sentiment has become common from quarters that never thought about, much less worried about, the residents of Gaza.

This pernicious prejudice has become the new antisemitism and has gained traction, in great part because its perpetrators claim to be anti-Zionist, not anti-Jewish. Somehow, it has become acceptable to hate Israel.

Here in Sarasota, we have been lucky. Over the past few years there have been scattered incidents of graffiti on synagogue walls, schools ignoring major Jewish holidays and antisemitic flyers distributed in some local neighborhoods. However, Sarasota has not been plagued by numerous overt acts of antisemitism.

We are also fortunate that the Jewish Federation of Sarasota-Manatee has worked to create strong relationships with clergy across the spectrum, and church leaders have responded positively. Just recently the federation gave more than 300 free menorahs to church leaders, who then invited members to put menorahs in their windows during Hanukkah.

“There are many positive feelings and attitudes, affection even, that the Jewish community experiences here,” says Liat Alon, the federation's learning and engagement officer. She suggests turning the conversation around: Instead of talking about fighting antisemitism, Alon says, we should "encourage a conversation about the positives. Let's have courageous conversations about good things.”

Like so many others, I live with a foot in two worlds.

I know that it is not just Jews who feel endangered by societal forces. Muslims, new immigrants, the LGBTQ community, African Americans and others all worry for themselves and their communities. Even our white Christian neighbors, by far the vast majority both here and nationwide, worry.

The answer lies partly in the hands of our civic leaders. But it is not in their hands alone.

Each one of us can be a part of positive, courageous conversations. We can open our minds and set aside learned prejudices. We can work to create a collaborative community that strives to make this a safe and welcoming home for every person.

In the Hebrew Bible, the word that is most commonly used for one's neighbor is "achi."

It means "my brother."

If we can learn that the guy who has a Pride flag on his car, the woman who goes to a mosque instead of a church, the homeless family living behind a store building or the man who speaks Spanish – if all of them are in fact our brethren – we can achieve something important.

Together.

We can create our community into a model for others, one that treasures our differences and embraces our similarities. We can – we must – take the journey together.

Will the task be completed in our lifetimes?

I doubt it.

But that cannot deter us. As the Talmud teaches, "You are not obligated to complete the work. But neither are you free to desist from it."

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