

Oct. 7, 2023: The day everything changed

St. Louis Post-Dispatch

September 19, 2024

By: Rabbi Jeffrey Abraham

We gathered on that Saturday morning Oct. 7, 2023, at my synagogue, Congregation B'nai Amoona in Creve Coeur, for a baby-naming and a 90th birthday. We were there to celebrate the sweetness of new life and to rejoice in the longevity of another.

My community doesn't use electronics on the Sabbath, so we still didn't know what was happening an ocean away. As our service began and we marked one of life's most joyous milestones, the murmur amongst our congregants grew. Israel was under attack.

Looking back, those were some of the last moments when things felt normal for me, for my congregation and for the Jewish people.

As we approach the one-year anniversary of Oct. 7 — the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust — a vast majority of people will think of a war happening halfway across the world. But for Jews here in America, this past year has been a terrifying awakening.

We have witnessed an eruption of antisemitism that continues to rise, and according to FBI Director Christopher Wray, is at "historic" levels. In Missouri, there was a 317% rise in antisemitic incidents in 2023, a figure that had been growing even prior to the terror attacks in Israel and the war in Gaza.

Myriad distortions, tropes and Jew hatred have echoed in our community. How else can one describe agitators accusing Israel of "genocide" when the St. Louis County Council considered a resolution to observe International Holocaust Remembrance Day?

Or when two days after Hamas' attack on Israel, a bus stop in South City was covered in swastikas? Or when the president of the campus Student Government Association at St. Louis University made pro Hamas posts on social media? Or when an elected representative to the U.S. Congress refuses to call Hamas a terrorist group? (Hamas has been a federally designated Foreign Terrorist Organization for more than 25 years).

This misguided thinking persists, in part when extremist fringe groups, that represent literally less than 1% of the Jews in St. Louis, are viewed as somehow speaking for us or providing a fig leaf for views opposed by our community. This tokenism not only harms us, but also damages the fabric of the entire city.

Perhaps what is worse than the venomous words of some is the deafening silence of far too many others. Leaders in our community who call themselves friends or allies, partners in

social justice and community activism, have remained largely quiet. Maybe they have forgotten that while antisemitism starts with the Jewish people, it rarely ends there.

They may remain quiet, but we will not. When we were confronted with Rep. Cori Bush's hateful rhetoric, accusing Israel of "genocide" and "ethnic cleansing," our community exercised our right to organize. I along with a broad coalition of St. Louis rabbis in our personal capacities endorsed Wesley Bell for Congress. Our community mobilized, volunteered, and got out the vote.

But during a local Jewish voters' night, protesters tried to break down the doors to the office. They shouted threats as they banged on the windows. It became a pattern.

We're all petrified, constantly aware of our surroundings. Security has been bolstered significantly just so that we may be able to gather and pray in safety. It's been no different for the younger generation who feel like the threats reach them wherever they are — in their schools and on their cellphones, students have been on the receiving end of hate and intimidation.

Nevertheless, at every turn during this horrendous year we stood up and spoke out. We didn't ignore what we saw and heard, nor did we grow timid or tired. This year has taught us that we cannot afford to be anything less than bold — anything less than courageous.

I'm asking you, members of our beloved community, to do the same. Call out antisemitism when you see it, everywhere you see it.

Nearly one year later, the searing memories of Oct. 7 remain with us. And so too does the memory of our community joining as one to help ensure our future is a brighter one — a safer and a stronger one. We cannot do it alone though. We need allies by our side.

In Judaism, when one finishes reading a book of the Torah we say, "Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazeik": from strength to strength, and together we are strengthened.

Today, more than ever, we all must stand together against the forces of antisemitism and hatred. Truly then we will go from strength to strength, and together we are strengthened.

Abraham is the senior rabbi of Congregation B'nai Amoona in Creve Coeur.