

Rabbi Steve Cohen
 Yom Kippur morning, 5778
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 Congregation B'nai B'rith, Santa Barbara CA

Unbelievably, this summer we witnessed white supremacists marching in the lovely college town of Charlottesville, VA. At this point, no one with even a minimal awareness of the history of the 20th century can avoid asking: "What can I personally do about the rising tide of racism and anti-Semitism?"

This morning, I would like to be extremely practical, and to propose three measures that we as a Jewish congregation can take to build a resistance to hatred in our community. If any of these speak to you, please let me know by responding to an email I will be sending out right after the holiday. I honestly believe that each of these measures is practical, and realistic, and would significantly strengthen the emotional and moral health of our town of Santa Barbara.

#1. Creating enticing and enjoyable opportunities for the citizens of Santa Barbara to learn about us, our culture and tradition....and for us to learn about others

I remember one evening on our most recent CBB Israel trip, visiting a Druze village not far from Haifa. We were ushered into a home and served a superb middle eastern feast, after which a representative of the village spoke to us about Druze life. The representative was a young woman, about twenty years old! She was smart; her English was excellent; she was obviously proud of her Druze heritage, **and** she was completely honest with us about the challenges facing her community, even sharing with us things that she hoped would change. She was incredibly impressive! As we left I thought to myself: "We should do this at CBB. Why don't we train a team of CBB spokespeople? **Not** me and not even our interns or the Cantor, but **normal** CBB Jews! who could speak to visiting groups about Judaism, about Jewish identity, about our Jewish community. Honestly, and with warm feeling. We should feed them Jewish food, (and it would need to be delicious!) and teach them about who we are."

This kind of hospitality and sharing, I think, would inoculate Santa Barbara against anti-Semitism. Furthermore, I think it would inspire the Latinos, the Muslims and the Mormons and others to issue similar invitations!

One of the most exciting events in our recent history, many of you were there, but many of you were not, was the Sundry morning about five years ago when we invited our local Muslim community to join us for breakfast and conversation about Judaism and Islam. That morning, about one hundred Muslims spent the morning noshing and chatting with about one hundred Jews, and everywhere I turned I heard people murmuring, "this is so great. We should do this again soon." And just this past May, under Sissy Taran's leadership, our Sisterhood and Hadassah hosted an evening of food and family, bringing together about fifty local Jewish and Muslim women. I was not there, but I heard that it was a brilliant success.

This is the way forward. We need cooks. We need willing and able spokespeople. And we need some friendly, outgoing people willing to reach out to the Muslims again, and to Catholics, to the Mormons, to the Chumash Tribe, to the Unitarians, to the Evangelical Christians, and to invite them to visit us. And it should not be a one-way street. We also need to assemble teams of C.J.'s, "curious Jews." Members of our community ready to go out and

visit those communities so that we can learn about them, and their cultures and their dreams and challenges. Can you imagine a Santa Barbara where delegations of Muslims and born-again Christians, Jews and Catholics, Latinos and African Americans, were regularly visiting with each other, breaking bread and learning about each other? Would that not be an amazing city to live in? That's one idea.

Idea #2. Embarking on extended interfaith retreats and service trips

When I worked at Hillel earlier in my career, we held a number of interfaith retreats, in which about thirty of us, representing seven or eight different faith communities, went away for a weekend at La Casa de Maria. For two days, we sat face to face and asked each other questions about each other's religions. Some of the time we were in one large group. Other times we broke into small groups or even just pairs, and shared deeply about ourselves, our questions and our convictions. A few things stick out in my memory. First, I remember noticing that the Jews in the group were speaking with more honest pride and conviction about their Judaism than I had ever heard before! Because they were representing Judaism, they were forced to own their Jewish identity and heritage. That happens in an interfaith gathering.

I remember also how very close I came to feel to the non-Jewish participants. By the end of the weekend, none of us had given up our own individual religions, but we had become a single community. I went home feeling for one of the first times in my life like a member of one great human family. So this is my question to you: Would you consider attending an interfaith retreat, with forty or fifty Catholics, Evangelicals, Mormons, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Bahaii? Who would not want to participate??

The other event from my Hillel days, which had a similar unforgettable effect on me was a work week with Habitat for Humanity, in which a group of Jews and Christians spent a week together in Oakland, CA, building a house for a low-income family. And, for years CBB had a great tradition of traveling together with members from the First United Methodist Church to the deep South, rebuilding black churches which had been destroyed by arsonists. Those trips served multiple purposes. First, the participants on those trips restored some of the faith in humanity that had been lost in the communities whose churches were burned. But equally important, the Jews and the Methodists who traveled and worked together came back to Santa Barbara intensely bonded with each other.

Now here is a new idea: How about an interfaith trip...with fifty or sixty people from a number of different communities here in Santa Barbara....perhaps to Texas, or perhaps to Puerto Rico, to help with the cleanup after the hurricanes? Obviously, not this month. But we can begin planning now for a trip at a time when we could really be useful. There will be work to do for many months, for years, and to be honest just to go there and pump some dollars into the economy will help. But think also of the impact on our own community here. We should go, by the way, with people who do not see the world the way we do. Evangelical Christians. Mormons. Muslims. This is how we build a Santa Barbara with a healthy emotional immune system, in which hate simply has nowhere to grow, no way to spread.

Now, idea #3. And this one is a little different: Strengthening our ability to hold respectful dialogue

Speaking of people who do not see the world the way we do, we have work to do right here at CBB. Political disagreements have strained friendships and created resentments right here, in our own congregation. If we are concerned about hatred, we need to begin our work right here at home.

Last year we began and this year we will continue with our once a month program of current events conversations. The name of this program is taken from an old Jewish text, "Who is Wise? One who learns from every person." Last year we began to practice the discipline of how to argue without bitterness. It takes discipline. We held conversations about immigration. About refugees. About fake news and real news. About Israel and the Palestinians. Contentious, emotional topics. Some of our conversations worked better than others. But we were trying. We **are** trying.

Can we disagree without sarcasm and anger? Can we share our convictions with an open mind? Without hatred. Without insult. Without shouting. Without sarcasm. It's not easy, and we will not learn this by watching the TV news. But if we want a world without hatred, that world begins here at home.

So those are my three proposals. None of them are easy, but **they will all be stimulating!**...and I predict even enjoyable. To review them quickly:

- #1. Creating enticing opportunities for the citizens of Santa Barbara to learn about us, our culture and tradition....and opportunities for us to learn about others
- #2. Embarking on interfaith and inter-community retreats and service trips
- #3. Strengthening our ability to hold respectful dialogue here at CBB

These are all, I believe, absolutely feasible, and would I am certain have a transforming effect on the entire community of Santa Barbara....with ripples beyond our community that we cannot imagine.

Together with our neighbors, with the friends we already know and with those we have not yet met, we can create the kind of world we want to leave to our children and grandchildren. A community in which there is no place for hate.

Ken yehi ratzon.

May this be God's will.