

On the Desecration of an American Jewish Cemetery

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Chesed Shel Emeth Cemetery (St. Louis, MO) was desecrated yesterday. Over one hundred headstones overturned. My co-worker, Karen Aroesty, Regional Director of the Anti-Defamation League of Missouri and Southern Illinois, told me she couldn't recall seeing anything like it. Things like this happen. They happen all the time. More often in Eastern Europe, but in America as well. Jewish cemeteries are vandalized and desecrated. I don't dwell on what it means or how it makes other Jews feel.

My maternal grandfather, Joseph Perll, is buried in Chesed Shel Emeth. My great-grandparents, Sam and Mollie Adelman are buried in Chesed Shel Emeth. My ancestors are buried in Chesed Shel Emeth. I felt a twinge of grief, envisioning my grandpa Joe's headstone overturned, and then I felt not much of anything at all.

In the past day, many of my non-Jewish friends have reached out to me to express their sympathy and see if I'm ok. They are outraged and sorrowful on my behalf, and I am warmed by their outreach and their words. At the same time I can't help but tell them I'm not shocked. This is common. JCCs with daycares receive bomb threats. Jewish schools get menacing phone calls. Rabbis are publicly slandered and harassed. Social justice organizations sponsor speakers who reference the Elders of Zion like it's the truth. Sometimes it happens more often as we've seen in the past several weeks, sometimes it's a bit more quiet. It isn't new, and it never stopped happening with a degree of regularity. This is how it's been for as long as I can remember. For many Jews these incidents simply do not register as newsworthy.

Younger Jews often say they've never experienced anti-Semitism—the truth is they have and they just consider it a normal part of life in America. We receive unsolicited feedback on our Jewish looking or not Jewish physical features. We are divided into groups of "good Jews" or "bad Jews" to further the political objectives of other groups that are both in power or marginalized. We are pressured to dilute our intricacies as a people to accommodate our neighbors and we worry what will happen to us if we don't. I suspect this sounds familiar to other vulnerable minorities. Furthermore, anti-Semitism teaches Jews that one of the worst things they can do is talk about anti-Semitism. It is a borderline grotesque and cardinal sin amongst young Jews. To talk about anti-Semitism is to be a complainer, a person who doesn't recognize their privilege or how good they have it. Sometimes we are put off by our leaders and our elders who speak about the Holocaust and the religious persecution which ultimately forced our ancestors to come to America. This rhetoric can strike us as tone deaf, in the face of the Black Lives Matter movement (which is a movement that includes Jews of color), or the Palestinian struggle for self-determination. American Jewry raised us to champion human rights and to be ever grateful that we were allowed to immigrate en masse to a country where we eventually were allowed to assimilate. We are hyper-aware of how good our lives are. At no time and no other place on earth has it ever been so good to be Jewish.

If you aren't Jewish, please consider how you've reacted when you hear about an anti-Semitic incident. Be honest with yourself. When you talk about vulnerable minorities and victims of discrimination do you talk about Jews? Does me asking you this question irk you? Consider your gut reaction, because that is a key piece in the cycle of anti-Semitism that plays out everyday. You may not talk about Jews. You may love Jews. You should know that Jews are acutely aware of how our suffering annoys the people around us. Popular culture reminds us on prime time tv. News headlines point out our ample security resources compared to others. This is the formula of anti-Semitism that Jews are eternally trying to disrupt:

1. Jews grow their own communities and institutions because of exclusion and/or necessity.
2. Jews are perceived as exclusionary and different.
3. Jews are threatened or attacked.
4. Jews cry out for help and support.
5. People with power answer and protect us.
6. Disenfranchised people see how Jews are treated preferentially by those with power.
7. Jews become a distraction “problem” from systemic issues in society.
8. Jewish communities turn inward and we go back to #1.

Jews feel this tension in America. We are blessed and we have thrived in this country. When we are terrorized for being Jewish, we are reticent to acknowledge it because we genuinely don't know whether we will be told we are too privileged to suffer or if we will be offered empathy and support. When we are given the latter, we can act like we've been starved—picking it dry and asking for more.

Non-Jewish allies, please be patient with us and our curious reactions to anti-Semitism. The outpouring of support from other religious communities, from those on the Left and on the Right, and fellow vulnerable populations is so appreciated. I see an opportunity for the cycle of anti-Semitism to be interrupted with every offer to fundraise and to help clean up this terrible mess. I am grateful. We are grateful. Thank you so very very much.

To my fellow Jews, I know you are tired. As a Jewish professional who spends a great deal of my work time trying to keep other Jews safe I know I've become complacent about security. I've worked at a number of synagogues that have received really wretched and violent threats, some that were quite personal (handwritten and slipped under the door). As a minority group we've grown accustomed to this. We simply live with it and dismiss it as normal. We have internalized these hurts and we have devised ways to cope and go about our business.

But this is not normal. This. Is. Not. Normal. Do not be complacent about your personal safety and the security of Jewish institutions. What we have built is priceless and deserves the peace that any other religious institution deserves. Try your best to be outraged every time someone threatens the lives of our little children. Allow yourself to feel sick for the parents and families who are terrorized. It's cruel and evil. Please, don't be like me. Don't shrug and laugh like it's a goof. It's not a goof. You are entitled to be outraged. You are precious. Our babies are priceless. Our Torahs are beautiful. Our cemeteries are sacred. Anyone who tries to minimize your trauma or horror over these events or the anti-Semitism you laugh off every single day (and I know that you do)—ignore them, or if you have the strength educate them.

Finally, do not delude yourself into thinking we have the luxury of being alone in this fight. American Jews will not acquire the inclusion and safety we so desperately want without locking arms with all vulnerable and marginalized groups including Muslims, Black people, Palestinians, immigrants, refugees, disabled people, women, and children. I promise you that there is enough freedom to go around. We will not get freer by keeping score. We will not get justice by refusing to accept a hand extended to us. The suffering of other groups does not undermine or diminish your suffering, just as the suffering of Jews does not undermine or diminish theirs.

I love you to life.