



Growing Up

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I dread this time of year. It's the time when statistical reports from the prior year finally get circulated. The report I dread the most is the Audit of Antisemitic Incidents. The Jewish Community Relations Council just released its 2019 results last week. Broken down geographically, reporting includes events that occur in the State of Wisconsin, are committed by persons residing in the State of Wisconsin, relate to Wisconsin institutions, relate to or specifically respond to Wisconsin persons, and/or would otherwise go unreported if not reported within the audit. The news isn't good.

The audit reflects a 55% increase in incidents from 2018 to 2019, and a 329% increase since 2015. There has been a sharp uptick in references to the Holocaust, Hitler, and Nazis.

For example, harassment included comments such as: "I hope Hitler comes back to kill the Jews"; "If I was part of Hitler's army, I would shoot and kill her"; "Do you prefer gas or bullets?"; "You should go die in a gas chamber." Nasty comments. Mean, hateful comments.

All these were said by middle school students in Wisconsin.

I remember being a middle school student. We tested the boundaries of meanness. I was on the receiving end, and I don't doubt I was on the giving end. But, I'm pretty sure I never heard anything like this.

These students and the many adults whose acts were documented in the audit were not protesting Israeli politics or policies toward Palestinians. They weren't challenging Israeli occupation of lands or civil rights violations, which the international community has also condemned. They were just being mean.

I keep having these fantasies that anti-Semitism and racism and xenophobia will die out – that somehow those mean people will finally pass away, and the next generations will embody the nearly universal call to love our neighbors as ourselves. Instead, from generation to generation, we choose to only live by neighbors we know in advance we are willing to love.

We can't grow out of hatred. We can't because it keeps getting passed down to the next generation. Even if not within a family unit, hatred looks for allies. It finds strength in numbers, and tolerance emboldens it.

Conversely, it cowers in the face of love. That's what I have to offer. The love doesn't originate with me but with the One who loved me first.

Sometimes love in my private action, however, isn't enough. Sometimes love must be public and must advocate for change at systemic levels to break the cycles. Today, bipartisan legislation to require teaching about the Holocaust and other genocides will have a public hearing before the Senate Education Committee. I don't know whether the legislation will make a difference, but I am grateful that our legislators are seeking solutions and are soliciting public input. I pray that love will prevail.