

Talking to Children about Events in Pittsburgh and Anti-Semitism

We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.

--Elie Wiesel

The recent murders, injuries, and aftermath at the Tree of Life congregation in the Pittsburgh area on International Religious Freedom Day sadly remind us that anti-Semitism, racism, and hatred continue in our country. This event has evoked many emotions including fear, anxiety and worry, confusion, and even anger in many around the country. It shook our ideas about the safety of the world around us. The debate on the issues has brought hatred out of the closet. As Jews, we have uttered the phrase, “Never again” in remembrance of the Holocaust. Yet, the shooting reminds us of how neo-nazi ideas and hatred fester and grow. We need to speak up. We, of all people, know what the price of silence can be. We may be struggling to make sense of what we are seeing and hearing in our country. So too are our children. They will be turning to trusted adults for help and guidance. It is imperative that we talk to them about what is happening and what everyone can do.

- Start the conversation. Talk about the events with your child. Not talking about it can make the event even more threatening in your child’s mind. Silence suggests that what has occurred is too horrible to even speak of or that you may not know about what has happened or even how to cope. With traditional and social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, text messages, and newsbreaks on favorite radio stations, and other avenues), it is highly unlikely that children and teenagers have not heard about the shooting at the synagogue, anti-Semitism and racism, and responses from our leaders around our country. *NOTE: For young children (preschool and below), they may not understand the discussions. Please consider the bullet point below.*
- What does your child already know? Start by asking what your child/teen has already heard about the events in Pittsburgh and the aftermath from media as well as from friends. Listen for what understanding he has reached. As your child explains, listen for misinformation, misconceptions and underlying fears or concerns. Understand that this information will evolve in the days ahead.
 - For Preschool children, consider what they have seen or heard. Do not assume they do not sense your emotions or have heard your conversations. Be mindful of exposure. As noted above, listen for misinformation, misconceptions and underlying fears or concerns.
- Gently correct inaccurate information. If you hear inaccurate information or misunderstandings from your child/teen, take time to provide the correct information in language your child/teen can understand.
- Encourage your child to ask questions, and answer those questions directly. Your child/teen may have some difficult questions about recent events. For example, she may ask if it is possible that such a shooting and hatred could come to your congregation, to your community; she is probably really asking whether it is

“likely.” It is important to discuss the likelihood of this risk. She is also asking if she is safe. This may be a time to review plans your family has of assuring safety in the event of *any* crisis situation. Include in your answers any information you may have on efforts being made to assure safety (e.g., working with local responders, with experts in safety, and with Jewish community leadership and teachers about anti-Semitism, hatred, and discrimination). Like adults, children/teens are better able to cope with a difficult situation if they feel they have information. Question-and-answer exchanges help ensure ongoing support as your child begins to cope with emotions related to recent events and their aftermath.

- Discuss Anti-Semitism, again answering questions directly. Anti-Semitism is difficult for adults to understand. No one wants to have to have a discussion with their children that people dislike them just for being Jewish or attending a Jewish place of worship or community center. But, given recent events and a rise in anti-semitic comments, discussing this with children/teens lets them know that you are willing to discuss difficult topics. Sometimes, the answer may be, “I don’t know why some people don’t like us/our Jewish friends, but it is never ok to say hurtful things to others.” Help children and teens come up with a response should anyone say or do anything that makes them feel uncomfortable. Help them identify adults they can trust should something be said or done when you are not around. There are many children’s books for different ages that are available related to anti-Semitism. Consider reading one with your child or providing one to your teen. Discuss the book after it is read as a way to jump-start a conversation about a challenging topic.
 - Empower your children and teens. When discussing the shooting at the synagogue in Pittsburgh and anti-Semitism, it is important to identify individuals who children and teens can trust should they be worried or overwhelmed by emotions and need someone to talk to about these. You are also identifying trusted individuals to approach if they or someone they know or see is being victimized by bullying actions. You can also empower them to ask about safety and security for all. This is also very important for your children entering/returning to college. Having information is important to coping and resilience in the face of difficult circumstances.
 - For preschool children: You may begin the conversation with “sometimes people can say things that are mean and hurt our feelings. Some people may say these things to us just because we are Jewish. We are very proud to be Jewish. If someone ever tries to be a bully to you because you are Jewish, it is important for you to tell me and to tell your teacher. I will do everything I can to be sure you are always safe. That is your teacher’s job, too. No one ever should be bullied or made to feel bad because of who they are, what they look like, or what they believe. Have you heard about anything like this or has someone ever said or done anything to you?”

- For older children and teens: Discuss these events with a historical perspective. WWII, the civil rights movement, etc. At all times, good people took a stand. Jews, perhaps more than any other group, understand the consequences of hatred and fear.
 - For college students: As your college students may be away from home, they (and you) may be concerned about how recent events may be played out on college campuses. These may take the form of protests, rallies, and student organizations being formed. Existing organizations such as Hillel may also be planning activities or special events. Talk to your college students about safety and security on campus. Identify where to find information. Identify trusted organizations and individuals. Discuss their thoughts about involvement. Stress the important need to say something should they or anyone they know or see be the victim of hate speech or actions.
- Values and beliefs. As you begin conversations, recognize that this is an important opportunity to instill values and beliefs about respect, tolerance, and diversity. What your children/teens hear and see from you, they learn and these can become their values and beliefs. As Nelson Mandela so eloquently stated, “No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin or his background or his religion...” This was followed by what we have come to learn through experience as well as empirical research, “People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love.”
 - Recognition of other groups: When talking to your children and teens about your values and beliefs, help them identify other groups who may be targeted for hate and discrimination. These include minorities, other religious groups, refugees, and LGBTQ individuals. These children/teens may also be scared, worried, anxious, and even angry. Consider how you would like your child to support others who may be targeted with racism and hate speech and actions.
- Common reactions. Children/Teens may have reactions to these events. In the immediate aftermath of a threat, problems with attention and concentration may arise. Increases in irritability and defiance may be present. Children and even teens may have more difficulty separating from caregivers, wanting to stay at home or with caregivers. Worries and anxieties about what has happened, what may happen in the future, and how this will impact their lives are common. As the events in Pittsburgh, other acts of hatred, and neo-nazi, confederate, and klan rhetoric are discussed across our country, children/teens who were not directly impacted may have anxieties that “it could have happened to me.” Children/Teens may think about this event, even when they are trying not to. Sleep and appetite may also be affected. In general, these reactions will begin to lessen within a few weeks of events. Support from you will help with feelings of safety and security.

- Be a positive role model. Consider sharing your feelings about the events with your child/teen at a level they can understand. You may express worry, fear, and even a little anger for what happened and for what leaders and others are saying. You may express sadness, worry, and empathy. But, it is very important for you to also share with your child/teen ideas for coping with difficult situations like talking with you or other trusted adults. Your positive statements about the response by many leaders, Rabbis, and others in support of those targeted by hatred will increase your children's sense of security and safety.
- Limit adult conversations. Be mindful that children/teens are sensitive to your stress. Know that they also listen to your conversations, even when you don't believe they can hear or are attending to you. Children may not understand all of your conversations and will fill in the blanks, often with misconceptions or inaccurate information. While the recent events have raised concerns for adults, have discussions about your feelings and thoughts with other adults out of your child's or teens presence. It is important that you express your concerns in a healthy way as stress impacts all of us.
- Limit media exposure. The events in Pittsburgh and the aftermath of these is on the every type of media. These are compounded by continued terrorist attacks around the world. Limit exposure to this coverage. For the very young child, there is truly no "good" amount. For young children and teens, they will likely have contact with traditional and social media. The younger the child, the less the exposure should be. In all cases, find a time to sit with your child/teen and ask about what they have seen, what they have heard. Get their ideas and opinions. Even checking in to determine what their friends may be saying about what is happening. Consider limiting your own exposure. Too much increases our stress levels, also.
- Be patient. In times of stress, children/teens may have more trouble with their behavior, concentration, and attention. Even if they may not openly seek your understanding or support, they will want this. With adolescents who are searching for an increased sense of independence, it may be more difficult to ask for support and help. Children/teens will need a little extra patience, care, and love. (Be patient with yourself too!).
- Extra help. Should reactions continue or at any point interfere with your children's/teens' abilities to function or you are worried, contact your Rabbi or your local mental health professionals who have expertise in trauma. Your family physician or pediatrician may be able to guild you to such experts. State mental health associations can also provide guidance.
- Keep in mind:
 - School can be a place of safety or bullying. School/college is a place of learning, time with friends, time for school spirit and activities. But this

setting may also bring other worries related to anti-Semitism, racism, deportation concerns, and hatred. Sadly, bullying behaviors are on the rise. Recent events may heighten worries and anxieties as they go to school/college. Be sure to discuss with your child/teen and college student what to do should they encounter bullying toward *anyone at all*: Tell someone. You may discuss other action steps such as befriending those who may be targeted. Silence should never be the correct response.

- Regilious services. With regular religious services, it is likely that all of us will be thinking of Pittsburgh and its aftermath and the visible rise of anti-Semitism. Neo-nazis, white supremacists, and others will likely be part of conversations and sermons. Consider what your hope will be for your community. Consider what your hope will be for your children.
 - Security. Most synagogues and temples will have security during worship services and even Sunday school. Talk to your children and teens about safety. Be sure they know these individuals are there to protect congregants as well as to provide any help needed. This discussion may reduce some anxiety surrounding our religious activities.
- Religious schools and community centers. Many children attend Jewish schools and families of all faiths are members of Jewish community centers. Recent events and anti-Semitism may result in increased concerns about safety and security in these settings. Learn about efforts to ensure safety and security. If you or your child ever feels uncomfortable about their safety, be sure he knows you are available to talk to about these worries or other emotions. Be sure you and your child know who to talk to about concerns at the school and/or community center.

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