Build on unifying response to cemetery ordeal

BY ANDREW REHFELD

Last week an estimated 2,500 individuals gathered to show the world that St. Louis would not tolerate senseless acts of violence, particularly those aimed at minorities. The desecration of Chesed Shel Emeth Cemetery was a signal event for our community and the response was heartwarming.

The response has included: St. Louis is working actively with the leadership of the cemetery to support them in managing the unprecedented international attention this event drew. We will be conducting security reviews with them and our other community cemeteries and making sure the dollars that are donated from multiple sources get to work as soon as possible.

Sadly, among this demonstration of unity and support there is now a terri- ble rumor circulating that the Jewish Community of St. Louis is shunning contributions by the Muslim commu- nity. It is false and despicable.

Let me explain.

In the wake of the cemetery vandal- ism last week a number of fundraising efforts have been started. They have been very specifically from the Islamic com- munity outside of St. Louis.

Our community has been and will be for any support for a safe and secure Jewish St. Louis. I have very publicly expressed my thanks in a general way for these efforts, noting the contributions by our Muslim brothers and sisters at my pub- lic remarks during the interfaith vigil in St. Louis. And I have reinforced this in every interview I have given to the media.

But it is true the Federation did not publicly name any specific effort being undertaken on our community’s behalf beyond the general note of thanks.

Why——at this point——did we only thank these efforts in the broadest terms without specifically mentioning the names of the other charities?

Sadly, one common phenomenon of crisis fundraising is that it is a market- place of deceit. False charities open up that have no oversight to take advan- tage of people’s desire to give and then scam them in one way or another.

The Jewish Federation should not promote any specific effort until they have established a clear relationship and partnership, and can vouch for the funds being raised in their name.

Now that the intensity of the crisis fundraising has subsided the Federation should be respon- sible of responding to other groups to help them get their donor’s funds to work. I have been in contact already with prominent efforts in the Islamic community outside of St. Louis. Our conversations always begin with the strongest words of thanks and grati- tude and a presumption that these efforts are honest and above board.

And this process works both ways. We are now working through a process to help these charities manage the trans- fer of funds in a manner that maintains their confidence in us, to make sure that they know that their dollars go to real projects in St. Louis as well.

This is what responsible philan- thropic management looks like on both sides.

We will continue to work together in a spirit of collaborative partnership with any group. And we will be delighted to announce and celebrate those gifts and efforts——very publicly by name——when they are made.

What we do not need is to turn a moment of tremendous unity into divi- sion because of an uncharitable response from those who insist on viewing others with suspicion and always presuming the worst in peo- ple.

Let me state once again how grateful our community is to all support—from the thousands who came to clean and protect the cemetery to the multiple funding efforts from other Muslims, Christians, Jews, agnostics, atheists, and many many others. We will continue to build our partnerships with all who seek to find common ground and in a man- ner that is responsible and respectful of each other’s motivations.

And that is what we must con- tinue to do.

Last week the St. Louis region came together as a comprehensive Jewish community to stand against Anti-Semitism, bigotry, and racism. We “named it” and called it out. We have said we will do it again and committed to not tolerating it. Now we must “do something about it.”

As a first step, let me suggest treat- ing each other with charity, avoiding the constant speculation about motives, and giving each other the benefit of the doubt. That is a good way to create a foundation on which the collective purpose to which we all joined last week might be continued for a very long time ahead.

Andrew Rehfeld is President and CEO of Jewish Federation of St. Louis.
In the beginning of this week’s Torah portion, Parashat Terumah, God instructed Moses to build Mount Sinai after the saying of the aseret hadashot, Ten Commandments, and G-d now commands Moses to tell the Jewish people that he is coming to the Tabernacle building of the Mishkan (tabernacle), a moving Temple the Jewish people traveled with in the wilderness.

This Torah portion and several subsequent ones to continue to describe the details of the Mishkan’s construction. Why do the commandments for building the tabernacle follow so soon on the heels of the revelation at Mount Sinai? Indeed, why do the Jewish people, a nation that our rabbis say was like a crowd of one girl, dead at age 3, reads, “Loved and sadly missed by your family” “Darling daughter” died in the spring of 1914, eight days after completing her third month on Earth. The family of a 13-month-old baby who succumbed in the fall of 1926 to a cancer, son.

Some of the words carved into these stones speak of “Our little boy,” “Beloved sister,” “You longed for your father” a crowd of one girl, dead at age 3, reads, “Loved and sadly missed by your family.” More than a few of the children’s stones were broken, but their exposed faces still who had paused to comfort each other.

So it is with Israel, G-d says. When she was young, I interacted with her everywhere face-to-face, at the Sea, in the Exodus and at Mount Sinai. But now that she has grown up, received the Torah and become a complete nation, it is not

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months to 13 years. Some of the words carved into these stones speak of “Our little boy,” “Beloved sister,” “You longed for your father” a crowd of one girl, dead at age 3, reads, “Loved and sadly missed by your family.” More than a few of the children’s stones were broken, but their exposed faces still who had paused to comfort each other.

More than a few of the children’s stones were broken, but their exposed edges were well weathered, and the fractures might have resulted from natural causes. In a couple of instances, though, the breaks looked more recent. As recent as the weekend of the 18th. I don’t know. But a person who lived in a cemetery and wearing decent boots would have had no trouble shattering one of these stones.

Troubled by that mental image, I left the field of children’s graves and started looking for my sister and nephew among a crowd that had grown considerably larger since we arrived.

From 30 or 40 feet away, I noticed a woman walking in my direction. We happened to make eye contact and kept walking until we were standing together. I hadn’t been aware of deep sadness in my face, but she apparently detected it even at a distance, just as I had sensed something similar in hers.

Without a word, she opened her arms, and we embraced. Several seconds later, we stepped back and asked about the headstones of our respective loved ones. I told her mine were OK; she said she hadn’t found the ones she was looking for yet. And then we parted, strangers then and now.

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ing of anti-establishment conservatives that includes within its ranks unashamed anti-Semites, the RJC went dark.

The group issued few statements mentioning Trump. None of its events at the Republican National Convention in July were open to the media — in contrast to the group’s high profile in past years. Its drive to get the vote barely even noticed Trump for the most part and focused on vulnerable GOP senators in states with large Jewish communities. And even the group’s inaugu

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What happened in that moment did not seem to me to be a “random act of kindness.” Our presence at Chesed Shel Emeth and our wounded emotional states were not at all random but the direct result of violence inflicted on the cemetery in the days since. We simply extended kindness and compassion to each other, people who seemed to need it for reasons that we understood without explanation. The subsequent outpouring of human decency from the people, institutions and diverse religious denominations of Shel Emeth cemetery is an effort joined at the last minute by Pence. The vice president called out inspiration over a bullhorn. Pence also stood on the back of a pickup truck, waving a raddle (see related coverage on Page One).

Greitens, having depicted a sweaty, out-of-breath Trump as the savior for the Jews, finally got around to Trump. “The president had called me earlier that day,” Greitens said. “He said tell the people of Missouri that we stand with Trump, you have a terrific team with the president’s back, that the Jews, finally got around to Trump. “The president had called me earlier that day,” Greitens said. “He said tell the people of Missouri that we stand with

Local leaders, community centers, and others have adopted the alt-right’s confrontation to reject the support of their followers. Trump himself has had multiple opportunities to publicly express support for individuals who are aligned with extremist white supremacist groups who felt legitimized and empowered by the election of Donald Trump. I do know that Trump himself has had multiple opportunities to explicitly condemn the anti-Semitic ideology of these groups and reject the support of their followers.

He has refused to do either.

Still do we have a Mishkan due to our lack of ability to interact intimately and maturely with our G-d or because we have an even greater ability to do so? Though growing up often changes the parent-child relationship into one that at first may seem less intimate, the potential exists, if we can mature enough, to have a relationship that is ever more deep and complex.

This is why we each personally become spiritually mature enough to have an even more intimate, deep and complex relationship with our G-d.

By Rabbi Hyim Shafner

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Now the group is trying hard to get behind Trump. It has sought out his “neutrality” on Israel in 2015 to an eager embrace earlier this month of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu — and his policies on the Palestinians and Iran — have helped the vocal minority among Republican Jews who have adopted the all-right’s confrontational style, made a similar pitch in another ballroom.

Sheldon Adelson, the casino magnate who owns the Venetian and contributed tens of millions to the effort to elect Trump, had a private meeting with Trump prior to the RNC.

Missouri Gov. Eric Greitens described how he rallied a diverse community earlier in the week to help clean up Chesed Shel Emeth, a thinking from the people, institutions and diverse religious denominations of Shel Emeth.

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