

Editorial

Hate should have no home here

This week, we mark the 16th anniversary of September 11.

We remember again, as we do every year, the way hatred and foul irrational sulphurous evil came out of what literally was a clear blue sky, a sky as gloriously cobalt as we'd ever seen, a sky almost impossibly blue.

And then unthinkable monstrosity came from it, death and pain and stench and loss, the courage of first responders and the unthinkable decision people at the top of the towers had to make as they chose between death by smoke or death by jumping and plummeting to the ground, pulled by gravity ever faster and faster.

Many people in this community – the local Jewish community and the larger north Jersey one – died on that day.

There was some good that came out of that nightmare, examples of courage and heart and healing, an attempt to understand each other better, to see past labels into hearts. People lined up to donate blood, to search rubble, to post signs, to give food, to give love, to do whatever they could to help. Even if they could do nothing else, they could give love, and they did.

One of my most powerful memories of that time – other than the smell of death that was blown upriver every evening for weeks – is the first Friday night after that monstrous Tuesday. That night, at twilight, hundreds of people came out and stood silently, holding candles, holding vigil. We were on our way to Shabbat dinner then, so we had no candles, but we were lit by their flickering light, and somehow we felt hope and love.

But now the world seems again plunged into a morass. The situation in North Korea is terrifying. This country's moral and physical fabric seems to be fraying. We are at each other's throats. We are turning away the immigrants who were brought here as children and know no other home, young immigrants who are just like many of our grandparents and great grandparents, also dreamers, equal in their hopes but not in their welcome. And anti-Semites seem to be crawling from the woodwork where they apparently have been flourishing in the fetid darkness.

We cannot possibly let this happen. And we don't have to.

This is the month of Elul. Selichot is next Saturday night – September 16. It is a time for reflection, not only about ourselves but about our place in the world. We are a strong community. And our new year comes at a physically beautiful time, when the world is about to turn bright with vivid color, when the light is gold and the shadows are sharp and the sense of excitement and change is palpable in the air.

There have been grassroots movements springing up all over, declaring that hate has no home here. There have been vigils, outpourings of love and solidarity, visual representations of the truth that love can trump hatred, that goodness can overcome wickedness, that Dr. Martin Luther King was right when he said that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

As we remember September 11, as we look toward an unclear future in a suddenly unfriendly world, let us keep hoping that the moral universe continues to bend.

—JP

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Editorial

More about the eruv

The eruv fight in Mahwah is becoming uglier and uglier, and we watch it with dismay.

To some extent, it is a microcosm of the anger and fear and hatred and bigotry that is bubbling all around us. If even football players can be under attack (and to be honest, I've never understood the allure of the oversize over-padded waddling eye-blacked behemoths, running into each other and grunting, but I know I'm in a minority on that one), then why not eruv supporters?

But the situation is complicated, and we watch helplessly as it is turned into a black-and-white, good-versus-bad, cartoon version of real life. (And of course which side is good and which is bad, which is all virtue and which is the cartoon demon, entirely depends on where you stand.)

First, it is hard to explain what an eruv is. A few weeks ago, I wrote that an eruv is a legal fiction, and that I knew that no one would be happy with that wording, but it's the most accurate way to explain this odd phenomenon, the stripes marking poles and strings connecting them that demarcate private space for observant Jews and allows them to carry things and push strollers and wheelchairs on Shabbat.

Non-Jews and less observant Jews cannot help but be put off by the idea of an eruv because they assume – and logic and common sense are on their side as they make that assumption – that somehow their own private property is less theirs if it is surrounded by an eruv.

That of course is not the case.

Observant Jews bristle at the idea that an eruv is a legal fiction – they insist that it is symbolic, not fictitious, making a distinction so fine that it loses its meaning easily – because if it is, they say, it does not work.

As I expected, I got an angry letter telling me that I am breathtakingly ignorant because I used the term legal fiction. It is exactly that approach – the I'm-right-and-so-you're-wrong-so-why-don't-I-just-call-you-names approach – that leads to so much trouble.

It's not an I'm-right-and-you're-wrong issue.

Eruv supporters must understand that it is not inherently anti-Semitic not to want an eruv.

The eruv struggle is not happening in a vacuum. There is history just over the state border. The specter of the East Ramapo school district looms. It is a tragic story – the working class, striving, largely immigrant or minority parents who moved to Rockland County to give their children better lives,

and found themselves in a school district stripped of most resources, apparently by a large chasidic community that at least seemed not to care about them. The story is murky, but the one thing that is clear is that it is not good.

No one wants her school district to turn into an East Ramapo.

It is also true that it is possible to fight against an eruv, bring in lots of outside lawyers, fight in court, lose, fight again, lose, fight again, lose, and eventually give up and get an eruv. And then watch as absolutely nothing happens. So there's an eruv. So what?

That's what happened in Tenafly more than 10 years ago. The town fought the eruv, anti-Semitism spewed, lots of money was spent, and it lost, and now it has an eruv. And Tenafly continues to have a wonderful school district; it also has many Jews, some Orthodox, some Conservative, some Reform; many non-Jews, representing a wide range of ethnicities, and very few problems.

That could happen in Mahwah too.

On the other hand, eruv opponents must understand that it doesn't sound like they're opposing just an eruv. More and more, as tempers stretch and patience and understanding run out and old elemental hatreds bubble up, it sounds like they're opposing Jews.

It is starting to sound like pure anti-Semitism.

Social media just makes everything worse. It used to demand either middle-of-the-night stealth or pure brazen guts to call someone a name or leave a nasty or threatening note in someone's mailbox. Now there's another way. Go online, and let the venom spew.

This has to end.

This is a dream, of course, a mad wild dream, but wouldn't it be wonderful if the adversaries could talk to each other? Really talk? The eruv supporters could explain how the eruv would make their lives significantly easier, and also could talk about the community that an eruv fosters. That's no small thing.

The opponents could talk about their real fears without couching them in anti-Semitism. Maybe their fears could be assuaged. Maybe they too would feel the powerful pull of community.

As Yom Kippur approaches, we hope that everyone involved will be able to pull back from the fight, disengage their emotions, engage their logical faculties, and then fall back on their basic goodness. Yes, apologize to each other, and then move forward together.

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Editorial

Save Bennie and Josh

Two related stories in this week's Standard by our science correspondent, Dr. Miryam Wahrman, beautifully told and scientifically complex, tell the heartbreaking story of Bennie Landsman, not quite 1 1/2, and his little brother Josh, about 5 months old.

Both the brothers have Canavan disease; unless science stops and magic takes over, the boys are likely to die before they can turn 10.

Their grandmothers have devoted themselves to their care, and to raising money to fund the research that probably will not cure them but probably could prolong and comfort their lives.

There are many lessons to all of us in this story, should we be able to dry our eyes and still our hearts enough to learn them.

To be clear, none of those lessons is theological. I have no idea what people whose minds go in that direction make of this story, and I do not want to know.

This story is about human love and perseverance and the ability to keep going; about the ability to take love wherever you find it and make more of it and keep going; about the ability to find hope in odd places and make more of it and keep going.

It is also about science's failures, and its successes, and its future.

The boys' parents maybe could have been diagnosed as carriers, had the tests been more available and the need for both parents to take them been more clear. It is vital that we as a community stress the need for people who are thinking of becoming parents to test themselves, and to do it more than once, because as scientific knowledge grows the tests

become ever more precise. Do not assume you know what any panel of tests will show. Take it.

Fund science. That's how we fight terrible illnesses like these. That's how we keep children from dying. Fund science. Value science. Teach our children about the value of analytic thought, of never taking anything for granted, of challenging assumptions, of experimenting and experimenting and experimenting.

Value love. The boys' parents and grandparents are not giving in to despair, although who could blame them if they did? They are loving Bennie and Josh. They are giving them the experiences that all children deserve, no matter what we assume about their life expectancy. They are honoring their lives, listening to their laughs, playing with them, cuddling them, loving them. That matters.

Help the family. Go to the funding page – to get there, google "GoFundMe" and "save Benny and Josh." It will help the family afford the experimental drugs that will keep their sons alive, at least for now. Every little bit adds up, and every little bit counts. That matters.

As this new year begins, as we leave perhaps the most contentious year that most of us can remember, as we head toward a year that we fervently hope will be better, less partisan, less crude, less snarlingly ugly, we understand that we also are moving toward more light, and we hope that we also are moving toward hope.

Cherish hope. Nourish hope. Fund hope. Love hope. It matters.

We at the Jewish Standard wish all of our readers a new year of hope and love and peace.

—JP

The opinions expressed in this section are those of the authors, not necessarily those of the newspaper's editors, publishers, or other staffers. We welcome letters to the editor. Send them to jstandardletters@gmail.com.

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