

## Anti-Semitism in 2014

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On the day before the Seder, April 13, a Sunday, Frazier Glenn Cross, a 73-year-old man known for his anti-Semitic and white supremacist activities, walked up to the Jewish Community Center of Greater Kansas City. There, he brutally murdered a 14-year old boy and his grandfather in the parking lot. Cross then proceeded to Village Shalom, a Jewish senior living facility, where he gunned down a woman who was on her way to her car after visiting her mother.

Even from afar, I took the news from Kansas personally. I immediately texted our nephew, to make sure he was safe. Grateful that he was watching the news at home, I knew that his safety meant that another family would be grieving. As many of you know, Toni went to high school and medical school in Kansas City, and her family lived in the part of Overland Park, Kansas where the shootings took place. Village Shalom was Toni's late parents' last home. How many times did Toni and I, Robert and Daniel, Toni's brothers and their families, walk to our car in that parking lot, as Terri LaManno did on that fated Sunday?

I have chosen to speak about this incident tonight, at the Shabbat that ends the week when we observed Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day. After all, the killer shouted, "Heil Hitler," as he pulled his trigger of hate. Clearly, Mr. Cross wished to be remembered together with the evil mastermind of the greatest anti-Semitic horror of all time.

The reality, though, is that the Kansas event has precious little in common with the Holocaust or with any of the devastating history of anti-Semitism in our people's past. Some have found irony in the fact that none of the victims were Jews. We know better: "Irony" doesn't begin to tell the story. Frazier Cross didn't only fail to kill Jews; he failed to understand the extent to which Jews are integrated into 21<sup>st</sup> Century America. When Reat Griffin Underwood, age 14, went to audition for a singing competition, he likely gave no thought to its location, the Jewish Community Center, where he would die with his grandfather, William Lewis Corporon, who drove him there. The anti-Semite Cross didn't imagine that the people who would attend a cultural event at a JCC would be just as likely Christian as Jewish. The hateful killer didn't contemplate that a Catholic family might choose outstanding care for their aging loved one at a Jewish facility. While the Kansas tragedy serves as a painful reminder that anti-Semitism is not a thing of the past, it also offers hopeful lessons about Jews, America, and the modern world.

For nearly 2000 years, our people faced brutal, often murderous, anti-Semitism in Europe. Wherever we lived, we were not considered citizens lands of our birth, nor could our ancestors even conceive of truly belonging where they lived. The 16<sup>th</sup> century Parisian Jew never imagined that he was a Frenchman, but rather saw himself as he was viewed by others: as a Jew, who happened to live in France. The 18<sup>th</sup> Century German Jew was not a German; she was a Jew residing in Germany by accident of birth and long-ago migration. The 14<sup>th</sup> Century Jew living in Poland would have been shocked that anybody would think of him as a Pole; he was a Jew.

That phenomenon did not end with modernity. Even now, Jews who have emigrated from the former Soviet Union tell me that they never imagined themselves to be "Russians" until they arrived in the United States or Israel. As long as they lived in Russia, or Uzbekistan, or Ukraine, they were Jews, never Russians, or Uzbeks, or Ukrainians even in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

For us, for American Jews, especially for those of the Baby Boom or later generations, *mah na-im goraleinu*, how fortunate our lot, for we have never wondered whether we could be both fully American and fully Jewish.

Let us not forget: The pogrom of the past was sanctioned by those in power, police looking the other way, soldiers often among the savages who killed our men, raped our women, and set fire to our homes and synagogues.

Let us not forget: The Holocaust was a systematic governmental effort to wipe Jews off the face of the Earth, a scant 70 years ago. The full power of the Nazi State, its clients and collaborators, was mustered to manufacture an industry of Jewish death and destruction.

By contrast, the anti-Semite of Overland Park was promptly apprehended by the largely non-Jewish police and charged with a capital crime. Frazier Cross now awaits trial on murder charges enhanced by laws against crimes inspired by hatred of any group, including Jews. In America, Jews cannot be marked for death with impunity. In America, even a heinous event like the murders of April 13 will not stop our fellow citizens, our friends, from visiting our Temple, from working out at a JCC or from seeking care at a Jewish hospital.

Yes, the outrage of Overland Park reminds us that anti-Semitism is not entirely a hatred of the past. So how common is anti-Semitism today? Permit me to share some statistics. After all, we find ourselves in the Jewish calendar at a season of counting. As Susan and Phil read for us from this week's Torah portion, we count the week of weeks — that is, seven weeks — between Passover and Shavuot. Similarly, the Anti-Defamation League counts anti-Semitic incidents in the United States each year. ADL's 2013 Audit recorded 751 events, 31 of them violent assaults. Those numbers sound bad, until we hear that "None of the assaults was life threatening or required hospitalization." Those numbers sound bad, until we learn that the total represents a 19 per cent decline from 2012 and "one of the lowest levels of incidents reported . . . since [ADL] started keeping records in 1979." In the words of ADL head Abe Foxman, "The falling number of incidents targeting Jews is another indication of just how far we have come in finding full acceptance in society, and it is a reflection of how much progress our country has made in shunning bigotry and hatred."

Even this relatively happy reality should focus us on two tragic counterpoints.

First, while anti-Semitic incidents are down, together with hate crimes against all groups in our country, the numbers of attacks against other groups far exceed anti-Semitism. We know this sad fact to be true. Race-based hatred continues to be the leading reported motivation for these crimes, with African Americans the most likely victims. We are all too aware that gays and lesbians, transgendered people, and those perceived to be immigrants are also targets, all too often, in America today. While Jews are still more likely than Muslims to be the targets of hate crimes in this country, we all know that our Muslim neighbors face far greater bias and discrimination.

Second, while anti-Semitism decreases in the United States, it continues to be a growing problem worldwide. A Tel Aviv University study indicated a 30 per cent increase in anti-Semitic incidents worldwide in one year, from 2011 to 2012, the most recent year for which figures are available. While some of the rise has been attributed to anti-Jewish and anti-Israel attitudes in the Muslim world, almost all of the increase in anti-Semitism has been found in Europe — above all, in France. Anti-Semitism is a common tactic of extremists, both of the right and the left, at least as likely among far-right parties sprouting across Europe as among those who seek to destroy the State of Israel.

While the deaths of Frazier Cross' victims were all too real, he comes off as a laughable neo-Nazi, compared to the fascists gaining real seats in real parliaments in Europe.

Not 24 hours after the Overland Park murders, news circulated of a flyer announcing that all Jews of eastern Ukraine must register with the government or face deportation and confiscation of their property. The flyer itself was denounced by the ADL as no more than a "political dirty trick." To be clear, Jews of eastern Ukraine did not actually have to register. Still, as ADL's Foxman pointed out, "Both classical political anti-Semitism and the manufactured, manipulative version rely on a common assumption, that a significant number of Ukrainian citizens do not consider their Jewish compatriots to truly be part of the Ukrainian nation." Sadly, the same may be said of Russia, or of Argentina, and even of more than a few in France, today.

As we count the days from Passover to Shavuot, we give thanks for our enduring freedom from Egyptian bondage and from the worst of classical European anti-Semitism. And as we count the days of this sacred week of weeks, let us ever remain vigilant, numbering every act of violent hatred, against Jews or against members of any targeted group, here in the United States or anywhere on Earth. On Shavuot, we will celebrate the fulfillment of our freedom in the gift of Torah. Then, let us pray for the day when we may study and live Torah, anywhere on Earth, free of the scourge of anti-Semitism. Then, let us pray that all peoples and groups will be liberated of the bonds of hatred and oppression. Then, may all be free.

Amen.