

## First They Came for the Trans Kids

### *Shabbat Tazria-M'tzora 5783*

April 21, 2023

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The Anne Frank Tree exhibit at the Clinton Presidential Center appropriately places the Holocaust front-and-center. It also includes memorials to three injustices that took place right here in Arkansas. First, we see the Indian Removal Act, which led to the Trail of Tears, as American Indians migrated through and from Arkansas after they were brutally forced—that is, ethnically cleansed—from their ancestral homes and deported to “Indian Territory,” now Oklahoma. Next, we read a quotation from George Takei about his childhood in a Japanese interment camp in Southeast Arkansas during World War II. Finally, we acknowledge the heroics of the Little Rock Nine, who faced down Jim Crow right here in our community.

The Anne Frank Tree sapling was secured, and the memorial was designed, shortly before I became your rabbi a decade ago. Then-Sisterhood President Muriel Lederman and Temple President Leah Elenzweig worked tirelessly and at great length—writing a complicated grant proposal, successfully securing significant funds to construct the exhibit, and coordinating with the folks at the Clinton Center to get it just right.

I was here, though, for the magnificent dedication. After all the speeches, a member of our congregation who had participated in securing grant funding for the project remarked to me, “Don’t you think the Holocaust is enough? Why did it have to include all those other injustices?” The question was reasonable. Thankfully, I knew the answer: The Anne Frank Foundation, which made the saplings available, required that exhibits address local injustice.

I might have added that the Foundation was right.

Important analogies connect the Holocaust to the Arkansas injustices reflected in the Anne Frank Tree exhibit. The Nazis conquered much of Europe in their quest to expand “living room” for the German people, just as the U.S. expelled Native Americans from their sacred lands to make room for more European Americans. The Nazis contended that German Jews were foreigners threatening German national security, just as Americans imagined Japanese Americans to be at the same period. And the Nazis sent students to the American South, including the Law School in Fayetteville, to learn about racial purity laws—that is, Jim Crow—that would become the basis for the Nazis’ Nuremberg Laws.

In 1947, Pastor Martin Niemoller famously wrote:

First they came for the Communists  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a Communist

Then they came for the Socialists  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a Socialist

Then they came for the trade unionists  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a trade unionist

Then they came for the Jews  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a Jew

Then they came for me  
And there was no one left  
To speak out for me

Niemoller's point, of course, was that those who discriminate against and persecute one group would not hesitate to turn against another.

This year's session of the Arkansas General Assembly began with a raft of proposals aimed at restricting the rights of transgender Arkansans, particularly but not only youth. Having been hamstrung by federal judges in their 2021 attempt to deny life-saving medical care to transgender youth, they tried to make it impossible for the gender clinic at Arkansas Children's Hospital to obtain malpractice insurance. They empowered public school employees who wish not to refer to trans and nonbinary young people by their correct names and pronouns, denying those kids their basic human dignity. They tried to criminalize trans people for using the bathroom, for crying out loud. Make no mistake: They came for the trans kids. Given the high rate of suicide among transgender youth, particularly when they face discrimination or are denied care, these laws are potentially deadly.<sup>1</sup>

Governor Sanders signed each of these bills into law. She frequently speaks of combating a so-called "woke agenda." That agenda includes education that fosters equity, diversity, and inclusion, particularly in connection to race. Apparently, librarians in the state are determined to pollute people's minds. Our

legislature and governor did not stop with the trans kids, therefore. They came for people of color. They came for low-income students in rural public schools. They came for librarians. Librarians!

Admittedly, Governor Sanders and the General Assembly did not “come for the Jews”—except that our Jewish community does, of course, include transgender and nonbinary kids and adults, people of color, public school students and employees, and at least one librarian. Even as they disregarded central lessons of the Holocaust, the General Assembly designated the last week in January each year as Holocaust Education Week in Arkansas. They adopted a definition of antisemitism, laudable but ineffective, since Arkansas is one of only three states with no hate crimes law whatsoever.<sup>ii</sup>

Still, like Pastor Niemoller said, once they come for one minority group, we ought not feel secure. The discriminatory and dangerous laws adopted in Arkansas this year are rooted in the Great Replacement Theory, the notion that a conspiracy exists to replace a white, Christian, straight majority in America with people of color, immigrants, non-Christians, gay, lesbian, and transgender folks. And guess who’s behind that conspiracy? Jews, of course!<sup>iii</sup> The Tree of Life mass murderer in Pittsburgh targeted Jews because of what he read about Jewish support for immigrants and refugees.<sup>iv</sup> And who can forget Charlottesville 2017, “Jews will not replace us?”

The Great Replacement Theory is a lie, of course, as is the notion of a nefarious “woke agenda.” Jewish Americans and our many allies do support efforts to enhance equity, diversity, and inclusion throughout our society, not only because it’s the right thing to do, but because companies and communities committed to diversity are more successful.<sup>v</sup> Interaction with a wide variety of ideas and individuals does not pollute people’s minds; it enhances the human experience.

This week, we read laws from the Torah about how ancient Israelite priests were instructed to control a disease called *tzara’at*, often mistranslated as leprosy. The sages make a linguistic connection between the word for a person suffering this disease, *m’tzora*, and the term for uttering slander, *motzi ra*. The *m’tzora* only evidences a disease because they have committed that sin of uttering falsehood.

Governor Sanders and our General Assembly are guilty of slander, accusing their political opponents and ordinary Arkansans—you know, librarians, teachers, parents and physicians—of seeking to pervert our youth. They have sought to remove trans kids, their parents, and medical providers from our community. Instead, like the *m’tzora* in our Torah portion, should be banished until they repent.

Lest we imagine repentance to be impossible, it may help to know that Pastor Niemoller, whose 1947 poem emphasizes the all-encompassing nature of Nazi evil, had been a Nazi sympathizer and a vocal antisemite. His opposition to Nazism came late in the War. He did not confess and repent for his antisemitism until 1963.<sup>vi</sup> Nonetheless, the poem he wrote has beautifully taught the lesson that once “they” come for one group, nobody is safe.

Congregation B’nai Israel cherishes a great and noble history. Throughout his thirty-seven years at this pulpit, Rabbi Ira E. Sanders fought Jim Crow. While his outspoken advocacy did not meet with unanimous approval at Temple, he did enjoy support, including most notably the many Temple women who were leaders of the Women’s Emergency Committee to Save Our Schools. The hateful legislation of 2023 attempts to impose laws that mirror Jim Crow, now starting with the trans kids. Let Congregation B’nai Israel, and all who would join us, stand up to fight discrimination and persecution. Then, may we not be next. Then, may nobody else be “next.”

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> See for example, [Facts About LGBTQ Youth Suicide | The Trevor Project](#).

<sup>ii</sup> [49 states and territories have hate crime laws -- but they vary | CNN](#).

<sup>iii</sup> [The Great Replacement - Global Project Against Hate and Extremism \(globalextrémism.org\)](#).

<sup>iv</sup> [Statement on Pittsburgh Attack, One Year Later | HIAS](#).

<sup>v</sup> See, for example, [How diversity, equity, and inclusion \(DE&I\) matter | McKinsey](#).

<sup>vi</sup> [Holocaust Memorial Day Trust | Pastor Martin Niemöller \(hmd.org.uk\)](#).