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Opinion // 'Business as Usual?' Jewish Groups Must Not Fail Their First Trump Test

The Trump hotel-hosted 'Hanukkah party celebrating religious freedom and diversity' sharpens the critical choice facing us: Will we fight the incoming administration's intolerance and hate - or accept a role as silent enablers? | Opinion

Ann Toback | Dec 07, 2016 2:30 PM

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Demonstrators protest in opposition of President-elect Donald Trump outside the Trump Hotel in Washington, November 19, 2016. Credit: Jose Luis Magana, AP

Less than a month ago, the United States elected a new government with a stated agenda that has little if nothing to do with our progressive Jewish values. The election result was a historic setback for all whose vision of the United States was a welcoming and nurturing home to everyone. This new reality, which to many of us had only days before seemed unthinkable, challenged our relationship with the rights and privileges which are the foundation of the United States democracy.

It has left many of us in the Jewish communal world considering what to do next. Do we move forward in a business-as-usual fashion? Do we acknowledge the new president elect, despite his two-year campaign which prominently featured positions of intolerance of dissent, of civil liberties, and of religious freedom? His presidential campaign rhetoric included a Muslim registry and a ban of Muslims and others from immigrating to the United States, and one that held rallies where we saw Nazi salutes. Do we simply put all of that aside and give him a chance?

Or do we take Donald Trump at his word that he will commit his presidency to intolerance? That he will roll back civil liberties, limit human rights, poison the environment, and end workplace protections for millions of people? And, that he will target specific religions for registry, and ban others from entering the United States? Should we sit back and watch as Trump brings people like Steve Bannon into key positions in his administration?

In New York alone, there has been a 115 percent increase in hate crimes since the election. One morning this week, I awoke to news that a Metropolitan Transportation Authority employee wearing a hijab had been pushed down a flight of stairs in Grand Central Terminal. Earlier this week, a young woman wearing a hijab was taunted and threatened on the subway.

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All of this is happening without any attempt by the president elect to staunch the hate-focused violence in his own backyard. These actions are clearly connected to the hate speech that his campaign propagated, and which are increasingly becoming violent across the United States. It is clear to the Workmen's Circle and many of us in the progressive Jewish community that we are living in a new world in which business as usual is not acceptable.

That is why we spoke out this week about another unacceptable affiliation. This past Friday, members of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, including the Workmen's Circle, received an invitation from the Conference and the Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan to a "Hanukkah party celebrating religious freedom and diversity" on December 14 at the Lincoln Library of the Trump International Hotel in Washington, D.C.

As a Jewish organization, we cannot and will not condone — by agreement or silence — the Conference's appalling choices in its partner and the location, both of which contradict the stated themes of religious freedom and diversity.

The Republic of Azerbaijan is led by a government that sanctions the violent suppression of any opposition. As human rights organizations and Western governments have consistently charged, it has authorized arrests and intimidation of political activists, a restrictive media environment, and violations of freedoms of assembly and association. The Conference's decision to hold a "party" with the Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan implicitly legitimizes a corrupt country where freedoms have been suppressed.

The choice of a venue is similarly problematic. It is inexcusable that a Jewish organization would host a party celebrating tolerance and religious freedom by partnering with an oppressive regime that actively violates those same principles and book the event in a building owned by and named for Trump.

In the years to come, Jews in America are going to be regularly tested to make the right choices, and this clearly is not one of them. Everything about this event is the wrong choice. We have demanded that the Conference disavow their partnership with the Republic of Azerbaijan, and select another venue.

This “party” is an example of an unacceptable business-as-usual approach to our new world. And, it is only the beginning. After January 21, we are expecting to see a governmental assault on civil liberties, religious freedoms, and immigrant rights. Although Jews may not be the immediate target of these attacks, our tradition demands that we stand up for our brothers and sisters of all religions and ethnicities. And, we know that even if Jews are not the first to be singled out, religious persecution will fast encompass us all.

We are now challenged to take a position against untenable messages of exclusion, of hatred, and of violence. We must fight against intolerance and hate or accept a role as silent enablers. For us as Jews this challenge is doubly important. Our history has ensured that we are painfully aware of the dangers of hate speech and demagoguery. We must say “never again” and we must know that it means that we cannot and will not legitimize messages of hatred toward others in any way. This demands that we all stand up and speak out and fight back.

Ann Toback has served as the Executive Director of the Workmen’s Circle since June 2008. The Workmen’s Circle cultivates a progressive, diverse and inclusive community rooted in Jewish culture and social action.



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