

What “never again” means to me

Written by Mirah Riben
Friday, 07 June 2013 11:22

I'm a Post WW II Brooklyn born Jewish woman living in retirement community. I didn't choose to live here for its disproportionately predominantly Jewish population, but here I am. I have enjoyed all of my life, since leaving my family of origins, living in more heterogeneous environments, yet there is the comfort of chicken soup being here surrounded by those I feel a shared history with, and being reminded of the few, long-forgotten Yiddish words and phrases I recall from my childhood.

Yet, at the same time it brings back old outcast feelings of high school where I never quite “fit in.”

I am a life-long social justice and peace activist and not a gung-ho Zionist and more now than ever, here in this community, I often find myself in the midst of an uncomfortable conversation such as this: Two women, a generation apart but both Jewish immigrants, one from Ukraine and the other from Poland began talking about how things were so different for them than for current immigrants. “We” came here and learned English and worked hard; “they” live on welfare and food stamps.

Why do I as a Jewish woman in my retirement years eschew these activities my peers love so dearly? Why do their conversations make me bristle with discomfort? The answer for me oddly lies in the lessons learned from the Holocaust.

Since childhood, I cringed at the racist, judgmental talk that was commonly acceptable at the time. My father's use of bigoted and discriminatory language extended to all “gentiles” or non-Jews. By high school I was well aware of, and not at all fond of, the hypocrisy between my parents' lack of religious observance and their insistence on Jewish superiority. Dad's southern cousins used to welcome us with open arms calling us “DamnYankees” in one word and never thought it offensive. My father likewise called all non-Jews “DumbGoyim” in one word.

The recent we/they dichotomy conversation was not just uncomfortable, it was blatantly, historically untrue. It disregards the fact that all immigrants have a hard time and most are very hard-working and not lazy bums living off the dole, while many American born families suffer inter-generational welfare mentality. Chinese immigrants built our railroads while others worked in mines under life-threatening conditions getting paid barely more than slave-labor. Living as we do on the East Coast, the vast majority of immigrants we see here are from Asia. In New Jersey in particular we have the largest population of Asian Indians in the nation. They, ironically, not unlike Jewish immigrants are derided for the exact opposite of being lazy! Many grumble that Asians from India and China are filling all the college openings leaving the children of less demanding American-born parents, behind.

What does all of this have to do with the Holocaust? The lesson of the Holocaust for all Jews is “Never Again.” But what does that mean? How do we as Jews interpret that and put those two powerful words into action, politically and personally?

For many of Jewish decent “Never Again” is a rally cry to make Jews a stronger people who will not take it but instead will stand and fight oppression when it comes; take up arms and fight back against hatred. “Never Again” is a show of strength and pride of our Jewish culture, our

What “never again” means to me

Written by Mirah Riben
Friday, 07 June 2013 11:22

heritage, the state of Israel, and a battle cry to fight for it so it is never taken from us again. All of which I fully understand.

I, however, try to take a more Gandhian approach: Working to prevent hatred, nipping it in the bud, and most of all not being party to it. For me, the lesson learned from the Holocaust is to not become my enemy. Like a child who grew up abused one can decide to never “take it” – never to be the beaten down underdog again – and in doing so replicate their parents, or chose to break the cycle.

As Jews, who suffered the worst discrimination – genocide – I believe we need to be all the more sensitive to and refrain from all we/they talk. It is that very kind of talk of one race or ethnicity being superior and another being inferior that led to the Holocaust which cemented for Jews around the world our world view and underlies beliefs and politics.

I hear it as a call for peace; a rally cry that no people should ever be persecuted. Islamophobia is every bit as offensive to me as is anti-Semitism. The Civil Rights movement did not just teach us to integrate and extend equal rights to Blacks but rather continues to teach us shape our policies on women’s rights and LGBT rights. Hate is hate. Persecution is persecution and none of us are free until all of us are free.

I struggle to have, maintain and nurture a healthy sense of my Jewish cultural and ethnic identity without allowing it to become ethnocentric. I have been called a “bad Jew” for my views: pro-Hitler, pro-Muslim and pro-Palestine for not supporting every offensive, defensive and divisive action of the Israeli government. I’ve heard it all. I have been shunned by friends and some family who so fervently disagree.

We seem able to accept that the Holocaust, understandably, made some more devout in their religious beliefs and turned others into atheists. Yet we are less able to accept world views shaped differently from the same event.

If we cannot accept – not tolerate – but and accept, honor and value with dignity differences amongst ourselves, how can we ever hope to accept them amongst and between “others.”? And until we can do that, how can we co-exist on this planet? What is the alternative: Endless war? Or can we learn to “Never HATE Again”?

Mirah Riben is an author and freelance writer.