

The Women's March (January 11, 2019)

By Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch

Next Shabbat, January 19th, our synagogue will proudly join Women's March On NYC, continuing our activism and support that we began two years ago. For the third year running, members of our congregation will be on the streets of New York, raising our voices and joining with friends and colleagues.

However, upon the recommendation of the Stephen Wise anti-Semitism task force; and
With the encouragement of the civil liberties task force; and
With the approval of the executive committee and the board of trustees:

We are disassociating from Women's March Inc. – the national entity that coordinated the 2017 and 2018 marches on Washington. As a synagogue, we will not participate in, or endorse, the 2019 D.C. march.

We are not, however, disassociating from the goals originally established by Women's March, nor are we disassociating from the millions of women – and men – who seek to advance gender equality, minority rights, reproductive freedom, economic justice, racial justice, and criminal justice. We are not disassociating from the ongoing and intensifying struggle to protect the delicate social fabric of our country from those who would tear it asunder.

To the contrary, we are joining other progressive organizations that have also disassociated from Women's March Inc. out of the same concerns we have: That its current leadership has distorted the values and thwarted the goals articulated on that amazing January day in 2017.

As one of the early Women's March activists wrote: "As founder of the Women's March, my original vision and intent was to show the capacity of human beings to stand in solidarity and love against the hateful rhetoric that had become part of the political landscape in the U.S. and around the world." [But the current leaders] "have steered the Movement away from its true course...They have allowed anti-Semitism and anti-LGBTQIA sentiment – and hateful racist rhetoric to become a part of the platform." (Theresa Shook, in JNS, January 4, 2019)

This year, we will be marching in New York City on January 19th, together with tens of thousands of others – women and men – who want to continue the fight. We will be marching under the auspices of Women's March Alliance, that, like numerous other Women's March affiliates, has criticized the national organization's leadership. Some affiliates have broken off entirely from the national group.

To prepare for the New York march, we will be gathering here in this sanctuary on January 17th with Congresswoman Carolyn Malony, Women's March Alliance, Zioness – the progressive

Zionist women's organization, the Anti-Defamation League, and many other like-minded colleagues. Rabbi Natov, who led the synagogue mobilization for the past two years, will welcome guests on our behalf.

If you are concerned about the direction of this country;

If you seek to advance gender equality;

If you are appalled by the bullying of the weakest and most desperate human beings – the lack of empathy towards the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free:

We urge you to join us on the 17th and the 19th. Contact our office for more details.

I want to spend the rest of my time explaining why we are disassociating from the Washington, D.C., march – and any other activity led by Women's March Inc. unless and until there is a change of leadership. It's been a difficult and painful process for us.

Already in 2017, we heard rumblings of troubling accusations of anti-Semitism within and amongst the leadership of the Washington march. We also knew of the intense anti-Israel, anti-Zionist views of at least one of the original organizers, who is also a fierce advocate of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, BDS. But at the time we pushed our discomfort aside. It seemed to us that the greater good was to unite with as many like-minded Americans as possible. It is the nature of coalitions. By definition, we will not agree on everything.

When we asked ourselves what is the threshold for our synagogue? When does our concern about Jewish issues outweigh our deep concerns about American social, racial, and economic justice?

We concluded that the intense urgency and enormous energy unleashed in the aftermath of the 2016 elections overrode and outweighed our narrower concerns. The amazing outpouring of political and moral indignation – a monumental achievement that propelled millions of Americans onto the streets of our country – seemed to us more urgent than our narrower concerns – in particular since, at that time, there was no real alternative. The organizations gathering in our synagogue next week had not yet coalesced into a viable alternative.

But now, when there are alternatives – as you will hear extensively next week – and now, in the aftermath of Pittsburgh and mindful of the surge in anti-Semitic incidents in the past two years – from the right, but also the left – we have learned, yet again, one of the key lessons of Jewish history. Anti-Semitism is not a narrow concern. It is not simply a Jewish matter. It is not just a parochial issue. Anti-Semitism is a dagger in the heart of liberty itself. Hatred of Jews, intolerance of Jews, prejudice against Jews is never contained to Jews alone. Anti-Semitism is a precursor – a warning – that something is rotten in the state.

And hence, even the whiff of anti-Semitism – even the appearance of an association with, or tolerance of, anti-Semitism – must be addressed. It should not be too hard to disassociate from Louis Farrakhan, who has called the Jews “termites” and “Satanic.” Instead, one of the co-leaders tweeted that Farrakhan is the “Greatest of All Time.” It should not be too hard to uphold the right

of Israel to exist. Instead, one of the leaders declared that “nothing is creepier than Zionism,” and that Muslims should not be humanizing Israelis. (Jewish Journal, September 6, 2018)

We knew – but we disregarded – one of the key lessons of history. You cannot claim to be both progressive and anti-Semitic. You cannot advocate tolerance and be intolerant of Jews. You cannot assert inclusion and exclude Jews. According to press reports – already in the earliest days after the 2016 elections – there was an effort to push out the founding Jewish organizers of the Women’s March under the contention that only women of color should lead the effort.

Many observers noted that the “unity principles” included “Black women, Native women, poor women, immigrant women, Muslim women, queer and trans women,” but excluded Jewish women.

According to press reports – early on, two of the four current leaders of Women’s March said to their Jewish founding colleague that Jews have a “special collective responsibility as exploiters of black and brown people.” (Tablet Magazine, December 10, 2018) They reportedly contended that Jews were leaders of the American slave trade – libels popularized in a book that Henry Louis Gates called “the bible of the new anti-Semitism.” “Your people hold all the wealth,” one of the four leaders reportedly said.

We heard these rumblings. We heard them early on, but we suppressed them in deference to what we considered the bigger issues threatening our country. We sublimated the lesson we had learned a thousand times: anti-Semitism must be confronted by Jews and all good people every time it rears its ugly head. We cannot turn aside.

Perhaps I – a straight, white, Jewish man – am not the ideal messenger to point out how bizarre it is that one of the leaders of the Women’s March attended a Nation of Islam event that preached that a woman’s place is in the kitchen and that gay marriage is an abomination. Come on the 17th and you will hear a more eloquent case than I can make by Rabbi Natov and many other women leaders better qualified than I to point out that absurdity.

But I believe that I – a straight, white, male, Jewish rabbi – am qualified to point out – nay, obligated to speak out – that you cannot preach intersectionality and sectionalize Jews. You cannot legitimize every state in the world except the Jewish state.

While criticism of Israel is absolutely legitimate... And while regard and concern for Palestinians and their rights are absolutely legitimate... And while even unfair criticism of Israel is not necessarily disqualifying... And while I realize that some BDS activists sincerely do not seek to destroy Israel, but view Israeli policies to be morally wrong and boycott Israel in order to force it to change its policies... And while it is often the case that a big tent requires people of different and even opposing views to set aside their differences for the greater good, and I accept that... Still, is there a threshold that we cannot cross? Is there? Do we want this synagogue – or any Jewish entity acting in the name of Judaism – to join forces with Louis Farrakhan, or sympathizers

of Louis Farrakhan, who said that powerful Jews are his enemies and that Israeli and Zionist Jews played key roles in the 9/11 attacks?

What is the threshold? Where is the breaking point?

I know what it is for me. If you're a critic of Jews, fine. If you're a critic of American-Jewish policies, you're in good company. If you disagree with some biblical or Talmudic teaching, great.

But if you hate Jews because they're Jews, if you tolerate those who hate Jews, if you are sympathetic to those who are prejudiced against Jews: We cannot stand with you.

If you are a critic of Israel, join the club. If you are opposed to this or that Israeli policy – whether on political or moral grounds – fight it. Speak out. Persuade others.

But if you deny Israel's right to exist... If your goal is to eliminate Israel – to dismantle the Jewish state... If you claim that Jews fabricated history... If you contend that the People of Israel never settled in the Land of Israel: That it was all made up – a Zionist plot...

We cannot stand with you.

You don't get to decide what constitutes Judaism. It is for Jews to define Judaism. You don't get to decide that Judaism is simply a religion with no national character. It's for Jews to define. You don't get to determine that the good Jews are the anti-Israel and anti-Zionists Jews – and all the rest of us are deviant or creepy. You only get to decide whether you accept us as we define ourselves. And if you do not accept us as we define ourselves, we cannot stand with you. If you come on Thursday, you will hear a more eloquent statement of principles from the leaders of Zioness.

Many of today's progressive social activists cite Martin Luther King as their inspiration. We'll be celebrating and honoring the great man next weekend.

Although I never met him, I feel as if I knew him intimately. I read and study his published works regularly. Whenever I am in need of inspiration, I listen to one of his amazing sermons. Martin Luther King was a genius of religious oratory.

I was raised on family stories of the friendship that Dr. King and my father shared. The March on Washington in 1963, which was the march that inspired all the subsequent ones – was partially planned in my father's office when he was the director of the Reform movement's Washington-based Religious Action Center. Much of the civil rights legislation of the 1960s was drafted in the conference room of the Religious Action Center. Dr. King was a frequent visitor and used my father's office when he came to Washington.

So, in a certain sense, I feel as if Martin Luther King was almost part of our family. I feel that the struggle for civil rights, justice, equality, decency is in my blood. I am almost personally offended

when some progressives nowadays seek to write Jews out of the civil rights struggle, ignorantly or willfully ignoring the history of the civil rights movement.

“Your people own all the wealth.” “Jews were responsible for the slave trade.” “Jews are exploiters of black and brown people.” “Zionism is creepy.”

Dr. King would have none of that.

“Israel’s right to exist is incontestable,” he said. “When people criticize Zionists, they mean Jews,” said King. “When people criticize Zionists, they mean Jews. You’re talking anti-Semitism.”

I conclude with this hope – this prayer – of Martin Luther King: “We are tied together in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality... I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the way God’s universe is made.”