

Senate Opening Prayer
Rabbi Erica Asch * Temple Beth El, Augusta * May 2, 2019

Elohainu v'lohei avoteinu v'imoteinu, our God and God of our ancestors.

We come before you today ready to do the work of governing our great state.

But, before we move into our work, we pause for a moment to remember.

Today is Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day. It is a day dedicated to remembering the nearly 6 million Jews, including more than 1 million children, who died in what Adolf Hitler hoped would be the "Final Solution." In less than a decade, four times the population of our state were murdered, simply because of their religion.

As the Holocaust recedes further into history, as the last of the survivors pass away, it used to be tempting to think that such horror could never happen again -- not here, not now, not in an interconnected world of smartphones, Facebook and the internet. But, as we know too well, the last six months have seen the murders of Jews, Muslims and Christians in their houses of worship. This day is not some relic which exists to remember the victims of Holocaust, it is a clear and dire warning about the perils of dehumanization in our own time. Yom HaShoah reminds us of how an advanced, civilized society moved from Beethoven and Gutenberg to terror and mass murder. This day reminds us that the demonization of wealthy Jews who fund shadowy political campaigns and the labeling of people who look or dress differently as "un-patriotic" traitors can easily lead to the gas chambers and crematoria of Auschwitz. This reminder is especially pertinent to the leaders who hold elected office.

Primo Levy, an Italian chemist, author, and survivor of Auschwitz wrote in 1947, "Auschwitz is outside of us, but it is all around us, in the air. The plague has died away, but the infection still lingers and it would be foolish to deny it. Rejection of human solidarity, obtuse and cynical indifference to the suffering of others, abdication of the intellect and of moral sense to the principle of authority, and above all, at the root of everything, a sweeping tide of cowardice, a colossal cowardice which masks itself as warring virtue, love of country, and faith in an idea."

We play with fire when we elevate our ideas above our humanity. In this country, we hold strong, passionate opinions. In recent years we have seen increasing polarization and retreat into opposite corners. We are free to express our disagreements within our democratic system at the ballot box and by sharing our opinions in person and through social media. But Yom HaShoah reminds us to beware of scapegoating, to recognize the perils of dehumanization, the dangers of delegitimization of our central institutions of the judiciary and the press. It reminds us that we must speak strongly against the anti-semitism we see today.

This solemn commemoration reminds us that the silence of good people allows hatred to flourish. It is easy to say that we do not know what is happening, to ignore the tweets and posts about alleged terrorists in our midst, heartless business owners, co-opted student activists, radical gun owners, violent refugees, a corrupt media or a tainted judiciary all bent on destroying the America we know and love. We retreat into a cocoon

of silence, rationalizing to ourselves that we do not hold such hateful views.

But, the Holocaust reminds us that can not and must not meet hatred with fear or silence. We must speak out strongly against such rhetoric, we must recommit ourselves to standing with marginalized communities, and we must protect the diversity which strengthens our country. We must actively work to stop this hatred now.

God, as we move through our work today may we be mindful of the warning this day brings. May we find the humanity in others and act as examples to our fractured society. May we recognize that the words "never again" are easy to speak, but that the actions needs to make those words a reality are more difficult. May we commit ourselves to acting. May we remember all the lives and lights that were extinguished too early, and may that compel us to shine light on the perils of dehumanization and scapegoating which we see today.