

Gala Celebration of 85th Anniversary
of “When Southbury Said NO to the Nazis”
Gary Jones Talk, November 12, 2022

The Jewish Federation of Western Connecticut is proud to be a Presenting Sponsor of the weekend’s events honoring the 85th Anniversary of when Southbury Said No to the Nazis.

On behalf of the Jewish Federation, we are honored to have the opportunity to address you this evening. The Jewish Federation’s is the home office and lead voice of the Jewish community in Western and Northwestern Connecticut. One of our central missions is to combat hate victimizing the Jewish community, and to stand up for anyone else who is the target of hate and marginalization.

The Jewish sage Hillel offered a three-pronged test to help guide us in living a meaningful and moral life. His first rule is: If I am not for myself, who will be for me. The second rule is: If I am only for myself, then what am I. The third and final marching order is: If not now when? In other words, Hillel teaches us that we have to be proud of ourselves so that others will support us. If we only care about ourselves, then we deserve nothing. And we should never wait to do the right thing.

We are, of course, very concerned about the growth of antisemitism and the attacks on members of the Jewish community and its institutions in recent years. In fact, to support the synagogues, day schools and other Jewish institutions in our part of Connecticut, the Jewish Federation has determined that is necessary to devote precious resources to hiring a Regional Security Advisor to help protect those institutions.

Although tonight is not the time to delve deeply into these matters, we are also concerned with the increasing comfort in which horrible conspiracy theories targeting Jewish people are being spread on social media, through Amazon and in other manners with almost no consequence. The fact that these conspiracies are easily proven to be totally without merit and, at times, are even contradictory does not keep the conspiracies from being spread and believed in too many instances.

The truth is that hate is not rational. It is a belief system that supports itself without regard to truth or logic. It feeds on itself. Unfortunately, when people are taught to hate, many do. Not everyone, thankfully. There are people who are always capable of seeing through hate and evil.

However, for many who never hear a contrary opinion and only listen to the same sources of hate, they will not stop to think that they are being brainwashed. They will begin to believe that hate is normal and appropriate. That is where good people come in. Good people can and should confront that hateful narrative.

We know that uncontested hate spreads, and spreads fast. It is our job to contest the hate. We can't afford to turn our head and say it's a shame. We need to stand up to hate, without regard to the source of the hate or the target of the hate. That's what the people of Southbury did 85 years ago. They did not turn their head and look away. They stared the haters of the world in the eyes and made them look away. And the people of Southbury set a standard that we must continue to follow.

When any group in our society is victimized, we must stand with them to show our support. We should never let victims of hate feel isolated or alone. When we stand together, we send a clear message that it is not the victims of hate who are isolated and alone. Instead, it is the perpetrators who are isolated and alone. When we stand together long enough and strong enough, we will make it clear that it is the haters of the world who will ultimately be relegated to the dustbin of history.

We can all take a personal role too in the effort to fight hate. Call out hate whenever you see it, no matter who is targeted. Even if a bigoted statement is intended to be a joke, and even if the statement is said by a friend, let them know that you do not appreciate the attempt at humor. You have every right to express your opinion. And when you make it clear that you won't tolerate that kind of behavior, you may be helping the person to learn that there are consequences to his or her action. And, maybe, the action won't be repeated. If there is no audience to support hate, it can wither and die.

If we work collectively, and on our own, to combat hate and bigotry, we have the chance to make our town, our state, our country and ultimately, the whole world a hate free zone. So, let us all continue to do everything we can to combat hate wherever we find it. After all, there is no better way to remember and honor the actions of Southbury and its citizens in 1937 than by following their lead in 2022 and in all years thereafter.