

Not in God's Name – Making Room for Differences in America

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I attended a rally at the Jewish Community Center of Springfield back on Thursday, March 9.

The good news is that I wasn't alone. Hundreds of people were there: politicians, faith leaders, and people from here in Springfield up to Northampton and beyond.

The bad news is that the rally took place at all. It was organized in response to threats made against the Jewish Community Center, which forced the building to be evacuated twice in one month! These local threats came along with hundreds of anti-Semitic incidents across America plus hatred leveled against the Muslim community plus the shooting of a Sikh community leader in Seattle. The Sikh man was standing in his driveway when the gunman approached and told him "go back to your own country."

All of this is bad news for us. It seems as if America is not becoming great; America is becoming intolerant and hateful.

But not all is lost. The JCC rally sprang from a vision of America that truly is great. You see, the rally was organized primarily by the Interfaith Council of Western Massachusetts. Christians, Muslims, Unitarian Universalists, Baha'i, along with Jews form this multi-faith council, and it was their great belief in unity and community that brought everyone together.

Religion didn't separate us; religion helped us find and defend our common humanity.

You might expect the contrary. People often criticize religion. We are warned to be wary of those whose faith is different than ours. We have come to believe what a French writer by the name of Blaise Pascal said several centuries ago, "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction."

But here's the truth: If and when religion turns people into murderers, I believe God weeps! The Interfaith Council doesn't work because its religious conviction is weak. It works because religion at its best transcends separation and works for love.

All this is the message of a remarkable book by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. He calls the book, *Not in God's Name*. In the book Sacks captures the Bible's central message in these words, "We are each blessed by God, each precious in God's sight, each with our role in God's story, each with our own song in the music of humankind."

Sacks calls his book, *Not in God's Name*, because he believes anyone who claims his or her faith cancels someone else's faith is not speaking "in God's name."

Sacks reaches this powerful conclusion from two angles. First, he considers the structure of the Bible's first book. He asks why the Book of Genesis takes 11 chapters before it gets to the story of Abraham. Since Genesis and the biblical books that follow mainly tell the story of Judaism, why start with the story of creation, Adam, Eve, and Noah? These characters aren't even Jewish.

Precisely the point. Genesis starts at the beginning before religious differences arise in order to teach that, before we become separate from each other, we are united in our humanity. As Sacks puts it, we act in God's name when we remember "that our common humanity precedes our religious differences."

There is a second way to read the Book of Genesis. Sacks notes that on the surface it looks as if the early Bible can't stop telling stories of unhappy sibling rivalry. Isaac is nervous around older brother Ishmael. Jacob tricks Esau in order to gain their father's favor. Joseph is sold into slavery by jealous brothers.

Since Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph carry forward their fathers' blessings, you might think the Bible affirms their absolute victory. But that's not so. In fact, even though the Bible doesn't focus on Ishmael, Esau, or Joseph's brothers, none of them are written out of the story. They aren't cursed. They aren't done away with in some violent manner.

Each still gets a parental blessing. As the Bible paints it, the world is big enough for everyone in the family to have his or her own satisfaction.

That is my takeaway from last week's interfaith rally. Differences are what make us interesting. They make us who we are. Differences are at the heart of the America mosaic.

I am proud to be a Jew, and just as proud for others to be who they are and to believe as they do.

It's an American value. It's a religious value. We just don't have room in America for hate.