

Time for Reflection, Dumfries and Galloway Council

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Thank you very much for inviting me here this morning.

It is a privilege to be invited to speak and offer some reflections before you begin your formal deliberations.

As a Jew, this is an interesting time of year. The Jewish calendar places us between the two festivals that most typify an old saying:

“They tried to kill us.

We survived.

Let’s eat.”

Purim, just last week, celebrates the salvation of the Jews 2,300 years ago, when they were spared annihilation, mass genocide by the ancient Persian Empire.

And Passover, which begins in 3 weeks, commemorates the exodus of the Jewish people from centuries-long forced slavery in ancient Egypt.

These festivals, more than others, commemorate the Jewish people’s struggle through the ages, celebrate the fact that the Jewish people are still here today, and remind us each year of those events.

Of course not all antisemitism is so murderous.

But, as lots of people have said, the Holocaust did not begin with the gas chambers – it began with name calling and an attack on social liberties.

Unfortunately, we see all too frequently news reports of atrocities such as took place in Charlottesville, the synagogue in Pittsburgh, and the mosque in New Zealand. The perpetrators first wind themselves up by what is a souped-up version of name-calling on social media, and then go on to commit their acts of terror.

The way to counter that is education and tolerance, and listening to people about what they find hurtful.

It is for this reason that we have so much appreciation for the Council’s recognition of the importance of accepting the IHRA Definition of Antisemitism to the Jewish community.

Now, it may not be apparent, but I think it’s worth pointing out that while it is called the IHRA Definition of Antisemitism, it was actually not originally drafted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).

This definition of Antisemitism was in fact originally drafted by the EUMC – the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia – a European Union agency.

And while our status as part of the EU remains a topic that I probably should have steered well clear of, I think this lends even more weight to the deliberations here this morning.

Further on this topic, I’d like to quote a piece written by the previous Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, an internationally recognised philosopher, and moral voice, who was described by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales as “a light unto this nation”.

Lord Sacks writes that antisemitism is not really about Jews. It is about how societies treat the Other, the one-not-like-us.

For more than 1,000 years Jews were the most conspicuous non-Christian presence in Europe. Today they are the most prominent non-Muslim presence in the Middle East. Jews were hated because they were different.

But it is our difference that constitutes our humanity. Because none of us is the same as another, each of us is irreplaceable. A nation that has no room for difference has no room for humanity.

Lord Sacks then goes on to explain how the hate that begins with Jews never ends with Jews.

It was not Jews alone who suffered under Hitler and Stalin, nor is it Jews alone suffering from the ruthless pursuit of power that today masquerades as religion. Christians are under assault in more than a hundred countries: made to flee in Syria, removed from Afghanistan, butchered, beheaded, and terrorised elsewhere. Hundreds of Muslims are assaulted by persecution daily. Bahais, Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs have all suffered their own tragedies.

The world is awash with hate across religious divides.

Genesis chapter 1, a foundational text for Christianity and Islam, says that every human being, regardless of colour, class, or creed, is in the image of God. Our shared humanity takes precedence over our religious differences. Until we are prepared to take this seriously, people will continue to kill in the name of the God of life and practise cruelty in the name of the God of compassion. And, says Rabbi Sacks, God himself will weep.

At the end of his life, Moses told the Israelites: “Don’t hate an Egyptian, because you were strangers in his land.”

It’s an odd sentence. The Egyptians had oppressed and enslaved the Israelites. So why did Moses say, “Don’t hate”?

Because if the people continued to hate, Moses would have taken the Israelites out of Egypt, but failed to take Egypt out of the Israelites.

They would still be slaves, not physically but conceptually. Moses understood that to be free, to truly be free, you have to let go of hate. Wherever there is hate, freedom dies.

Which is why each of us, especially those in positions of power, have to take a stand against the corrosive power of hate.

All it takes for hate to flourish is for good people to do *nothing*. Today, in this room, I see so many good people doing *something*, acting – and I am proud and honoured to be present.

I’d like to end with a Jewish prayer which we say in Synagogue on Sabbath, every Saturday morning:

ופרוש סוכת שלומך על כל יושבי תבל ארצך, וכן יהי רצון ונאמר אמן.

May the Almighty spread His tabernacle of peace over all the dwellers on earth.

May this be His will; and let us say, Amen.