

AN INVISIBLE FORM OF CANCER - by Rabbi Tom Heyn – July/August 2016

As I write this article, the news on everyone's mind is the mass shooting that took place in Orlando. Even as you read these words, the tragedy continues to be a solemn reminder for me that our congregation's role as one of Miami's most progressive religious institutions is more important than ever before.

I am proud of our reputation for being on the leading edge of social justice issues, but we cannot rest on our laurels. Even with a small percentage of our members being active in our social justice initiatives, Temple Israel is playing an important role in the battle against an invisible form of cancer.

Over the past few years, I have spoken about the connection between religion, spirituality, health and wellness. We all know that the mind and body are closely linked, and that mental illnesses can often go undetected. I would go a step further and say that hatred and bigotry are forms of mental illness that can metastasize like a cancer and become like malignant tumors.

We know that to minimize or eliminate cancer, we can't wait until it becomes deadly. Instead, we have to find and reverse its underlying causes, determine if or where it may already exist in its latent stages, and find the means to eradicate it early and effectively.

Jews, Christians and Muslims all have traces of this invisible cancer in its various stages. The former Chief Rabbi of France, Joseph Sitruk recently said, "The Torah considers homosexuality an abomination and a failure of humanity." He described the Gay Pride parade in Tel Aviv to be an "attempt at [the] moral extermination" of Jews. He added, "I hope the listeners will react in a radical manner to this abomination."

Although Sitruk stops short of explicitly condoning violence, there are thousands more who share his views but don't express them as openly. This insidious cancer is present, in all its stages, in the Jewish community.

It has also present in the Catholic Church, manifesting as homophobia and vehement opposition to same-sex marriage. The Archbishop of Lyon, Cardinal Philippe Barbarin, claimed that "Next... they will want couples of two or three people...then one day...the ban on incest will fall." Likewise, most Muslim countries continue to condemn homosexuals, sometimes to death.

Even in our own country, transgender people in North Carolina are denied the right to use the restroom according to their gender identity, and a new law in Mississippi will soon allow an officer or businessperson to refuse to serve gay people if his or her religion forbids. While traditionally-religious people may believe that homosexuality is an abomination -- a problem that must be kept in the closet -- it's becoming apparent that the problem has more to do with traditionally repressive views toward sexuality.

Religions and cultures are evolving and the most difficult stage to pass through, as many of us know from adolescence, is when sexuality comes into play. It will take a long time before traditionally-religious communities are able to come to terms with sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular. In the meantime, we must help them find other ways of responding to those challenges besides repression and intolerance.

As for the tragedy in Orlando, we cannot blame Islam for the hatred and intolerance that have found their way into the hearts of many Muslims. Those same cancer-cells have also found their way into the hearts of many Christians and Jews.

As we seek to eradicate this invisible cancer, our own health and well-being as a congregation will improve. In examining ourselves and our own communities, we can identify and root out fear, anger and mistrust which easily mutate into hatred and violence. And in working to strengthen alliances and affirm the rights of all peoples, we can give substance to our reputation for being on the forefront of social justice issues, creating an environment in which all people feel valued and welcome.

We Jews have experienced too many painful traumas in our history to not have learned from them. On the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av (also known as *Tisha b'Av*, which falls on August 13-14th this year) we will remember the destruction of the First and Second Temples and other tragedies sustained throughout history. What if we were to think of those traumas as times when we almost died from an invisible form of cancer? What if we were to have the foresight now to seek out its cause and find a way to treat it effectively? There is still time, if we begin now.