



# Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

## ON BEING TARGETED

Imagine my surprise to read in the *LA Times* that Buford Furrow had “scouted three of the West Coast’s most prominent Jewish institutions.” Among those institutions is the place that I work, a place I have loved for many years. By that news report, what previously had been theoretical was now personal: I was a target. My new reality became clear in how other people responded: My family called from Northern California to urge me not to go to work, to be sure I was careful. Friends emailed from the East Coast and Israel to assure themselves that I was safe. While I could remind them that Furrow had “found security too tight,” and that we were doing everything possible to continue to provide security, my thoughts were really elsewhere.

I kept returning to the Talmud’s injunction to “be of the oppressed, not the oppressors.” While I had always admired the phrase’s sentiment and its grand moral stance, it now percolated differently to me. The truth is that I normally did not feel like a victim. My guess is that most American Jews, like myself, feel pretty much in control most of the time. Antisemitic violence is at ebb, Jews are relatively secure, prosperous, and influential. Yet for others — the poor, ethnic minorities, gays and women — feeling subject to random and senseless violence is a background hum permeating their lives and communities. In our inner cities, children are gunned down with horrifying frequency. A gay member of the military was just beaten to death simply for being gay. And women are subjected to the intrusion of male power and control. In the light of this pernicious and ever-present danger, Rabbi Abbahu’s Talmudic advice revealed the illusory nature of our being different. Unless we all work to make everyone safe and secure, we will all remain weak, all in danger. To “be of the oppressed” is a call to strip away the false lure of going it alone, of caring only about our own safety. To “be of the oppressed” is a recipe for empowerment and justice for all.

Recent events gave me a second understanding of the verse as well. In most times and places, Jews live with the reality that violence can erupt spontaneously, that Jew hatred and callous bigotry can wrench our lives without warning. Far from being the norm, it is my sense of safety that is the exception. Insecurity is the norm. Far too many generations of Jews have known what it means to be the butt of someone else’s consuming hatred. Now, I know it too. Now I also walk a little quicker, briefly consider the possible consequences of gathering together with my fellow Jews. Like my ancestors, like Jews elsewhere today, resolving to live my life, to be a Jew, became — besides an assertion of identity — an act of resistance. “Be of the oppressed” is a call to

identify with the Jewish People, throughout time and around the world, to embrace the good and acknowledge the bad.

Such an act of identity — with the oppressed of other peoples, with our own history of Antisemitism, suffering, and resilience — is by no means easy. Nor is it simple. But it is the essential first step in building the solidarity that can confront and contain the hatred.

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