

Speaking—and acting—against hate

The president has been slow to condemn acts of hatred against religious minorities. Moral leaders are stepping into the vacuum.

From the Editors in the [March 29, 2017](#) issue



Interfaith volunteers lifting vandalized tombstones at Mount Carmel Cemetery in Philadelphia on February 26, 2017. Photo courtesy of Rabbi Adam Zeff.

On one day last month, Jewish schools and community centers in 11 states were targeted with bomb threats. The threats came after Jewish cemeteries were extensively vandalized in St. Louis and Philadelphia. Meanwhile, four mosques were burned during January and February, three of them known to be acts of arson—an unprecedented sequence of attacks on mosques, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center. Also in February, two Indian engineers were attacked in a bar in Olathe, Kansas, by a man who shouted racial slurs. One of the engineers was killed. The perpetrator reportedly believed the men to be Iranian.

Since the presidential election, the SPLC has seen an upswing in this kind of hate-filled activity. It counted 1,094 “bias incidents” in the first 34 days after the election.

When acts of racial, religious, or ethnic hatred take place, Americans instinctively look to national leaders to respond. Presidents typically offer statements that condemn prejudice and speak to the wounds that hate-filled acts inflict. The current president’s reluctance to offer even brief words of condemnation until pushed to do so has created a moral vacuum and encouraged an atmosphere in which contempt for the other is permissible.

When moral leadership is absent at the national level, it is all the more needed from local civic and religious leaders. On that score, many responses to recent incidents have been heartening.

Muslim activists raised more than \$150,000 to repair headstones damaged at the Jewish cemetery in St. Louis. Christians and Muslims worked to repair the Jewish cemetery in Philadelphia. After a mosque was razed in Texas, a synagogue and two churches offered to let Muslim worshipers use their buildings. (See news story, ["Interfaith support rises along with attacks"](#))

Throughout the country, Jews and Muslims have joined forces to resist the movement toward intolerance. In a dramatic statement late last year, Jonathan Greenblatt, head of the Anti-Defamation League, a Jewish group, stated that if Muslims were forced to register with the United States government, he would register as a Muslim too.

Rabbi Andrea Goldstein at Congregation Shaare Emeth in St. Louis says that moral leadership in her community has come from faith leaders who were able to deplore acts of hate but remain calm and recognize that much remains unknown about some crimes.

“Helping a community to remain calm and remind them that, while deplorable, the vandalism was a destruction of property, not lives, has been incredibly important,” she said. She has been inspired by the leadership of people like Faizan Sayed, a Muslim leader in St. Louis, who responded to attacks on Muslims and Jews by reminding his community of the teachings of the faith.

After the shootings in Olathe, a diverse group of mourners gathered at the First Baptist Church there to support one another and to hold up a vision of community in which people of different races, nationalities, and religions live together in peace and mutual respect. Holding up that vision is an urgent calling for everyone.

A version of this article appears in the March 29 print edition under the title “When hatred rises.”