No Room For Nazis

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“NO ROOM FOR NAZIS”

By the Rev. Dr. Michel J. Faulkner, chairman of the board of directors of the Philadelphia Council of Clergy Global.

Unfortunately, antisemitism has become chic in some circles. We saw what that looks like in Philadelphia on Sunday, November 8, when a bicycle protest near Rittenhouse Square called for a boycott of six Jewish-owned restaurants. Hundreds of people showed up to support those businesses, many by doing something as ordinary as buying a meal. I am grateful they did. I am also outraged that our Jewish neighbors had to see their businesses singled out on the eve of the anniversary of Kristallnacht.

On November 8, 1938, Nazi newspapers blamed Jews collectively for the shooting of a German diplomat in Paris. This was the pretense for attacks on Jewish businesses and synagogues. On the night of November 9 and into November 10, Nazi leaders unleashed a pogrom across Germany and its annexed territories. Synagogues burned. Mobs broke into homes and vandalized thousands of Jewish-owned businesses. Jews were savagely beaten and killed, and German police sent about 26,000 Jewish men to concentration camps. It’s been called “the Night of Broken Glass”, but the glass was the least of what was broken.

When I think about Kristallnacht, the hate began before the windows were broken that night. Nazi propaganda had taught people to see their Jewish neighbors were to blame for Germany’s economic decline. By the time the mobs came, some ordinary citizens were willing to join in. When we remember that night, we ought to ask ourselves what we are willing to speak up about in our own time. How often do we hear an antisemitic slur or a conspiracy about Jewish people and let it pass because speaking up would make the room uncomfortable? Why blame Jewish Americans for the war in Gaza? It’s just an excuse for racist antisemitism.

This is why I am so offended when Jewish businesses are singled out here in the City of Brotherly Love. A family running a restaurant in Center City should be able to open its doors, welcome its customers, and earn a living without being made to remember this horrible chapter in human history. Think about what it means for the people who work there to show up for a Sunday shift knowing that their place of work has become a target by haters. We need to take that seriously, even after the crowds have gone home.

As an African American, I remember that the racial hatred behind Nazism extended to Black and Brown people, too. The Nazi regime persecuted Black people in Germany and forcibly sterilized some of them, including children. Jewish people were the principal targets of Nazi racial hatred, and we must never forget what was done to them.

Growing up in Washington, D.C., during the civil rights movement I remember that many Jewish leaders stood with us in that struggle for equality. A community reveals its character when people are willing to bear some of the cost of standing with their neighbors. In the City of Brotherly Love there is no room for Nazi racist. I know what it means to count on your neighbors to speak when people treat your dignity as a matter of debate. I owe my Jewish neighbors the same solidarity I would ask of them.

As a Christian, I stand with the Jewish people and with Israel's right to exist and thrive. Jesus was a Jew. I believe Christian leaders ought to be among the first to speak when our Jewish neighbors are treated with contempt. Let us teach our congregations what happened on November 9, 1938. Let us call the rabbis in our neighborhoods, listen to what their congregations are experiencing, and ask how we can stand with them. If we have never made that call, this is a good week to pick up the phone.

There is no room for Nazis in Philadelphia. I want our Jewish neighbors to hear that from our pulpits and our public officials, and I want them to see it in how we show up for them. The people who lined up to buy lunch on Sunday gave us one way to begin. We can go back next week and learn the owners' names. When we say we stand with our Jewish neighbors, I want them to know us well enough to believe it.