

Founders' Nightmares, Founders' Dreams  
Founder's Day Shabbat  
Rabbi Joe Rooks Rapport  
January 11, 2019

It was a long and brutal summer that year, the heat and humidity hung heavy in the air. It was election day in Louisville, Monday August 6, 1855. Our Founders were immigrants to this land, Germans mostly, who had arrived and brought their families here just a decade or so before, establishing Louisville's first synagogue in 1848. There were some thousand Jews living in Louisville in 1855, out of a total population of 100,000 and after residing here for just five years and renouncing any allegiance to a foreign power, at least the grown men among them were now eligible to vote. The great German wave of immigrants to this land had not nearly reached its peak, but counting the German Catholics and the Jews together and adding in the Irish Catholics who were arriving at that same time in droves, there was a significant enough voting block among the immigrants to begin to effect politics on the local and national scene.

Kentucky's legendary Senator, the great compromiser Henry Clay, had past away just a few years before and with him the last remnants of the Whig party he had come to represent. Clay was a man of broad tolerance, a southerner and an abolitionist, who counted among his closest friends, a pall bearer at his funeral, Benjamin Gratz, one of the most prominent Jews in the Commonwealth. Clay's grandson married Gratz's granddaughter some years after he died.

Out of the ashes of the old Whigs emerged a new Republican party, a progressive heir to Clay's legacy, reaching out to immigrants and proclaiming the cause of the Abolition of Slavery as their most important national agenda. But, there was also an afterbirth of the Whig Party which spawned a more spiteful heir from its dross. The so-called "American" Party, the political wing of a movement known as the "Know Nothings". Virulently nationalist and anti-immigrant, its white protestant membership staked its claim before the national electorate as the only bulwark against the growing "foreign elements" in our midst. Nativist and nationalist, the self styled savior of white protestant America, the Know Nothings stood firmly against what they described as the twin evils of immigration and Catholicism, both bent on destroying the "American" way of life.

The recently elected Mayor of Louisville, John Barbee, was the local leader of the nativist American party and he let it be know that there would be no police guarding the polling stations on election day. The night before the election the "Americans" hatched a plan to "guard" the polling stations in Democratic and immigrant neighborhoods letting no man pass who did not know a secret Know Nothing hand sign. When the polls opened in the morning hundreds of voters were roughed up, beaten, or stabbed and thousands more were kept away from the polls. Once voting had ended these nativist thugs roamed the immigrant neighborhoods, smashing storefronts on West Market Street and setting fire to homes throughout the Portland neighborhood.

Some of the immigrants fought back and a few of the Know Nothings were killed, but the death toll among immigrants reached well over 100. When the smoke had cleared and the bodies of the dead were buried some 10,000 largely Irish Catholic immigrants left Louisville leading to her decline. August 6, 1855 became known as Bloody Monday, and Louisville, once the fastest growing city in the midwest, soon gave way to Chicago and St. Louis, the new boom towns of an age of increasing immigration and dynamic change.

But the Germans stayed, our founders fought for their rightful place as citizens of this land. German Jews and Catholics worked together to build our first bridges of interfaith cooperation, many of which continue to this day. It took years and dedicated effort before Louisville would shed the mantle of that infamous Bloody Monday to become famous for its leadership in interfaith relations and to become the compassionate community which our new Mayor so proudly declares. There were many trials and setbacks along the way, but 164 years later we are a community with a rich religious heritage, welcoming immigrants from many lands, who help build and sustain our city as a finely woven tapestry of many cultures and faiths.

The Know Nothings disappeared along with the American party they had built amidst the throws of the Civil War and their own internal divisions over slavery and states rights. And yet, with the next wave of immigrants from Germany, this time fleeing Nazi oppression in the 1930's, that nativist strain, long dormant in American life, would rise again.

Here too, one of our founders provides a window into the challenges we faced in those days. H.P. Grossman – father, grandfather, and great grandfather of our current Grossman clan – was Chairman of the Administrative Committee of the Chicago Division of the American Jewish Congress in 1935 and in that capacity he addressed the AJC Convention that year with a clarion call on the need to stand against the revival of antisemitism in Europe and here in the United States. In June of 1935 he said:

“There is anti-Semitism in this country to an extent and a degree which is not yet appreciated by any of us. We are a violent people, we Americans: and I tremble to think what might happen to us, if our prejudice against the Jew were suddenly fanned into flame.”

It would appear from the survey made by Fortune Magazine, 15% of this country are anti-Semitic.

Just three years later the American Jewish Committee would begin to conduct surveys of its own and the level of antisemitism in America had more than doubled. By 1941, on the eve of America's entry into World War II, fully one third of the nation would say that if antisemitic violence were to break out in this country they would either join in or be “sympathetic” to such attacks.

H.P. Grossman was not the only one to see the rising tide of antisemitism and hate emerging in this country in the 1930's, but what makes these words so prophetic for our time as we too struggle to comprehend the revival of such hate yet again in our land, are the remedies he recommends which are as prophetic as his warnings. Said Grossman,

“What can we do to meet the problems confronting us?

1. To fight this rising tide of anti-Semitism”

To counter its claims with education, outreach and facts to counter the irrational and illogical claims upon which it has always based its xenophobia and hate.

But just as importantly he argues that we are called:

“2. To permit the Jews to develop their culture so that it may be a contribution to the progress of the countries in which we live.”

“We as Jews must have faith in and fight for democracy. We have learned that our existence and our happiness depends upon the democratic principle of free speech, a free press and equality under the law for all.”

That we must work to advance the American value of a Liberty which welcomes people of many lands and faiths to rise together through the strength of our diversity as a nation of freedom and justice for us all.

And to seal this prophetic call he concludes with words of the prophet Jeremiah:

“And seek the welfare of the city whither I have banished you, and pray in its behalf...  
For in its welfare shall you farewell.”

Therein lies a time tested prescription to combat bigotry, antisemitism and hate: teach, talk and stand up for your faith, work together with people in common cause, and seek the welfare of your community, for in its welfare shall you fare well.

And should you be inspired by these words, to do more than wonder or worry at what one can do to combat this most recent divisive tide of hate bent on tearing apart the fabric of our nation yet again...

You might join us next Friday night as we celebrate Martin Luther King Shabbat and hear the words of Rev. Corrie Shull and help us to build a new bridge between our Temple and his large and vibrant African American congregation at Burnett Avenue Baptist Church in Hurstbourne.

Or you could help us to rebuild a bridge with our Catholic friends, first forged after Bloody Monday, by joining in and bringing your thoughts to our longstanding Catholic Jewish dialogue groups, we are having a reenergizing and reorganizing Catholic Jewish dialogue meeting here next month. If you are interested in joining us, there will be a sign up list in the Oneg Shabbat after service or you can just let me know or ask me for any further details.

We pray, and fairly wish, for a world which would banish bigotry and hatred forever, but until that day comes we must work for the building of a better world, together day by day. May the work of our hands be blessed, may the work of our hands bring blessing. Amen.