

Jewish Journal

ADL at 100: Imagining A World Without Hate

The Anti-Defamation League “celebrates” a major milestone this year as we mark 100 years since our modest beginnings with two desks in a Chicago law firm. Much has changed in the 100 years, but as the country has grown we have grown with it.

Today we are a well-known national organization, with 30 regional offices and staff of hundreds of dedicated professionals. But as our leadership gathers at The Breakers in Palm Beach this week for the annual meeting of our National Executive Committee, we will not be popping the champagne corks just yet.

In talking about our centennial year, I have been putting that slightly discomfiting word celebrate in quotation marks because, while we have made many strides in America since our founders saw a need to combat the rampant anti-Semitism that existed in 1913, we are not yet ready to declare a complete victory over the forces of hatred, bigotry and prejudice in society. Our struggle is not yet over; the battle is not yet won.

Our history defines us and prepares us for another century of fighting hate.

At our founding a century ago, America was already a great democracy and a melting pot, but it also fell short of fulfilling its

promise.

For Jews, it was a time when universities, industry, neighborhoods and social clubs were not always open to them. It was a time when epithets like Christ-killers, kike and other stereotypes were commonplace in public and private.

At that time, a Jewish lawyer from Chicago by the name of Sigmund Livingston, disturbed by stereotyping of Jews in vaudeville and newspapers, conceived ADL. His great insight was to realize in the charter he composed for the new organization that there was an intimate connection between combatting anti-Semitism and working for equality for all citizens. This was, in fact, a very Jewish concept going back to the words of the sage Hillel 2,000 years ago: “If I am not for myself, who will be? If I am only for myself, what am I?”

The early years of ADL, indeed the period up to and through World War II, were characterized mostly by continuing challenges.

The very year of ADL’s founding witnessed one of the most egregious anti-Semitic events in American history the trial and the eventual lynching of Leo Frank, a Jew falsely accused of murder of a young woman in Atlanta.

The 1920s saw the dissemination

of the infamous forgery, “The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion,” that document that purported to be the plans of the Jews to take over the world, by Henry Ford, America’s leading industrialist. His reputation in America lent credence to the worst of anti-Jewish conspiracy theories. His Dearborn Independent newspaper made anti-Semitism respectable.

In the 1930s it was Father Coughlin, the infamous “Radio Priest” who broadcasts weekly to millions of Americans out of Royal Oak, Michigan. He shamelessly ranted week after week about sinister Jewish control and power. And then late in the 30’s and early in the 40’s, the voice of another American hero, Charles Lindbergh, emerged in his role as head of America First, accusing Jews of wanting to drag America into war against Germany to serve their own interests.

The same period saw other manifestations of hatred and discrimination in the mainstream. Included was the resurgence of the KKK in the 1920s, directing their vitriol more at Catholics than at African-Americans.

The passage of anti-immigration legislation in 1921 and 1924, among other things, prevented maybe another million or two Jews from entering the U.S. even before the rise of Hitler. The war

and its aftermath, however, opened America up to new possibilities. Inequality was no longer accepted as a natural part of American life. Efforts to stand up for minorities drew allies in different parts of the nation.

And so began an era of great change. ADL helped generate that change and we also benefitted from it.

This led to some of our most significant achievements. In the 1950s we initiated the anti-mask law in Georgia. This law, recognizing the right to demonstrate even by hate groups, required that KKK marchers not hide their identities behind their cloaks. It played a key role in the decline of the Klan and represented a fundamental ADL principle: the best way to fight hate and haters is to expose them to the light of day.

Also in the 50s, we initiated a project to ascertain and then expose the extent of the quota system against Jews at universities. By getting university presidents to admit that such quotas existed, we set in motion a process that eventually led to the end of such quotas.

The 1960s was the time of the great civil rights revolution in which ADL participated. Its impact was of course mostly felt by African-Americans, but it emboldened all minorities. For us it was a time when we commissioned the most definitive study of anti-Semitism in America to this day. Done in cooperation with scholars from the University of California at Berkeley, eight volumes were published dealing with anti-Semitism from every angle.

Of course, one of the major changes affecting Jewish life in America was the rebirth of the state of Israel. Supporting the state in the face of its challenges became part of the ADL agenda, as it was on the agenda of all major Jewish organizations. In the early years, however, our unique role was in fighting the Arab boycott of Israel which had an impact in America through pressure on U.S. companies. Since boycotting Israel was not illegal in the early years, we exposed and shamed American companies that boycotted Israel.

A changing America enabled us to do significant work in new areas.

Our model hate crime legislation developed in the 1980s was one of our more significant contributions to American society. It became the basis of legislation in more than 45 states. It was upheld by the Supreme Court because we distinguished between hate speech, which is protected by the First Amendment, and hate actions, which are not. And it helped propel a whole field of literature on the importance of dealing with hate crimes.

In the present day, new challenges loom large. The complexity of hate on the Internet, an old challenge in very new form, is more and more occupying our time. Working with Internet companies, we are constantly looking for new approaches to deal with the ability of haters and extremists to use the Internet to spread their message and recruit people to their cause.

And while international terrorism has remained a priority ever since 9/11, ADL never lets its guard down regarding domestic extremists and terrorists who are still responsible

for the vast majority of terrorist activities in this country.

As the recent presidential election just demonstrated, Latinos are becoming more and more important in American life. For us at ADL, developing good relations with the Latino community is a priority. Over time those relationships will be important to maintain American support for Israel and in countering anti-Semitism.

Finally, there are the ongoing threats to Israel -- militarily, diplomatically, and through the media and public opinion. Protecting the well-being of the Jewish State in the face of delegitimization efforts and counting the anti-Semitism associated with it will remain at the top of our agenda.

Sigmund Livingston's idea of an ADL fighting both for the rights of Jews and the rights of all minorities was a brilliant one all those years ago. The best proof of that is the difference we have made through our voice, our programs, and our values.

And as we head into our second century, the mission and work of ADL remains as important and as exciting as ever.

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