This Passover, the Imperative of Educating Americans about Anti-Semitism

By David Bernstein, President and CEO of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs

Passover accentuates so much of the Jewish experience—freedom from captivity, the need to educate ourselves and our children, compassion in the face of adversity and, not least, the continued threat of hatred and anti-Semitism.

The Passover Haggadah is essentially the story of how Jews fought and defeated anti-Semitism. Pharaoh was the ultimate anti-Semite, enslaving, oppressing and murdering Jews. Unfortunately, the Exodus from Egypt was the beginning, not the end, of the story of anti-Semitism. The coincidence of Passover with the Easter holiday placed vulnerable Jewish communities in great danger for being blamed and targeted for killing Jesus Christ. Such Jew hatred often drew upon bizarre blood libel accusations that Jews made matza with the blood of Christian children.

We, like most Jews, take Passover very seriously. And it is hard to tell the Passover story without invoking concerns of continued anti-Semitism. On this Passover in particular, in the aftermath of the Pittsburg shootings, we are reminded of the ongoing threat of anti-Semitism, its growth on both ends of the political spectrum, and the vital importance of fighting it in its various forms.

How should we fight intensifying anti-Semitism? Here’s where we can once again turn to the Passover Haggadah for guidance in the parable of the Four Children:

The Wise Child
The wise child is the knowledgeable person in our own community and among our allies who knows of the threat of anti-Semitism. To the wise child we say “be thoughtful about how you explain anti-Semitism to the larger community. Educate before condemning. Let the people know about anti-Semitism in a way they are likely to hear and understand.”

The Wicked Child
The wicked child is the anti-Semite who seeks to scapegoat and marginalize Jews. To the wicked child we say “What you are saying and doing is an age-old hatred that seeks to hurts the Jewish community and fans the flames of bigotry against others. If you persist, we will do everything in our power to expose your bigotry and deny you a platform.”
The Simple Child
The simple child is the person who doesn’t know much about Jews and anti-Semitism. To the Simple child we say: “Let’s get to know each other, share our stories, and make society a better place.” In sharing who we are and getting to know who they are, we can sensitize them to anti-Semitism.

The Child Who Does Not Know How to Ask
This child may inadvertently and carelessly repeat anti-Semitic tropes. We are patient but firm with them. “You may not realize it, but these words are damaging to the Jewish community.”

We at JCPA offer this framework because we realize that a one-size-fits-all approach to fighting hatred toward Jews works no better than a singular approach to educating children about the story of Passover.