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Pistons' Arn Tellem: Personal connection is how we fight hate, antisemitism | Opinion

Arn Tellem Detroit Free Press

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My son's high school classmate Danielle Sasi, along with her husband, Maor, and her father, Avi, attended a peace concert in southern Israel on Oct. 7. When they heard shots from attackers, they took cover in an open-air shelter. Terrorists tossed grenades inside, and in an effort to save his children, Avi, threw himself onto one of the grenades and was killed. Dani and her husband were wounded and hid under dead bodies for hours until they were rescued. They were treated in an Israeli hospital and are now back in Los Angeles, shattered by the experience.

We mourn with the families who have lost loved ones. We hope for the recovery of those wounded. We appeal for the safe return of all those held hostage. And we pray that innocent lives — Palestinian as well as Israeli — are spared as the crisis continues.

The conflict following the Oct. 7 terrorist attack has exposed once again the raw wounds and bitter divide between Israel and its neighbors in the Middle East. My wife Nancy and I have spent our entire lives trying to build bridges between the two sides of that divide, supporting organizations that seek Jewish and Muslim coexistence. We believe that we must improve the lives of Palestinians and enable them to live with dignity and respect. When the fighting ends, we must all strive for a just and lasting peace for Israelis and Palestinians, which can only be achieved if dialogue and understanding prevail over violence and hate.

Sometimes, the political and cultural issues seem intractable. But we continue on, trying to find common ground that breeds understanding and peace. Yet we must be vigilant about differentiating between legitimate disagreement in search of common ground, and pure hate and the pernicious brand of antisemitism it breeds.

The appalling and barbaric terrorist attack on Oct. 7 is the most recent visceral example of violence and discrimination against Jewish people, but it is emblematic of a disturbing and

rising wave of antisemitism around the world and in the U.S., one that is greater than at any time in recent memory. It harkens us all back to Europe in the 1930s.

I applaud President Joe Biden for his strong support of Israel and Israel's right to defend itself in the wake of atrocity. But what has been particularly disheartening in the aftermath of the terrorist attack is that more university presidents, artists, and activists did not condemn those deplorable acts in the strongest manner possible.

Antisemitic incidents in the U.S. are up fourfold since Oct. 7. At college campuses, Jewish students do not feel safe, including at some of our most prestigious universities: Cornell, Harvard, Penn, and Columbia, among others. While I fully support the right to free speech, and honest debate over grievances and disagreements, we cannot allow free speech and dialogue to turn into threats, intimidation and violence.

In the aftermath of the Oct. 7 terrorist attack, some of those actions have been cloaked beneath the rhetoric of self-defense and response to oppression in which some people excused or even celebrated the murder of innocent children, mothers, and grandparents. But let's be clear: The Oct. 7 attack was terrorism perpetrated by Hamas murderers, not by Palestinian freedom fighters. There is no cause on earth that justifies what those murderers did. There is no moral equivalence, and no explaining away that "this is what happens when people are oppressed."

In fact, the Oct. 7 attack was the product of years of demonizing and dehumanizing Jews, preaching the destruction of Israel and that killing Jews is a virtue. It is an existential reality that in the face of hate we must always be vigilant in recognizing and calling it out for what it is.

The Zekelman Holocaust Center and others like it throughout the world serve a vital role in our communities by preserving our past history, so that its lessons can inform our future. Events and exhibitions that personalize Holocaust victim and survivor stories are a powerful tool to combat misinformation and hate, and to promote tolerance, unity, and understanding. Education is a key to stemming the rising tide of antisemitism.

My grandfather, Max Tellem, always told me that the most important line in the often-read Psalm 23 was: "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thou art with me."

We can't be passive to tragedy, we can't stand still, or turn our backs in the face of misfortune or when confronted with evil. We must stay true to our values, pass through darkness into

light, and into a world of love and understanding. We must never shut our eyes, never refuse to acknowledge the truth, no matter how unpleasant.

We must stand in support of Israel, call out antisemitism when we see it, support our Jewish communities, and see to it that the immeasurable pain of the Holocaust is not lost on this generation or any future generation. It is much more than a responsibility for Jewish people, but one that falls on all of us.

At the Pistons organization, we have engaged a cross-section of our community from various cultures, faiths and backgrounds — schoolteachers, administrators, church leaders, police, African American youth, and other civic leaders — to come together to discuss pressing social justice issues and attempt to find common ground and ways to work together.

Today, each of us must again create opportunities and participate in respectful dialogue across considerable differences of thought, perspective, experience, and backgrounds. Although we may not ultimately agree, dialogue, education, and personal connection across our community is the best and most effective weapon to combat antisemitism and hate in all its forms.

Arn Tellem is vice chairman of the Detroit Pistons. A version of these remarks was delivered on Nov. 12 at the annual benefit dinner of the Zekelman Holocaust Center in West Bloomfield. Submit a letter to the editor at freep.com/letters.