

June 2, 2020

Dear ADL Leaders:

The Mourner's Kaddish prayer is one of the most sacred traditions of Judaism and one of Judaism's greatest mitzvahs. We mourn to honor those who have passed, not to say goodbye, but to say thank you to God for the gift of the souls we have lost. In the spirit of that tradition, we still mourn Emmett Till, Martin Luther King, Jr. and James Byrd Jr., all killed because they were black. And because history's lessons of prejudice and bigotry have not yet been learned, we now mourn and remember more who were killed because of the color of their skin:

George Floyd. Breonna Taylor. Ahmaud Arbery. Eric Garner. Michael Brown. Laquan McDonald. Tamir Rice. Walter Scott. Trayvon Martin. Sandra Bland. Freddie Gray. Alton Sterling. Philando Castile. Stephon Clark. Botham Jean. And the lives of too many others whose names have not reached our headlines.

In 1913, ADL was founded with a mission "to stop the defamation of the Jewish people, and to secure justice and fair treatment to all..." With intention and purpose, ADL recognizes that the fight against one form of prejudice cannot succeed without battling prejudice in all forms. Inspiration also came from the wrongful conviction of Jewish businessman, Leo Frank, whose conviction and lynching death were rooted in antisemitism. We mourned Leo Frank, and ADL committed to fight against the antisemitism that took his life.

ADL has a rich history of mourning those whose lives were extinguished by hate – by racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and by all other kinds of bigotry. No one should mistake our mourning for silence, because ADL has never been and never will be silenced. First, we mourn, next we speak out, and then we fight for change.

James Byrd, Jr. was an African American man who was murdered by three white supremacists in Jasper, Texas, on June 7, 1998. ADL's Southwest region responded, supported his family, and mourned his death. Then, we spoke out against the racism that was pandemic then and now. Finally, we partnered with his family to ensure that his life was not lost in vain. ADL drafted the model hate crimes legislation that was ultimately signed into law, and James Byrd, Jr. will forever be remembered by our country through the state and federal hate crimes laws bearing his name and enacted and enforced to punish hate crimes.

ADL's history of working with law enforcement is, in part, grounded in first working with department leaders to root out racism in their own ranks. And now, more law enforcement authorities depend on ADL than to any other non-governmental organization for training, information and resources—to combat extremism, terrorism and hate crimes. ADL actively engages with every major federal, state and local law enforcement agency, from the Federal Bureau of Investigation to local police and sheriff departments, state police, highway patrol agencies in the fight against prejudice and bigotry.

Our work is not done, and we are counting on you to help. We are duty-bound to educate and advocate. We must continue the good fight: to create a legacy of fewer hate crimes and pursue material change to the systemic racism and hate that has gripped our country since its founding. Most importantly, we will work to create community where every human being is treated with respect, dignity and kindness because no soul among us is worth more than any other. It will not be easy, but vital work never is.

As Mishnah Pirkei Avot 2:16 teaches us: Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from trying. ADL remains committed today, and that fight grows exponentially in each of us, in our leaders, supporters and allies to meet the hate we confront. Why? There is no other option. We will never be able to un-see the images of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery fighting for their lives, and while that is torturous, that pain reminds us to keep fighting so that we don't have to add any more names to the list for whom we must say Kaddish.

Nicole Nathan Gibson
Regional Chair
ADL Southwest