

My friends, those who have already begun following CST on Twitter already know the title of tonight's sermon. If you are not following us yet, I encourage you to do so. To bring you up to speed for tonight, this sermon is titled *Two Apologies: A Rabbi's Morning At the Statehouse*.

I was invited to give the invocation before the Indiana House of Representatives this past Wednesday morning. As you know, that was anything but a normal day at the Statehouse. The Democrats were hunkered down in an Illinois hotel, and the Statehouse halls were packed with protesters. Before my invocation, I was advised by the Speaker of the House that without a quorum present, the session would consist of my invocation and the Pledge of Allegiance. The speaker would then close the session and hope to have a quorum when the House reconvened later that afternoon.

I was told that the protestors, mostly members of labor unions, had been respectful on Monday and Tuesday. I thought that they would behave the same way on Wednesday, having successfully stopped the controversial Right To Work legislation the day before. However, Speaker Bosma evidently had some concerns. He introduced me before the invocation, and then said, "Ladies and gentlemen outside, we are going to have an invocation. We're going to ask you to respect that. Thank you."

His request fell on deaf ears. Although the protestors in the gallery had no choice but to remain silent, those packing the halls began to chant some slogan. I could not understand their words, but I heard them chanting all through the invocation. I happen to have a recording of it. I hope to be able to post it on our website so you can hear it for yourself.

When I finished the brief invocation, several members of the House rose to shake my hand as I left the rostrum. They expressed appreciation for my presence and my words. One of them offered me a memento of my visit. It was a little pin, similar to the pin I was wearing. My pin depicted the American and Israeli flags. The pin I was given was a cross superimposed on an American flag.

How would you have reacted to being handed such a pin? I assumed that the fellow who gave it me did so with good intentions, never intending to offend me. I have encountered educated people who were so ignorant of Judaism that they did not know we have no Christmas, no belief in Jesus, and no cross in our religious symbols. Maybe he was one of those people, I thought. At any rate, I thanked him for the gift and put the pin in my shirt pocket. Andrea Leopold had accompanied me to the Statehouse, and together we left the House chamber a short while later.

As we walked through the crowded hallways, one of the protestors evidently recognized me. He came to offer one of the two apologies referred to by the title of this talk. He said, “We didn’t mean to be disrespectful of your prayer, but we had a cause.”

Mazel tov—he had a cause. So what? Not to equate one with the other, but Hitler also had a cause. Who doesn’t have a cause? From the American Cancer Society to the North American Man/Boy Love Association, there are some wonderful causes and some horrible causes.

Let’s assume this man had a wonderful cause. Again, so what? He and his fellows had a political point to make. They tried to make that point by drowning out an apolitical invocation and the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag of the country that guarantees them the right to voice their political opinion. This man knew what they did was wrong

—that's why he apologized to me in the first place. Had he seen nothing wrong with their behavior, he would not have apologized at all. So he knew they behaved badly, but he felt it was justified. Why did he feel that way? As Tevye said, that I can tell you in one word: narcissism.

*I* have a cause, and because it is *my* cause, *I* get to decide not to respect the invocation and the Pledge of Allegiance. This kind of narcissism is becoming more and more widespread, and I see it as one of the greatest threats to our society. That, my friends, is the first apology I wanted to tell you about.

The second actually happened before this one. Remember the representative who gave me the cross on the flag? Before Andrea and I left the House chamber, that same representative came up to me with a look of sheer horror on his face. He began to apologize profusely to me for giving me the pin. When he gave it to me, he was not

thinking about the fact that I was a rabbi, he said. He told me that he had gotten into the habit of giving one to each minister or priest that gives the daily invocation. He reflexively gave one to me, too. He begged my forgiveness and repeatedly assured me that he had meant no offense by giving me a cross.

I assured him that no apology was necessary. I told him that I accepted his gift in the spirit in which it was given, from one religious man to another. I told him that not only was I not offended by his gift, but that I would cherish it as a memento of my visit to the Statehouse. He seemed only somewhat reassured, and apologized once or twice more before we shook hands and parted company.

Of course, had he given me that pin in an attempt to convert me to his religion, I would not feel the same way about the pin. But I was not surprised that this was not his agenda. I have met many religious Christians like him. A

few try to convert us; a few others warn us we are going to hell. But in my experience, the vast majority treat us with love and respect because they take the Bible literally, including the verse that says of the people Israel *I'll bless those who bless you, and those who affront you I'll curse.*<sup>1</sup>

So that is the story of one rabbi's two apologies at the Statehouse. One was called for, but took the form of a self-serving rationalization of narcissism. The other was heartfelt but unnecessary. I'll take the latter any time.

In conclusion, let me mention that a third apology arrived in the form of a letter from the Majority Caucus Chairman. She apologized for the protesters' behavior and invited me to come back on a quieter day for another invocation. I'm going to accept that invitation, and I hope it will be a less eventful morning. But I assure you—I'll never forget my first trip to the Statehouse.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 12:3