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Pamela Geller Statement

New York, New York – Pam Geller’s recent New York City bus ad depicts a man with a scarf wrapped around his head beside the quote, “Killing Jews is worship that brings us closer to Allah” attributed to Hamas MTV. A federal judge ruled that the ad, slated to run on NYC buses and already running in San Francisco and Chicago, are protected by free speech. And the MTA is now banning all political advertisements.

Without question, freedom of speech is a core value and the foundation of our democracy. As such, it must be preserved. But how do we respond to hate speech that is intended to divide us and incite hate? Regardless of Geller’s motive, it is clear that her ad fuels bigotry toward Muslims, by instantaneously conflating 1.6 billion people with the visible few, who perpetrate violent extremism. So what should the MTA do? How do we responsibly balance freedom of speech with messages that may incite violence in our communities?

It sounds simple and it’s said often. The first step is to fight speech with speech. Together, it is our responsibility to condemn, confront and debunk advertisements that perpetuate false stereotypes and marginalize our neighbors. Ironically, in Geller’s fervor to protect her prejudiced view of democracy for people who think like her, an unintended consequence of her actions looms over New York City. Political discourse – one of the bedrocks of democracy – is being shut down by the MTA as they prohibit all political ads. While that may save us from having to witness Geller’s venom in our neighborhoods, our right to free speech will be taken from us and, indeed, all of us will bear the consequences.

On the bright side, however, Geller’s actions have yielded another unintended consequence. Because of her actions, Muslims, Jews and Christians are working together in a united front against her hate-inciting initiative. And that is what our democracy is really all about.

Tanenbaum is a secular, non-sectarian not-for-profit committed to combating religious prejudice in global workplaces, schools, health care settings and areas of armed conflict.

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