

CRIME

Five or more Jewish congregations receive bomb threats in Alabama



Alex Gladden

Montgomery Advertiser

Published 4:36 p.m. CT Oct. 6, 2023 | Updated 6:12 p.m. CT Oct. 6, 2023

At least five Jewish congregations, including one of Montgomery's, received emailed bomb threats Thursday morning, according to law enforcement officials.

Montgomery police responded to Temple Beth Or at about 11 a.m. The bomb squad cleared the building and did not find any harmful devices, Major Saba Coleman said in an email.

None of the Jewish congregations found evidence of bombs in their places of worship, said Phillip Ensler, the executive director Central Alabama Jewish Federation who is also a member of the Alabama House of Representatives.

More: Black Montgomery families find swastikas, racial slurs painted on their homes, cars

Congregations in Montgomery, Dothan, Auburn, Mobile and Birmingham received threats.

Local law enforcement and the FBI are investigating the threats.

"It's very, very unsettling to know that anybody hates Jewish people enough to go to the trouble of compiling a list of all of the places we might worship in the area and sending a threat," said Leah Nelson, who attends Beth Or.

Reported antisemitic hate crimes have been on the rise, according to the Anti-Defamation League. In March, the league used newly released FBI data that "shows that reported hate crime incidents in 2021 rose to 10,840 incidents, the highest level recorded in more than two decades."

“It’s been very, very safe and felt very, very safe to be Jewish in the United States for the last four decades. So what has happened over the last four or five years is really different and really upsetting for that reason,” Nelson said.

Nelson also noted that threats are harmful to the community, even when they are not backed by violence.

“Threats work even when there’s no bomb because they make people feel like maybe it’s not safe to gather,” Nelson said.

Enslar encouraged Jewish people to continue to gather in the face of these threats and he also asked others to share messages of love.

“Be kinder. Be more accepting of people. Be more loving, and just know that right it’s a beautiful thing that we have all these different backgrounds and religions and practices in America, and we all can do our part to make sure we’re not directly or indirectly supporting any sort of ignorance or bigoted rhetoric or actions, and as scary and horrible as this is, my hope is that it makes people embrace and love each other that much more and be willing to recognize and include everyone for who they are,” Enslar said.

Nelson wanted to acknowledge that this is not the first act of hatred perpetrated against the Jewish communities in Alabama.

In November 2022, Birmingham police arrested a man and charged him with arson after finding a propane tank and clothes that had been set on fire in the basement of Temple Beth-El, Al.com reported.

Nelson also wanted to bear in mind that other communities are targeted and receive similar threats.

“Antisemitism is another flavor of hatred that is experienced by many communities in Alabama,” Nelson said. “It personally affects me more than other streams of hatred because I’m Jewish, but we all need to be stepping back and thinking about how we’re treating and talking about each other and especially talking and thinking about people who are different from us. It is absolutely fine to have very strongly held beliefs, political beliefs, religious beliefs, whatever ideology it is that animates you.

“I have very strong beliefs. It is not OK to say that people who think differently from you or believe differently, live differently are less human than you, that they deserve fewer human

and civil rights you know or that they deserve to be killed," she said.

Alex Gladden is the Montgomery Advertiser's public safety reporter. She can be reached at agladden@gannett.com or on Twitter @gladlyalex.