

Testimony of
Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker
Congregation Beth Israel,
Colleyville, Texas

On

The Rise in Violence Against Minority Institutions

Before the
Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, And Homeland Security

of the
Committee on the Judiciary
U.S. House of Representatives

February 17, 2022

Via Video Conference

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Introduction

Chair Jackson Lee, Vice Chair Bush, Ranking Member Biggs, I want to thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you this morning. I am honored to have Chairman Nadler join us this morning. And I am pleased to see Representative Demings, who was so gracious when I testified, for the first time ever, just last week before her subcommittee.

I believe, and often teach, that Judaism is filled with contradictions because life is filled with contradictions. And today I am filled with mixed and even contradictory emotions.

On the one hand, I am devastated about what brings me before you today. It's horrific that my congregants and I were held hostage in our sacred home. It feels so wrong to have those words come out of my mouth. We spent over ten hours with a terrorist pointing a gun at us in our sanctuary. We were concerned for ourselves and for one another. We were terrified.

I am truly horrified that in our society today religious leaders must devote themselves to security training. How to "harden" our facilities is both a necessary conversation and anathema to religious ideals of hospitality and loving the stranger.

And yet I am also grateful. I am grateful to be here. To be honest, I'm grateful to be anywhere.

The Reality of Antisemitism

I am grateful to be anywhere because a terrorist chose a Jewish synagogue, because he thought that Jews control the world. He thought that he could take Jews hostage, call up an influential rabbi and she would snap her fingers and give him what he wanted. He truly believed that Jews control the media, that Jews control the government, that Jews control everything.

Tragically, this is just one aspect of Antisemitism that has been so harmful to the Jewish people throughout history. Over the centuries entire Jewish communities have been destroyed because people believed that Jews drank the blood of non-Jewish children. Entire Jewish communities have been destroyed because people believed that Jews wanted to torture communion wafers. Entire Jewish communities have been destroyed because people believed that Jews were responsible for all the bad things in life – that we are the root of all evil.

And as absurd as it sounds, every single outrageous lie about the Jewish people – has been shared in various forms by people from all walks of life in recent years.

It's sad, ridiculous, and maddening that I was taken hostage because of it! Far too many Jews have died because of it. This isn't distant history. This is a month ago. This is now. This is after years of increased harassment and attacks against my people.

As I think about my survival, I must ask myself what went right?

What Went Right in Colleyville?

Six years ago, I attended the Faith Based Security Summit that was hosted by the FBI, Homeland Security, and our region's US Attorney's Office because of Antisemitism. It was my first education related to active shooters and the first time I was introduced to the concept of a security committee. Since then, I have participated in about a half dozen different security workshops offered by the FBI, the ADL, Colleyville Police, and the Secure Communities Network (SCN). Those sessions helped me to stay alert, look for an opportunity, and gave me the courage to act.

I am grateful that just a few months after the Security Summit, Mike Finfer, our current congregational President, formed our first Security Subcommittee. The subcommittee was responsible for numerous physical security enhancements, educational sessions, and the development of our Security Action Plan. They built a strong relationship between the Colleyville PD and Congregation Beth Israel. The police officers who were at CBI that day knew our building and they knew us. Their work made a dramatic difference.

I am so grateful that Colleyville Mayor, Richard Newton, formed a Ministerial Alliance that I started attending in 2017. Through those meetings I was able to develop a strong relationship with city leadership, the Fire Chief, and the Police Chief. I never would have guessed how important the relationship with Police Chief Miller and having his cell phone and email at my fingertips would be.

I am grateful for the financial support of our members, Tarrant County's Jewish Federation, and the Nonprofit Security Grant Program that made our security plans possible. That included

upgrading our security cameras, which was critical to law enforcement. Matthew DeSarno, special agent in charge of the FBI's Dallas Field Office has said that the video coverage “gave the decision makers, the negotiators and others general situational awareness.”¹

The chances that something could have happened were so small. Even so, we knew it was a possibility and we wanted to be as prepared as possible. But even that is an illusion. No one is ever prepared.

My Experience: Balancing Hospitality and Security

On the morning of January 15th, when the gunman arrived, it was me and one volunteer in the building. I was running a bit late. I was finishing my preparations for the Torah reading and loading the PowerPoint slides with the prayers onto the computer. I needed to turn on projectors and check the sound and start Zoom and Facebook Live. I was rabbi and tech support; not an uncommon situation. And in the midst of trying to do a million different things, I had a stranger come to the door.

I have, of course, thought about that moment a great deal. I welcomed a terrorist into my congregation. Four of us could have died and I would have been responsible. I live with that responsibility. And it’s important for you to understand that this was not a matter of me opening the door just because I value hospitality.

I do value hospitality. I have welcomed in people who were Jewish or who were interested in learning about Judaism – all races, all gender identities, all income levels... people with accents and piercings and tattoos. The Torah scroll that we read from each week was gifted to our congregation thanks to hospitality. I strive to live that value every day. Like so many congregations – synagogues, churches and mosques -- Congregation Beth Israel strives to be “a house of prayer for all people.”²

At the same time, I also value security. When our member asked if I knew the person at the door, I was distracted, but I still did a visual inspection and after a brief word, he appeared to be who he said he was – a guy who spent a night outside in sub 40-degree weather. But that was just the first analysis. Yes, I served him tea. I also spoke with him throughout the process to learn his story. Who was he? How did he get to our congregation? Such conversation is welcoming and gave me an opportunity to see if he was acting nervous or if his story added up. Security and hospitality can go hand in hand. I was running late, but I spent time to see if there were any red flags and I didn’t see any. Of course, I was wrong.

¹ Nicole Sganga, “Calls for Boosted Security Funding Intensity Among Faith Leaders After Texas Synagogue Hostage Standoff,” CBS News, January 22, 2022. Available at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/calls-boosted-security-funding-intensify-among-faith-leaders-after-texas-synagogue-hostage-standoff/>

² Isaiah 56:7

I share this because despite all the plans and funding and courses – I still opened the door. But because of all the plans and funding and courses and literally dozens of small things that just happened to go our way, we were able to escape.

The Landscape

As horrible as what happened to us was, I know that what happened at Tree of Life in Pittsburgh and Chabad of Poway a few years ago was so much worse. Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox - those who hate Jews do not distinguish among us.

This is a moment filled with anxiety and deep concern for American Jews. As my colleague Rabbi Angela Buchdahl preached the Shabbat after our ordeal, “if you are a Jew in America today and you are not feeling unsettled, you are not paying attention.”³ It is worth noting that Rabbi Buchdahl is not the Rabbi of a small congregation in Texas; she spoke these words from the *bimah* (lectern) of a very large and prominent synagogue in Midtown Manhattan. I hope you remember that as you think about how your Jewish friends, neighbors, and constituents are feeling. They are unsettled. Many are scared.

And we’re not alone.

There have been terrible moments of harassment and violence and bloodshed at churches and mosques, and basically every religion has experienced challenging moments or tragedy. The murder of six worshippers at the Sikh Temple in Oak Creek (WI) in 2012 was devastating. The murder of nine worshippers, all Black, at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston (SC) in 2015 was terrifying for all of us, especially for so many in the Black community. It was another blow, shattering the perception of safety in religious spaces.

No one should fear gathering to pray or celebrate or mourn or connect in their spiritual home.

In preparing to be with you this morning, I came across a remarkable statement offered to the Senate Labor Committee in 1947 by perhaps the leading rabbi of that time, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise. Rabbi Wise told that Committee that “equality of opportunity for Jews can be truly secured only in a genuinely democratic society.”⁴ He continued,

³ Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, “Captives of Hope,” sermon preached at Central Synagogue, New York, NY, January 21, 2022. Available at <https://youtu.be/Q8MlhMp99CM> (Video) or, in an adopted written version at “‘You’re Running out of Time’: Rabbi Details Calls with Texas Terrorist,” The Forward, January 21, 2022, available at https://forward.com/opinion/481211/angela-buchdahl-texas-synagogue-hostage-colleyville-beth-israel-faisal/?mc_cid=f98290a683&mc_eid=18e469e147

⁴ Hearings Before A Subcommittee Of The Committee On Labor And Public Welfare United States Senate Eightieth Congress First Session On S. 984 A Bill To Prohibit Discrimination In Employment Because Of Race, Religion, Color National Origin Or Ancestry June 11 , 12, 13 , 18, 19 , 20, July 16, 17 , And 18, 1947. Page 162.

Accordingly, we seek to fight every manifestation of racism, to promote the civil and political equality of all groups and persons in America, and to support measures designed to safeguard civil liberties and to build a better America. We regard ethnic discrimination...directed against...any...group, as a single and indivisible problem and as one of the most urgent problems of democratic society. Nothing more gravely threatens American democracy today than the fact of its incompleteness. Democracy to be secure must be complete. An incomplete democracy is an insecure democracy. ⁵

Members of the Committee, I would add that the converse is equally true: an insecure democracy is an incomplete democracy. And too many communities in our democracy today feel insecure.

Conclusion

Tragically, we live in a world where those houses of worship need protection. Where too many are victims of hate crimes. And I believe that both Democrats and Republicans want to change that reality. It's not naiveté – it's intentional societal disobedience. I refuse to accept that any of you are satisfied with the status quo. We all need to work together to solve our problems.

Changing our reality all at once is a bit too much to ask. That's why Rabbi Tarfon taught⁶ לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְלָאכָה לְגַמְרָהּ, וְלֹא אַתָּה בְּךָ חוֹרֵינִי לְבַטֵּל מִמְנוּחָה that we aren't obligated to complete the work, but we can't neglect it.

I'm not here today asking you to complete the work. But we do need your help. Please hear the diverse group of witnesses who come before you today. We are all unsettled and we need practical and intelligent solutions to help all of us feel safe and secure.

It is an honor for me to speak with you today. Thank you for the opportunity.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of Our Ancestors), 2:16