An N.J. rabbi says we need to protect Jews, ‘just in case’

January 23, 2022

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NJ.com

<https://www.nj.com/opinion/2022/01/an-nj-rabbi-says-we-need-to-protect-jews-just-in-case-opinion.html>

On the Monday after the siege at Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas, I heard [Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/texas-rabbi-says-threw-chair-helping-end-synagogue-standoff-rcna12496), describe the first moments of the terror attack in his Colleyville, Texas sanctuary.

“While we were praying and my back was turned — we face toward Jerusalem when we pray — I heard a click… and it turned out that it was his gun.”

I am sure every other rabbi listening felt the fear and vulnerability of that moment viscerally.

Preparing for such a moment has become a part of the modern rabbinate. Indeed, on my first day as a newly ordained rabbi in a New Jersey pulpit in 1988, I was taken on the traditional tour of my new spiritual home. Along with all the usual highlights, I was shown the location of panic buttons installed in various places, “just in case.”

Over the next 30 years, and especially after 9/11, the[Tree of Life synagogue massacre](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/some-people-just-dont-like-us-in-a-texas-synagogue-11-hours-of-terror/2022/01/16/3538f950-76d4-11ec-bf97-6eac6f77fba2_story.html) in 2018, and the attack at Chabad House in Poway, California, in 2019, “just in case” came to include active shooter training, situational awareness and security audits with local, state and federal law enforcement.

“Just in case” meant uniformed security at the door, local police in the parking lot, and plainclothes security in the sanctuary. And “just in case” included becoming a grant writer so my synagogues could install electronic door locks, hardened entry doors, security lighting, video surveillance, blast-proof window coatings, and truck-stopping bollards. A security consultant even suggested my lectern be lined with Kevlar, “just in case.”

And it is not just rabbis who have had to adjust to this new normal in the face of the scourge of rising antisemitism. Sadly, so, too, have our congregants and even our children. On Saturday night, after the hostages in Texas escaped, my daughter tweeted, “it’s why at Jewish summer camp, we practiced lockdown drills and had to know where we would be able to hide the kids across camp if someone armed made it onto camp.”

This is Jewish life in America in 2022.

While I am sad to see our synagogues go from open doors to secured locations, I also have hope. Colleyville demonstrated the power and impact of our relationships not just with political leaders and law enforcement, but with interfaith and community leaders whose responses were equally meaningful. In such relationships, we may find the answers for not just reacting to incidents of violent terror, but perhaps preventing many of them as well.

That is the goal of the [Tackle! Upstander Training program](https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/muflehun-american-jewish-committee-launch-training-to-prevent-domestic-terrorism-and-targeted-violence-in-us-cities-301351532.html#:~:text=%22Tackle!,motivated%20by%20extremism%20or%20bigotry.) which, coincidentally, I co-taught with a Muslim partner just days before the hostage crisis in Colleyville. Over 20 members of law enforcement, the education community, local municipalities, and interfaith community groups joined us for an eight-hour training funded by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and implemented by the American Jewish Committee (AJC) in partnership with Muflehun, an organization that focuses on providing solutions to complex social problems.

Tackle! is designed to enhance the ability of community leaders to identify and respond to individuals at risk of mobilizing to commit violence. We led participants in a curriculum designed to teach awareness of the threat of violent extremism and extremist recruitment tactics; understanding how hate can incite violence, including antisemitism and anti-Muslim bigotry; and the role communities can play in violence prevention. Indeed, an intervention that far precedes an individual’s descent into violent hate is key.

We have been battling violent antisemitism through so many generations that the effort can sometimes feel disheartening and lonely. But along with finding hope in the heroics of Rabbi Cytron-Walker and his congregants, I find solace in our relationships with allies who stand with the Jewish community in solidarity, and in finding paths to healthier communities and a safer future for all.

It’s something we need to do all the time, not just in case.