

‘A Culture of Preparedness’



Rabbi Riqi Kosovske, left, and Pastor Marisa Egerstrom under the display of ribbons with messages of love, support, and peace in the Florence, MA worship space used by both of their congregations. Suzanne Kreiter/*The Boston Globe* via Getty Images

Spring/Summer 2024

By Robert Israel

JEWISH WORSHIPERS WERE murdered by terrorist gunfire at two synagogues—in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 2018, and in Powray, California, in 2019. This burgeoning trend of antisemitic incidents has left synagogues struggling to implement strategies to protect their

congregants.¹

“Change came after Pittsburgh and Powray,” said Thomas Michaels, chief security officer for the Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest, New Jersey. “There were so many violent attacks against Jews. After every attack, I heard people say, ‘I *hope* it won’t happen again.’ But hope is not a strategy. These incidents kept increasing. And this was before things escalated further with the Hamas terrorist attacks on Israelis. We knew we needed to be more prepared.”²

The incidents run the gamut: gun violence, racial slurs, physical assaults, bomb threats, swastikas painted on public buildings and other acts of vandalism, and hateful messages posted on social media.

Jewish leaders have found themselves exploring strategies that can combat these attacks and protect citizens so they can worship freely, without fear. One terror weapon predominates: arson.³ On January 22, 2023, Temple Ner Tamid in Bloomfield, New Jersey, a suburban town 17 miles from New York City, was attacked by an arsonist. This firebombing bore an eerie similarity to three strikes against two Jewish houses of worship in my hometown of Arlington, Massachusetts, and the neighboring town of Needham in 2021, when arsonists—operating under the cloak of darkness—tossed Molotov cocktails at synagogues while Jewish families slept upstairs. Synagogues aren’t the only targets. Five arson attacks were directed at a mosque in St. Paul, Minnesota, that left the Oromo American Tawhid Islamic Center “completely burned,”⁴ and the Conference of Catholic Bishops recently issued a report documenting that churches nationally are increasingly being targeted by arsonists.⁵

“We believe that a sustained effort is needed with people from different walks of life so that we can promote a United We Stand agenda,” said Scott

Richman, director of the Anti-Defamation League's (ADL) New York and New Jersey region. "When an attack occurs, our approach is to universalize the issues. We take a whole society approach. We believe that an attack is on an entire community, not just on a segment of that community."⁶

Richman cites this approach as successfully bringing to the conference table New York's governor, attorney general, the FBI, and the mayors of the New York and New Jersey towns where incidents took place—and spurring them to take action.

A similar steadfast effort—advanced with arduous behind-the-scenes lobbying—was in play when an assembly of religious leaders, elected officials, and national law enforcement agents convened at the White House in Washington, DC, on Thursday, May 25, 2023, to announce the first National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism.⁷ President Joe Biden declared that his strategy "sends a clear and forceful message [that] in America, evil will not win, hate will not prevail," adding that "the venom and violence of antisemitism will not be the story of our time."⁸

The four "basic goals" of Biden's plan include: increasing awareness and understanding of antisemitism; broadening appreciation of Jewish American heritage; improving safety and security for Jewish communities; and reversing pervasive and destructive antisemitic trends by building "cross-community" solidarity and collective action to counter hate. Other groups have beefed up their existing programs: the ADL's "No Place for Hate," an educational program, has expanded to include over 1,600 schools;⁹ New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft's Foundation to Combat Antisemitism has launched an advertising effort with "It's time to stop Jewish hate" displayed on billboards across the nation.¹⁰ But awareness campaigns are not enough.

“What keeps both my congregants and me up at night,” said Rabbi Marc Katz of Temple Ner Tamid, where the January 2023 firebombing took place, “is we just don’t know when the next shoe is going to drop. We just don’t know when terror is going to be brought to our doorstep. And we cannot rally when nothing happens. We can only worry. That is why they call this terror.”¹¹

Temple Ner Tamid has implemented an aggressive security system. “We have cameras placed around the property, shatterproof windows, boulders, panic buttons,” Rabbi Katz said. “We have an armed security officer on staff. The Molotov cocktail that was tossed at our building on January 22 was quickly extinguished because we have a flame resistant door.”

Those security measures proved to be crucial to law enforcement when they reviewed video recorded by Ner Tamid’s cameras that led them to arrest a suspect a few days after the attack. In a statement, Philip R. Sellinger, the United States Attorney for the District of New Jersey, said, “No one should find that their lives are at risk by exercising their faith.”¹²

Even with these measures in place, Rabbi Katz remains concerned. “No synagogue can be 100 percent secure,” he said. “We don’t want our house of worship surrounded by a moat like the synagogue I visited in Holland that is connected to the town via a bridge.”

Michaels of the Metro West (NJ) Jewish Federation believes his community is safer precisely because of those security measures.

“The fact that the Bloomfield Police responded to the Ner Tamid firebombing within six minutes of getting the call,” Michaels said, “proves that our relationship with the police is a strong and effective one. At the federation, our slogan is: ‘Jewish Proud & Security Strong.’ We are a diverse

Jewish community; there are many that advocate a more aggressive stand. But we all agree we can no longer ignore the violence against us. We need to be prepared. This requires putting procedures in place. It requires training. It's not 'one and done.' Our call to action: engage everyone in our community and encourage them to report to the authorities what they see and hear."

Michaels said the federation has a "gold standard—we advocate hiring a licensed security office on the premises for each facility." Additionally, he said there is a program to train ushers and greeters. "We want people to visit our houses of worship," Michaels concluded. "We want to welcome them. But if we don't know them, if we've never seen or met them before at any of our properties, we need to have a conversation with them first. We're talking about a friendly conversation; we want to find out about them and why they are visiting us."

The training program for ushers and greeters is one of multiple initiatives coordinated by the New Jersey Jewish Federation's security staff, according to Amy E. Keller, director of security initiatives, external affairs, for the Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey.

"Just as we say that hope is not a strategy," Keller said, "we also emphasize that [responding to attacks] is not prevention. We help put processes in place to mitigate damage and build resiliency. Our goal is to breed a culture of preparedness."¹³

Keller explained that she and her colleagues "assist in understanding the risks; some we work to mitigate, some we choose to accept. Knowing them is an important part of our security plan. The threat landscape can change quickly. It is imperative to understand it, and when you grasp what might possibly go wrong, you consider the ways in which you can respond. As

security professionals we can describe and preach [to our constituents] what they should do, but culture dictates the ‘will do’ and ‘can do.’ We try to find a balance. We try to engage in these conversations before incidents occur.”

The result of instituting these programs has had a positive community effect, Keller noted. A noticeable “strengthening of the relationship between Jewish, non-Jewish worshipers, and law enforcement personnel is a direct result of working together on a daily basis to keep our communities safe,” she said.

Bomb threats against Jewish institutions are regular occurrences. Many “swatting” threats in New Jersey and nationally turn out to be hoaxes intended to draw out a heavily armed law enforcement response (or SWAT teams), in order to divert first responders from other potential targets. Still, evidence collected by the FBI reveals a more complex issue: many incidents directed at U.S. Jewish institutions are being perpetrated by foreign antisemitic groups.¹⁴

An incident of “swatting” took place in the rural town of Florence, a suburb of Northampton, Massachusetts, when Beit Ahavah, a Reform synagogue with around 100 members, was targeted in November 2023. Housed in a historic building erected during the Civil War, Beit Ahavah shares space with Florence Congregational Church and a community arts center. Rabbi Riqi Kosovske received a bomb threat in her email. She contacted local and state law enforcement, who, working with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, determined the threat to be a hoax.¹⁵

The incident became a catalyst for the occupants to strengthen their bonds. A public showing of solidarity took place a few weeks later, when Beit Ahavah congregants and neighbors arrived at a Hanukkah celebration and

found the sanctuary colorfully transformed, draped with 150 bright ribbons, an act of inclusivity and celebration orchestrated by Senior Minister Marisa Egerstrom (MDiv '16, PhD '21). The message emblazoned on the ribbons read: "You Belong."

"I told my congregation, this is part of loving our neighbor," Egerstrom said. "We all need to develop our sense of moral agency, and to serve as moral agents in our communities. That means working together and to attain a deeper understanding of one another and how we want to behave in the world."¹⁶

In the aftermath of the firebombing of Temple Ner Tamid in New Jersey, Rabbi Katz considered a community-wide gathering as a show of support for the Jewish community. He decided against it.

"Rallies feel good for a second, but do not have a lasting effect to bring people together," he said. "What's going to make a difference, what's going to move the needle, is that you have to do the work, you have to meet people one or two at a time and engage them. That's why I show up at many interreligious and other group functions. I make my presence known. I offer support and I solicit support. That's what's going to make a difference in the long run."

Esra Tozan, who hails from Turkey, is a member of Peace Island Institute in Bloomfield. "I feel our generation can make a difference," she said. "At Peace Island Institute, we bring people together. Rabbi Katz is one of us. We have a strong connection with him. We act on that connection and stand up for one another."¹⁷

A similar bond has been forged between Ner Tamid and the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) group in the nearby township of

Montclair. AAPI works in the schools and lobbies the New Jersey legislature toward educating communities about diverse cultures as a way to stem the rise in hate crimes against Asians in the state.

“We’ve banded together to fight bigotry and to work across cross-cultural channels,” said Jeffrey Chang, a lawyer who serves on AAPI’s board of directors. “Rabbi Katz has invited us to be part of the Ner Tamid community. When we experience racism or hostilities, it takes all of us to call it out. And from there, we take action, and lend support where it’s needed.”¹⁸

While Rabbi Katz acknowledges progress has been made in Bloomfield, Montclair, and adjacent New Jersey towns, and says he is heartened by the community alliances he has made, he is also aware of unseen forces hell-bent on destroying what he and his neighbors are painstakingly laboring to cultivate. “I receive email alerts, for example, that there is a strange car idling in a parking lot near the synagogue, as well as other threats,” he said.

He believes that antisemitic terror will not stop.

“These shadowy hate mongers, however, need not derail our lives,” Rabbi Katz said. “Vigilance, not hope, rules the day. Every triumph, no matter how small, takes up the room in our psyche that was once full of our anxieties. We need to ask not what will happen tomorrow but what we can do today. Then, when tomorrow comes, we arrive, realizing we have been so busy fixing our broken world that we had no time to be afraid.”¹⁹

Notes:

1. Anti-Defamation League, “[ADL Reports Unprecedented Rise in Antisemitic Incidents Post-Oct. 7](#),” December 11, 2023: “more than 2,000 incidents reported in U.S. since Hamas massacre, a 337-percent increase.”

2. Thomas Michaels, interview with the author, May 22, 2023.
3. Christine Chung, “Molotov Cocktail Hurlled at a New Jersey Synagogue, Police Say,” *New York Times*, January 29, 2023.
4. Claire Fahy, “‘Living in Fear’: Arson Is the Latest in a String of Attacks on Minnesota Mosques,” *New York Times*, May 21, 2023.
5. U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2023 report: “Arson, Vandalism, and Other Destruction of Catholic Churches in the United States.”
6. Scott Richman, interview with the author, May 18, 2023.
7. The White House, *The U.S. National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism*, May 2023.
8. Darlene Superville, “Biden Releases New Strategy to Tackle Rise in Antisemitism,” AP News, May 26, 2023.
9. See ADL, NoPlace for Hate website, www.adl.org/no-place-hate.
10. Sonel Cutler, “Jewish Group Launches Effort to Fight Hate, Raise Awareness,” *Boston Globe*, May 16, 2023.
11. Rabbi Marc Katz, interview with the author, May 5, 2023.
12. Tracey Tully, “Man Is Charged with Firebombing a New Jersey Synagogue,” *New York Times*, February 1, 2023.
13. Amy E. Keller, interview with the author, January 3, 2024.
14. Riley Hoffman and Josh Margolin, “Nationwide Swatting Spree Targeting Jewish Institutions Appears Coordinated, Coming from Outside” ABC News, December 19, 2023.
15. Brooke Hauser, “Streaming Solace, Support: Bomb Threat Binds Christian, Jewish Congregations in Fellowship,” *Boston Globe*, December 19, 2023.
16. Rev. Marisa Egerstrom, interview with the author, January 4, 2024.
17. Esra Tozan, interview with by the author, May 16, 2023.
18. Jeffrey Chang, interview with the author, May 18, 2023.
19. Marc Katz, “My Synagogue Was Attacked, but That’s Not What Scares Me the Most,” *New York Times*, April 23, 2023.

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