

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

on

*The Nonprofit Security Grant Program and Protecting
Houses of Worship:
A View from the American Jewish Community*

Before a Joint Hearing of the
Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response and Recover
And the
Subcommittee on Intelligence and Counterterrorism

of the
Committee on Homeland Security
U.S. House of Representatives

February 8, 2022

Via Video Conference

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

on

*The Nonprofit Security Grant Program and Protecting Houses of Worship:
A View from the American Jewish Community*

Before a Joint Hearing of the
Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response and Recover

And the

Subcommittee on Intelligence and Counterterrorism

Of the

Committee on Homeland Security

U.S. House of Representatives

February 8, 2022

Via Video Conference

Chairwoman Demings, Chairwoman Slotkin, Ranking Member Cammack, Ranking Member Pfluger, thank you for the opportunity to share some thoughts with you this morning.

This is the first time I have appeared before a congressional committee, and it's great to see so many fellow Texans on the subcommittees. I would like to take a moment, before turning to the substance of my remarks, to publicly thank Chairwoman Slotkin for her kind introduction and, even more, for her thoughtful

outreach to my family during and after that traumatic day. I know it was a source of great comfort.

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.

And 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. Antisemitic attacks and incidents in every form have increased throughout the country. There's a lot of concern in the Jewish community. We're struggling. 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.

And for those of us from Texas, we remember the horrific bloodshed at the Sutherland Springs church -- where 26 people were murdered in the deadliest mass shooting in Texas history and the deadliest shooting in a place of worship in the U.S. No one should fear gathering to pray or celebrate or mourn or connect in their spiritual home.

All of us need to feel safe in our sacred space and our communities – and too many people, of every background, don't always feel safe. And that's heartbreaking. And that's our reality. Even though the chances are so remote that violence will be visited upon any one congregation – our recent past has shown that tragedy and trauma can happen. That's our harsh reality and it's been our harsh reality. And we can't ignore that reality. We have to confront it.

That means we all have to be prepared. Preparation does not mean we expect calamity or live in fear of disaster. Preparation means that we will have the resources and policies and training to reduce the chances of a tragic event and increase the chances of surviving the worst.

This is why my emotions are mixed this morning. 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.

So many things went right even as we were confronted by such violence. And government support has been invaluable. That’s why I appreciate this opportunity to be with you this morning to thank you and your colleagues for the support and funding you have provided to help secure our congregations. It has been, literally, lifesaving. At the same time, it is tragically clear the need is far greater than the current funding can address, and slight alterations will make a world of difference.

I am so grateful that six years ago, almost to the day, I attended the Faith Based Security Summit that was hosted by the FBI, Homeland Security, and our region’s US Attorney’s Office. 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 so grateful that just a few months after the Security Summit, Mike Finfer, our current congregational President, formed our first Security Subcommittee. Their work 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 knew us. All of 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 so 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

As grateful as I am for the support and funding under the Nonprofit Security Grant Act, my understanding is that the funding is not at a level where it can meet the urgent needs of the communities it was created to protect. Every congregation needs to be prepared, yet the gap between the need and funding is profound: In 2021 fewer than half of Nonprofit Security Grant Program applications were approved.²

Further complicating the situation, it is also my understanding that if an institution does not receive a much-needed security grant, there is no indication of where their application fell short. Without feedback, it’s impossible to improve the application for the future. That’s disheartening at a time when religious institutions need reassurance and support. Perhaps FEMA or the appropriate agency could be required to provide some type of response to a grant application. I know that would impose an additional burden, which would need to be alleviated by additional funding.

Others who have a better picture of the national situation will speak to you this morning; I want to add a few thoughts from the perspective of a small congregation.

Small congregations – which are most congregations in all faiths across the county – face special challenges in dealing with government grants. We have two paid staff – a part time Administrative Assistant and myself. Almost all of the work of running our congregation is done by our members, as volunteers. It typically takes all their efforts to keep the lights on and the synagogue running. Filling out extensive forms and finding the information they require is typically more than they can handle. Many small congregations don’t even apply because they see the paperwork requirements and they admit defeat. We were fortunate that we

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 Marc Rod, “Fewer Than Half of NSGP Grant Applications Approved for 2021,” JewishInsider, July 28, 2021. Available at <https://jewishinsider.com/2021/07/less-than-half-of-nsgp-grant-applications-approved-for-2021/>

happened to have a very capable volunteer who was able to dedicate an incredible amount of time to our effort to secure a grant. I understand the need for accountability and fraud prevention. Perhaps just as the IRS provides “short forms” for small organizations, FEMA and other agencies could do the same here or find another way to lower the barriers for smaller congregations.

For while small congregations might not have the resources to fill out all of the paperwork, a small congregation is a special place that needs your support and your protection. There’s always a gap between our ideal and our reality, and at a small congregation that gap can be quite wide. The ideal would be to have at least one volunteer outside of locked doors to welcome attendees and at least one volunteer inside to let people in. That would be a stretch goal for us when it’s not COVID, and during COVID, it just wasn’t a possibility. We only had three congregants show up in person a few weeks ago.

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.”³

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

³ Isaiah 56:7

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 CBI? 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.

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.

And right now, there are far too many houses of worship that are just beginning the process we started six years ago.

Right now, there are far too many houses of worship that have developed plans and are counting on the Nonprofit Security Grant Program to put them into place and help them feel more secure in their spiritual home.

Right now, there are far too many houses of worship who won't get the support they need.

Tragically, we live in a world where those houses of worship need protection. 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 Tarfon⁴ that we aren't obligated to complete the work, but we can't neglect it. I'm not asking to fix everything, but increasing funding for and making appropriate adjustments to the Nonprofit Security Grant Program would be an incredibly positive step in the right direction.

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

⁴ *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of Our Ancestors), 2:16