Senator Marsha Blackburn
Questions for the Record to Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker

1. You credited security summits and workshops hosted by several agencies and law enforcement for helping you act and respond to the situation. How can federal agencies and local law enforcement work with synagogues and places of worship to better prepare them for targeted attacks?

   Thank you for this important question. It is a terrible thing that houses of worship need to be prepared for targeted attacks. It's important to put this question in the context of how we can be prepared for any emergency.

   I first learned about the importance of congregations developing of an Emergency Action Plan at the FBI workshop I attended in 2016. Less than a year later, I attended a workshop on how to create such a plan that was offered by our local Police Department (PD). The creation of such a plan paved the way for us to hold active shooter and situational awareness sessions. It led to FBI walkthroughs and Colleyville PD walkthroughs of our building – so officers could know the layout of our facility and provide advice for security improvements. It also made us think through fire drills, tornado drills, medical emergencies, and a variety of other emergency scenarios.

   Such workshops by both federal agencies and local law enforcement helped move us on a good path towards preparation. In addition, Federal agencies have unique resources and can bring them to bear in these situations. In practice, that means they can provide helpful intelligence, outstanding training, and essential funding for security (both capital and operational).

   When things are working right – and I am so glad to say that they were indeed working right in Colleyville – local law enforcement can offer an unparalleled knowledge of the local situation. That includes, certainly, the local "chatter," but, even more so, the block-by-block breakdown of a city. They can build, and maintain, deep relationships with houses of worship. In our case, it was tremendously important that the local law enforcement knew our building and were able to make their plans based on that knowledge.

2. Before the attack in January, had you or any other Rabbis you may have spoken to observed increasing threats against synagogues?

   There was no specific threats that would have predicted the January 15 attack on our spiritual home. At the same time, there has been an increase in antisemitic incidents, including far too many directed at synagogues. In recent years, the entire Jewish world was shaken by the attacks in Pittsburgh and Poway (CA) and there have been other, less bloody, incidents as well.

The ADL's most recent Audit of Antisemitic Incidents in the United States recorded more than 2,100 acts of assault, vandalism and harassment, an increase of 12 percent over the previous year. This is the highest level of antisemitic incidents since ADL's tracking began in 1979. The year included five fatalities directly linked to antisemitic violence and another 91 individuals targeted in physical assaults. The ADL's website includes a tracker, which is updated nearly every day, of antisemitic incidents.

3. What steps have your community and law enforcement taken in response to these threats?

I have described some of the key law enforcement activities in response to Question 1 above: funding, training, intelligence, local relationship building. All of those are critical, all are ongoing, and all need to be done on a larger scale.

In our community, we continue to make security improvements. We've recently installed a security fence and increased lighting in our parking lot thanks to the Nonprofit Security Grant Program. We have uniformed officers at every event. Security cameras, locked doors, pre-registration of guests and members are necessary and important. But they are not without a cost. I do worry that we run the risk of building walls that will keep out those who are genuinely seeking religious connection. Because they weren't members and didn't register in advance, we recently turned away the parents of one of our past board presidents. That's not where we want to be. I am taking the liberty of attaching, for the record, a recent essay of mine published in the New York Times on this last point.

Questions for the Record from Senator Charles E. Grassley
Hearing on "Combating the Rise in Hate Crimes"
March 8, 2022

Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker
Congregation Beth Israel
Colleyville, TX

1) How would you advise congregations to engage in building relationships with their local police departments?

Thank you, Senator Grassley, for this important question. It is difficult to respond without acknowledging that in many communities, the relationships between congregations and the local police department are not in a good place. For the safety of all, it is incumbent upon both to work together to get to know each other and that should be encouraged on all levels.

The mayor and local government can assist in this effort. In our case, stronger relationships were developed when Mayor Richard Newton of Colleyville organized quarterly meetings of a Ministerial Alliance that included religious institutions, city officials, police, and fire. In addition, let me offer four suggestions.

First, I think that congregations must be proactive. Local police departments are overwhelmed. They can and should offer an open invitation or community workshops, but unless congregations make the first move, working relationships are unlikely to develop. In my experience such outreach is almost always welcomed and appreciated.

Second, and closely related to the first, congregations must affirmatively ensure that law enforcement is aware of the patterns of activity at the congregation. Is there a religious school that meets on Sunday morning? Is the largest service Friday night? Saturday morning? And the congregation much communicate clearly about any and all special events and major holidays when increased activity can be expected.

Third, there is no substitute for both commanders and police who patrol the area on a regular basis spending time in the congregation's building. We set up a walk through where they had a chance to see the inside layout of the building and they gave us advice on possible security challenges. Such interactions were invaluable. Their knowledge of the physical layout of the building was pivotal in our case.

Fourth, personal relationships are critical. I had direct contact with the Police Chief during the incident and that was incredibly valuable. Does the closest precinct or the FBI Field Office know how to reach the Rabbi or synagogue Executive Director after hours? In addition to 911, do the synagogue leaders have a police contact they can count on reaching in an emergency? And while this doesn't involve the congregation, I was told by a member

of law enforcement that without the positive working relationship between the local PD and the FBI, we might have had a different outcome. Increasing trust and relationships between those institutions would also have a significant impact.

From:	mark@hambletoncove.com
To:	Dubbs, Kara (Judiciary)
Subject:	RE: Questions for the 03/08/22 Record - Senate Committee on the Judiciary
Date:	Wednesday, 13 April, 2022 13:55:37
Attachments:	Grassley QFRs for Hate Crimes Hearing with answers - CCW edits FINAL.docx Cytron-Walker QFR with answers - CCW edits FINAL.docx nytimes oped.docx

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Kara,

Rabbi Cytron-Walker's answers to the QFR's are attached, as is one piece he refers to and would like included in the record.

Thank you for your patience.

Mark

Mark J. Pelavin
Founder and Principal,
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Located in St. Michaels, MD (Eastern Time)

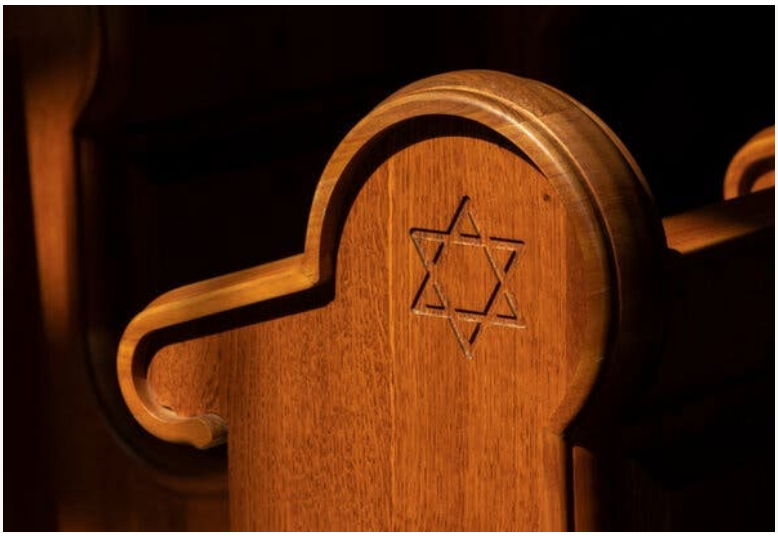
The New York Times

OPINION

GUEST ESSAY

My Synagogue Was Attacked, but I Will Never Stop Welcoming the Stranger

Feb. 23, 2022



Credit...Izzet Keribar/Stone, via Getty Images

By Charlie Cytron-Walker

Rabbi Cytron-Walker leads Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas.

Some teachings, such as, “Love your neighbor” or, “Care for your community,” are shared by almost every religious or ethical practice. From an evolutionary standpoint, that makes sense: In the long run, the group does better than the individual.

But welcoming strangers, let alone caring for them, does not come naturally. I was reminded recently that our brains aren’t wired for it. Strangers are, by definition, unknown. The unknown often generates fear. Strangers, in this context, are harmful.

All people should enjoy a sense of safety in their sacred space. But too many people, of many backgrounds, don't always feel safe. My congregants and I know this well and we are all grateful to be alive.

On Jan. 15, a gunman entered our synagogue and demanded the release of a woman being held at a nearby federal prison. During the 10 hours I spent held hostage by this terrorist, all the anxiety and fear that many Jewish people live with on a daily basis were realized. No one should live like this — not the congregants of the Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, S.C., and not the members of Sikh temples or mosques that have been vandalized or our small synagogue in Texas, the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh or the Chabad synagogue of Poway, Calif.

What happened to us at Beth Israel in Colleyville is only the most recent, dramatic event. Even before the Jan. 15 attack on my synagogue, many Jewish people were on edge. Antisemitic attacks have increased in recent years. Hatred has already led to harassment and even bloodshed in too many houses of worship. These problems have been with us for far too long.

At least part of the problem is because we, ourselves, are strangers. Jews are strangers. Muslims are strangers. People with a different religious tradition — or no religious tradition — are perceived as strangers. People of different ethnicities can be considered strangers. People who hold different political views are seen as strangers. We're strangers because one can look from afar and make judgments without understanding another's reality. We're strangers because it takes too much work to be curious, to give others the benefit of the doubt. It is a lot easier and a lot more comfortable to stick with one's group. "Love your neighbor" is hard enough.

And that's why I, and so many other religious leaders, have pointed out again and again the sacred obligation to love the stranger. The command to care for the stranger is mentioned at least 36 times in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible — more than any other mitzvah. It's mentioned so often because we need the reminder, because it isn't natural. It is hard. Just getting past the notion of fearing the stranger is a big enough hurdle.

I stress this teaching and try to live by this ethos even after living through a hostage situation — where every minute feels like it could be your last. I understand the temptation to seek comfort solely in those one knows and trusts. My congregants and I spent over 10 hours with a gun pointed at us in our sacred home.

Adding to the agony, I opened the doors of my synagogue and unknowingly welcomed the individual who would later attack me and my fellow congregants. That I opened the door will always weigh heavily on me. Still, I remain committed to the idea of welcoming and caring for the stranger and living that value.

I do not offer this teaching out of naïveté. We all have a responsibility to understand the context in which we live. Understanding does not mean that we expect calamity or live in a perpetual state of fear. We have a need for security action plans and preparation in

case the worst happens. I've participated in, and helped organize, far too many vigils after acts of intentional hatred and violence; gathering after gathering of mourning.

That is our current reality. I believe with all my heart and soul that we can — and must — change this reality. That goes back to caring for the stranger — caring enough that we're willing to meet and talk with those who are different from ourselves. Caring enough to know that while our experiences may not be the same, and we will probably disagree, we are human beings with something to teach and something to learn. This is not easy. And right now, it feels countercultural.

Many parts of Judaism are countercultural — especially the instruction that we do what is right, not what is easy. When it comes to the care with which we are supposed to treat other people, those teachings cross religious and cultural boundaries.

We know that not everyone will meet us here now, but neither can we step away from the work. All of us have a share in it. It means clergy and community leaders from every background meeting with curiosity, to share our traditions and our lives. It means gathering communities of faith together with those who don't practice a religion, with a desire to listen, learn and the opportunity to build new relationships. This isn't just theoretical. In Colleyville and the surrounding area, more than 20 groups already meet to do this work under the umbrella Peace Together. We began gathering after Charlottesville as a mass effort to build relationships.

In the last few weeks, my congregation and I received an outpouring of love and support from strangers the world over. If we begin with that love of the stranger, but offer it not in response to violence, but encouraged by empathy, we might just change our world.

Charlie Cytron-Walker is the rabbi for Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas.