

Antisemitism and Jewish Safety

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We are at a painful moment in American Jewish history. On the very evening of October 7th – when 1,195 human beings in Israel were murdered by Hamas and 251 additional human beings were taken hostage – chants advocating the erasure of Israel from the world map resonated around the world. Since that fateful day, many in the Jewish community have simply felt besieged. Acts of vandalism that once marked the apogee of American antisemitism, the [desecration](#) of synagogues and cemeteries, were the canary in the coalmine as they rose by [20%](#); since October 7th, 2023, [FBI data](#) on antisemitic hate crimes and incidents shows a 200-300% increase. [College campuses](#) have become hotbeds of anti-Israel and even, in some cases, anti-Jewish activities.

Jewish organizations and [federal agencies](#) alike have noted the rise of these and other antisemitic assaults – warnings that reached their culmination in the murder of Jews in [Washington, D.C. and Boulder, Colorado, this year](#). Amid these unfolding horrors, Jews perceive a lack of support from other communities, which has been [documented](#) to add harm to our communal spirit, as our very real trauma remains invalidated by much of the world.

The question on the minds of many Jewish communities, as we both welcome the season of the High Holy Days and anticipate the second anniversary of the October 7th slaughter, is: where do we go from here? How, in this current environment of escalating animosity towards Jews and Judaism, do we find security for our community?

To address that essential issue, we must honestly evaluate what we have done to date to secure the Jewish community. We need to be honest about what might have helped but certainly hasn't *worked*. It is understandably tempting to think that physical security will forestall attacks on the Jewish community, or that our tradition of interfaith dialogue will halt the spread of harmful antisemitic narratives. But we need to evaluate those premises.



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We can learn cautionary tales of dollars spent on physical security from the wider world: [RAND estimates](#) that the US collectively spends \$20.5B on physical security in K-12 settings, and sadly, school shootings have increased linearly since the Columbine tragedy in 1999. Our instincts are to protect our children and our communities, but there is no volume of cameras or guards that will, by themselves, decrease the violence. And so, in painful fashion, we must admit that the millions of dollars spent on securitizing Jewish spaces since the Tree of Life massacre in Pittsburgh in 2018 has only moved the location of Jewish attacks from *inside* our institutions to *outside* their doors. Building bollards and barricades — setting aside the psychological harm they do to our community by increasing our sense of vulnerability — have literally only moved attacks to the other side of our security stations. In the last five years alone, the hallmark federal program that funds *physical* synagogue security — the Nonprofit Security Grant Program — has increased its funding from [\\$180 million to over \\$430 million](#). Yet fewer people feel as safe now as they did when the program started. Securitizing our sanctuaries does little to change the growing landscape of antisemitism running rampant on our streets.

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Also ineffective on any large scale are the societal interventions the Jewish community routinely undertakes both proactively to engage with others and prophylactically to proscribe antisemitism. Some Federations and JCRCs across America have routinely hosted [interfaith dialogue opportunities](#) and sent [political missions to Israel](#), with a major goal of creating more favorable attitudes towards the Jewish community. Granted, sometimes these programs are either *pro forma* or taken for granted amidst what are considered higher priorities. Yet, according to recent [PEW Polling](#), negative public opinions of Israel — which often are transferred to the Jewish community writ large — have increased from 42% to a majority 53%. Likewise, more left-leaning Jewish communities often engage in [community organizing](#) across lines of race, class, and faith both to advance the work of *tikkun olam* and to create meaningful bonds of allyship with others. Yet, in cities like DC, where the wider Jewish community actively participates in [Faith In Action's CAN](#), this has neither diminished antisemitism in the progressive community nor forestalled continuous anti-Israel demonstrations or murder. In one last act of demonstrated inefficacy, we should note the continued Jewish argument — screaming into a void, really — that slogans like [“From the River to the Sea”](#) or [“Free, Free Palestine”](#) are antisemitic, has done nothing to mitigate the widespread usage, if not spread, of these phrases.

If we want to address the issue of improving Jewish security, then we must first admit that the techniques we have tried have *not* worked. It's not that they failed, or even aren't worthwhile: they are simply, and demonstrably, insufficient to the task. The aforementioned efforts should remain part of a larger strategy for Jewish security, yet only as certain pieces of a larger puzzle. To assemble that puzzle and create a holistic picture of Jewish safety, we need to reframe

the problem of contemporary American antisemitism. First of all, we need to remember that “antisemitism from the left” and criticism of Israel that bleeds into exclusion of many Jews isn’t a by-product of October 7th; at the very least, some academics have been visibly planting seeds of this hatred [since at least 2007](#) with the first threat to exclude Israeli scholars. Secondly, we need to note that “antisemitism from the right” didn’t just appear in Charlottesville; in 1977, [Nazis marched openly](#) in the home of Holocaust survivors, Skokie. Lastly, we shouldn’t fall victim to thinking that heightened antisemitism is the result of social media; as scholar Steve Zipperstein taught in his book [Pogrom](#), new forms of communication have long accelerated antisemitic hatred.



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What *will* work? We should not pretend there are simple, quick solutions. We are *not* going to extinguish American antisemitism in one grant or any single approach. Our responses to the frightening and deadly increase in antisemitism needs to be as multifaceted and multidisciplinary as is the hate focused at us. This need to work in many arenas is why temporary solutions like stronger security and active outreach *do* matter: even if the combination of these solutions has proved inadequate to the need, combating the hatred of Jews and Judaism remains a war that must be waged on many fronts. It is only when we put all our eggs in one proverbial basket that we add heightened risk and exposure. We should continue to make Jewish spaces as safe as we can; we should continue to build relations across lines of difference for many reasons, especially, given the subject of antisemitism, to increase understanding and reduce damaging stereotypes and false narratives.

Antisemitism is a widespread social sickness. While the Jewish community has attacked the symptoms of this sickness – securing separate institutions from attack, engaging individual leaders, taking on a misleading slogan – we must attempt to create a public health solution to a societal sickness.

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Applying a public health approach to mitigating antisemitism (or any [form of targeted violence](#)) means creating a suite of protections against this hatred, testing those interventions, and employing successful interventions nationally. To begin with, adopting this approach could provide the Jewish community with sorely needed internal resources. Creating and testing toolkits for understanding, preventing, and responding to antisemitism – which should definitely include a rapid response guide – would fill a noticeable gap. Likewise, training modules should be created (and improved through testing) for leaders and communities; this could include workshops to understand the history and currency of antisemitic thought or curated curricular guides for [noticing and responding to early signs](#) of radicalization and hate.

While these resources would be invaluable within the Jewish community, effective public-health interventions must demonstrably engage the wider community. Here, rigorous academic testing – not just market research – is essential. The *Foundation to Combat Antisemitism* launched a [\\$25 million ad campaign](#) this year: for all the statistics the Foundation [enumerates](#), measurement of how those millions moved even a single mind are not mentioned. PSA campaigns [can](#) make an impact; we should hold Jewish PSA campaigns to standards of accountability, and improve them if they fail to reach their goals.

Public health work is not only about wider campaigns. [Guides for communities and educators](#) exist to promote tobacco cessation, more commonly known as [highly effective](#) anti-smoking public health campaigns. In one example, some Jews walk out of a conversation anytime anything antisemitic is mentioned while others sometimes let a questionable phrase pass by in the name of communal unity: which is appropriate? Which actually is effective in mitigating antisemitism? How do we know? A well-researched and tested guide could be invaluable in giving us real answers to those questions.

In another example, Americans are accustomed to freedom of expression and freedom of religion: How, then, should Jews respond when a university department on [Race, Diaspora, and Indigeneity](#) does not include an expert in Jewish history on its 18-person faculty? How should the Jewish community treat a [national megachurch leader](#) who is both supportive of the State of Israel and harbors and abides antisemitism? It's not only that the Jewish community could benefit from guidance on these very real-world issues. It's *also* that public-health-style resources, tested thoroughly before widespread implementation, guide people towards productive and healthy outcomes.

For example, despite last year's efforts to claim that the slogan "Free Free Palestine" was a "[license to kill](#)," [research in political extremism has proven](#) that attempts to demonize or even outlaw slogans only strengthens the resolve (and often the resources) of hateful communities.

Public health lessons on extremism don't just suggest—they instruct: Banning speech is a counterproductive tactic. How much more could the Jewish community learn about countering antisemitism if it were committed not to being right, not to being outspoken, but to researching methods that work best and disseminating those techniques widely?

It is true that, as ineffective as they are at mitigating the rise of antisemitism, the Jewish community needs to continue to look to its immediate physical and psychological security. At the same time, a good look in the mirror demonstrates that the Jewish community needs an entirely new set of tools to change the American environment in which antisemitism is thriving. Many of these resources need to be developed; [some already exist](#), but call for wider deployment. The NSGP can equip a JCC with upgraded technology and SCN can train the staff of a Jewish institution on how to protect themselves and others from attack: *neither does a single thing to prevent an attack*. As a matter of fact, very little — and precious less that has had its effectiveness undergo testing — has been done to prevent antisemitism from spreading. Those who take Jewish safety seriously must widen the scope of their efforts; that broader approach must adopt a public health approach to reducing antisemitism. Jews do not feel secure when the hatred of Jews is at all-time highs.

Extinguishing the flames that fan that hatred, suffocating the spread of antisemitism from the left and right and center: these will make every Jew in America feel more secure.

RECOMMENDATIONS



- **Invest in a wide range of community resources**, rigorously researched and tested, covering topics such as: a rapid-response guide; best practices for protection from antisemitic activity; toolkits for communication on issues antisemitism; and guides for clergy and youth leaders for responding to signs of radicalization.
- **Align public awareness campaigns**, centering them on messaging that is proven through research to impact antisemitic thought and action
- **Develop protocols for engagement** with academic and evangelical communities that can make demonstrable shifts in antisemitic attitudes, speech, programs, and curricula.

In sum, in this age of rampant antisemitism, the Jewish community should begin to invest its time and resources in a public health approach to work more holistically towards Jewish safety.