

## Securing the Sanctuary

### *Shabbat T'rumah 5784*

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Rabbi Barry H. Block

“Gold, silver, and copper,” God says to Moses. Tell the people to bring these gifts to “build Me a sanctuary, and I will dwell among them.” Only the finest materials are suitable for the sacred tabernacle where the people will meet their God. “Blue, purple, and crimson yarns” may sound pedestrian, easy enough to buy at any fabric store, but the dyes required to produce those colors were luxuries in the ancient world.<sup>i</sup>

Our Talmudic sages urge us to observe the *mitzvah*, the religious obligation, of *hiddur mitzvah*, beautifying the performance of Jewish rituals.<sup>ii</sup> The architects who designed Congregation B'nai Israel took that injunction seriously, creating a magnificent modern edifice to glorify God.

Here, they started with the natural beauty of a wooded property, which the architects brought into our worship space through a wall of windows. The fabrics and colors they chose for the ark tapestry and the design of the ark gate inspire reverence for the Ten Commandments and evoke God’s presence in the wilderness, symbolized by the pillar of cloud that would become a column of fire at night.

Security might also have been a concern for the wilderness tabernacle—and later, the Jerusalem Temple. The tribes encamped around the portable sanctuary throughout their desert wanderings, protecting it from any evildoer who might encroach. The Temple was built atop Jerusalem’s highest hill, a military advantage in the ancient world.

Fast-forward to the 1970s. This edifice was built with the living memory of Civil Rights era bomb threats at a Temple exposed at the corner of two busy downtown thoroughfares. Perhaps Temple leaders thought that a less prominent location would be safer. They built a synagogue that would not be very visible from the road, and the sign out on Rodney Parham would charitably be described as modest. Even having a sign at all might have been somewhat controversial, calling too much attention to the location.

When I was a young rabbi, synagogues did not typically have officers onsite, except on special occasions to control traffic. 9/11 began to change all that, though back then, the threat was not particularly against Jewish people and institutions. Synagogues began to install cameras—and if they did not yet have them, alarm systems—but most did not remodel their facilities to make them safer.

Bomb threats in the Civil Rights era notwithstanding, our predecessors at the era this building was constructed did not face the dangers that we must reckon with. The ADL reported more than thirty-five hundred antisemitic incidents in 2022, an increase of thirty-six percent from 2021.<sup>iii</sup> Totals for 2023 aren't available yet, but they are sure to be worse, since ADL recorded over two thousand antisemitic incidents in this country between October 7 and December 7 alone.<sup>iv</sup>

Even those horrifying statistics may not be as frightening as two incidents that shook us to our core. First, the mass murder at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh in October 2018 terrified us. Then, the hostage incident at Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas was far too close to home. We asked ourselves how well prepared we were for an active shooter incident, and we learned about how Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker's training saved lives in Colleyville, so we got ourselves trained. Jewish Federations of North America spun off an entirely separate nonprofit, Secure Community Network, to enhance safety of Jewish institutions across the continent.

Nobody seems to know how much American Jewish organizations cumulatively spend on security, but it's enough that *eJewishPhilanthropy* refers to it as an "antisemitism tax."<sup>v</sup> My friend, Rabbi Daniel Bogard of Central Reform Synagogue in St Louis, describes his local situation: "Our shul—like most Jewish congregations in America—now spends thousands of dollars a year to have a police officer by the front door, all in an attempt to keep us from being murdered when we gather as Jews in community."<sup>vi</sup>

Moses does not instruct the Israelites to bring security cameras, emergency exits, or protective film for glass, but here we are. Thanks to the diligent work of our Security Committee co-chairs Carol Parham and Brian Rosenthal and the generosity of the Ottenheimer Brothers Foundation, we have an entirely new and improved security camera system, enabling us to see what's going on throughout the facility, inside and out, and providing law enforcement access beyond our building should the unthinkable arise. We have added new emergency exits in our offices and in the library, areas where we could have been trapped by a criminal who would wish us harm. Carol and Brian have additional plans to make us more secure and have recently secured funds through Arkansas's Right to Worship Safety Grant Program. Recently, Jewish Federation of Arkansas Executive Director Marcy Paul and Temple Board Secretary Sam Kauffman traveled to Washington to lobby for the Pray Safe Act, which would provide larger grants from the federal government, an initiative that our high school students had asked our representatives in D.C. to support last January.

We must acknowledge that losses accompany security enhancements—not, thank God, losses of life or health or property, but of a measure of beauty. This building’s architects knew that our Religious School classes would always be small, so they designed interior windows to enable students in separate classrooms to see each other and experience the larger community on Sunday mornings. Now, though, opaque film covers and strengthens those windows. The installation was done nicely, and it looks good, but a lovely design element had to be sacrificed to save lives in an active shooter incident. Worse, we have abandoned our gem of a chapel. We can no longer worship there safely, with only one way in and out, up a narrow staircase or accessibility lift, a situation that can’t be remedied for love or money. Perhaps that space will be repurposed as a gallery in the future.

We have also foregone good work that our congregation could do in pursuit of our sacred mission with the thousands of dollars that have necessarily been diverted to security instead. Rabbi Bogard puts it well: “All of these costs—the financial burden, ...the time, the spiritual and emotional toll—add up, and tear us away from the sacred work that our Jewish American institutions were meant to be engaged in.” He also warns us that “for many Jews of Color, a police presence sends a very different message about what safety means, and whose safety is being valued in our spaces.”<sup>vii</sup> We are focused on that concern at Congregation B’nai Israel, and we do everything we know how to do to mitigate it.

Prayer would be insufficient to secure the sanctuary. Still, we do believe in the power of prayer. We are obligated to take concrete measures to enhance our security and also to pray that God will, in the words of our Torah portion, dwell among us. From our prayerbook, we add a plea: Let God spread a *sukkat shalom*, a shelter of peace—above us, around us, and within us. In partnership with God, let us withstand this difficult period in American Jewish life, faithful that better days lie ahead.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Exodus 25:1-8.

<sup>ii</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 133b.

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.adl.org/resources/press-release/us-antisemitic-incidents-hit-highest-level-ever-recorded-adl-audit-finds>.

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.adl.org/resources/press-release/adl-reports-unprecedented-rise-antisemitic-incidents-post-oct-7>.

<sup>v</sup> Haley Cohen, “‘Antisemitism tax’: Security costs for Jewish day school soar amidst rising threats after October 7,” *EJewishPhilanthropy*, January 19, 2024, <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/hed-antisemitism-tax-security-costs-for-jewish-day-school-soar-amid-rising-threats-after-oct-7/>.

<sup>vi</sup> Rabbi Daniel Bogard, “I’m a pulpit rabbi. This is the true cost of keeping synagogues safe,” *The Forward*, January 20, 2022, <https://forward.com/opinion/481148/im-a-pulpit-rabbi-this-is-the-true-cost-of-keeping-synagogues-safe/>.

<sup>vii</sup> Bogard.