

RABBI'S MESSAGE

Learning from Colleyville: A Lesson of Hope

A chilly Shabbat morning at a small synagogue near Dallas was interrupted by a threatening situation. Unfortunately, it was not the first time in recent history that worship was interrupted by a threat. But unlike the 2018 situation at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, the person making threats did not begin with shooting. None of the worshippers on January 15 at Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville were physically harmed. It was unquestionably a frightening ordeal that none of us would want to experience. The outcome could have been worse, and we are grateful the hostages escaped to safety.

There is much to learn from this situation, and much of it is complicated. That Shabbat morning, Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker had no intention of becoming a household name when he opened the synagogue for worship. Most of the congregation was going to view the service online and three people showed up to pray with him in person. When a man came to the door expressing a need for comfort and shelter, Rabbi Charlie followed his rabbinic instincts that teaches multiple times in Torah, "Treat the stranger as one of your own, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." The rabbi invited the man to have a warm cup of tea and to worship with the others.

In a much-publicized account, this person turned into an intruder who made threats that led to 11 hours of negotiation before the rabbi and other worshippers ran out of the synagogue to safety. I remember visiting Beth Israel three years ago for the bat mitzvah of the granddaughter of one of our congregants. I was impressed with Rabbi Charlie then, and my respect for him has grown considerably after learning about the brave actions he took to protect himself and his congregants. In his interviews, he spoke about the rapport he and the others developed with the intruder, and credits their calm civility among the factors that saved their lives. To feel threatened for that length of time is unthinkable. It is also wonderous that they were not immediately attacked. The intruder engaged with both the congregants and law enforcement, and all four people who attended synagogue for Shabbat escaped without any physical harm.

While I am extremely relieved by the outcome, I cannot honestly say, "all's well, ends well" in this case. Despite no physical harm to the hostages, it was a traumatic event that hit home in many ways. I don't want to live in fear; but I am grateful to learn from even the most frightening of situations. I was gratified that on the first Friday night after the Colleyville incident, we had one of our most numerous in-person crowds at Temple Beth Torah in a long time. There were people who said specifically that they came to temple to show support.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, of Central Synagogue in New York, was a distant participant during the situation in Colleyville. The perpetrator, thinking that Rabbi Buchdahl was powerful and influential enough to get his demands met, insisted on speaking with her on the phone. She responded to a voice message from Rabbi Charlie, called back his cell phone, and spoke with the

perpetrator twice. She actively communicated with law enforcement that supported those on site in Texas. During her Friday night sermon one week later, she thanked multiple people who had showed support, including law enforcement, political leaders and faith leaders from outside the Jewish community. Both the New York rabbi and the Texas rabbi expressed their appreciation for strong relationships and support from other faith communities. In fact, the first people who reached out to me on January 15 were Muslim and Christian colleagues demonstrating their care. It is sad and unfortunate that when a terrorist act occurs, it tends to overshadow other wonderful work and relationships between communities of difference. At the same time, when these situations happen, we see there are many others standing up for us.

In Rabbi Buchdahl's Friday night sermon, she also expressed appreciation for those who showed up to the synagogue on Shabbat (in person and online), saying, *"You are showing up not just for this congregation, but for Judaism. You are showing up for fearlessness in the face of fear...our tradition continues to push us back into community, telling us to build bridges with each other and with the general community...We cannot do it alone. Thank God, we don't have to."* She closed her remarks by quoting from the Prophets, Zechariah 9:12 *"Return to your fortresses, captives of hope."*

I would much rather be a captive of hope than a captive of fear. The Monday after the hostage situation was Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, and a large church next door to Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville opened its doors for a healing service led by Rabbi Charlie and others. He quoted Martin Luther King, saying, "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend." Then, Rabbi Charlie gave his own take on that quote. Even after his harrowing ordeal, he said, "If we live by this concept, we may have many more **friends** with whom we disagree...but we'll have more friends and fewer enemies."

In today's uncertain world, we must certainly be careful, prepared and cautious. Recent and historical events emphasize both our need to be careful and that we are not alone. With the teachings of Torah, as well as modern teachers, we continue to learn how to share the world safely.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon