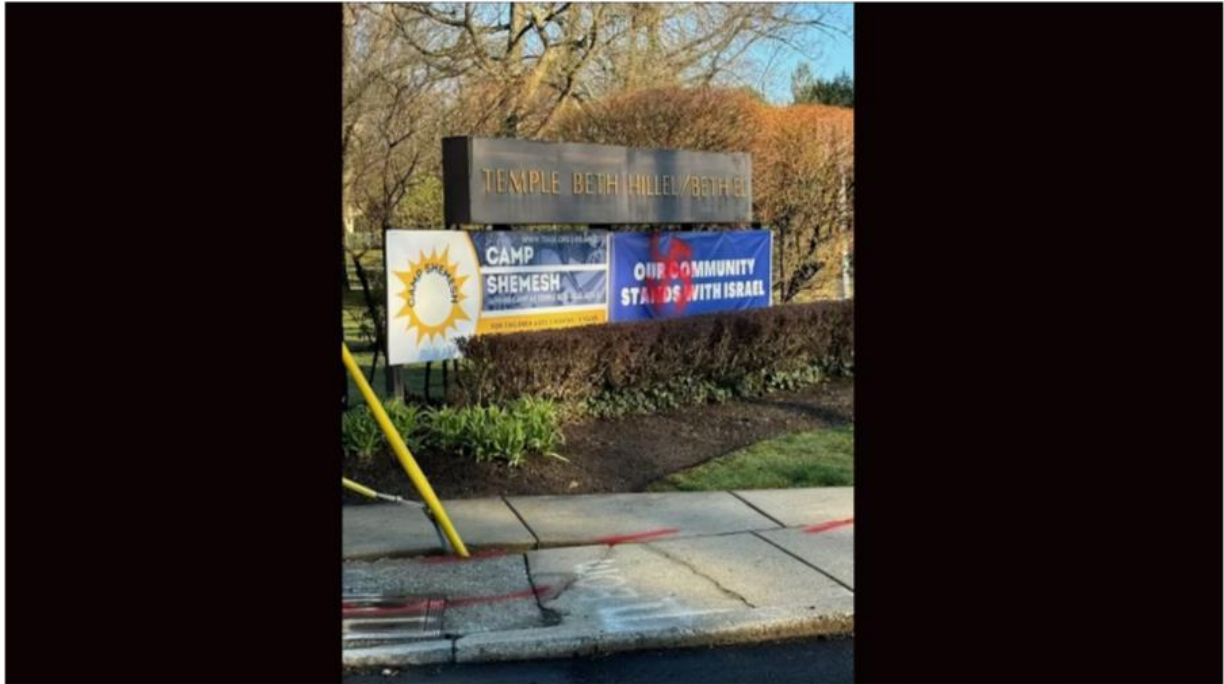


UNITED STATES

Officials condemn antisemitic and anti-Israel vandalism at 2 Philadelphia-area synagogues

BY ANDREW LAPIN APRIL 1, 2024



Swastika graffiti painted on a pro-Israel sign outside Temple Beth Hillel-Beth El in Wynnewood, Pennsylvania, March 30, 2024. It was the second incident of the sign being targeted in as many weeks. (Courtesy of Jada Eldrich)

(JTA) – Two Philadelphia-area Conservative synagogues were vandalized in similar incidents over the past several days, the latest in a growing number of Jewish institutions to be targeted since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war six months ago.

The incidents prompted rebuke from Pennsylvania’s Jewish governor, Josh Shapiro, as well as from national figures including CNN anchor Jake Tapper, who is Jewish and had his bar mitzvah at one of the targeted synagogues.

That synagogue, Temple Beth Hillel-Beth El in the suburb of Wynnewood, had a banner expressing solidarity with Israel tagged

with a swastika over the weekend. Another synagogue, Temple Beth Zion-Beth Israel in Center City, had graffiti spray-painted on the sidewalk by its entrance last week.

“This is the second message I’ve written like this in as many days. It’s two too many,” Shapiro wrote on X, formerly Twitter, Sunday while linking to a story about the Beth Hillel-Beth El graffiti. “Antisemitism and the vandalism of a house of worship of any kind have no place in this Commonwealth.”

Other Jewish institutions have been targeted across the country in the wake of the war, including in the Philadelphia region just weeks ago: “Free Gaza” graffiti was spray-painted on a Jewish-owned business in nearby Narberth on March 15. (The owner of the business is an Israeli who has relatives being held by Hamas in Gaza.) Last week federal authorities also charged a West Michigan man with damaging religious property after he spray-painted swastikas onto a Chabad house in Kalamazoo in November and defaced a large menorah posted outside the center.

But the prominence and proximity of these two synagogues made the recent incidents stand out.

“Last night someone spray painted a swastika at the synagogue where i was bar mitzvahed,” Tapper wrote on X Sunday.

It was the second time in as many weeks that Beth Hillel-Beth El’s Israel banner had been defaced. The first time the previous weekend, nondescript paint was splashed onto the banner, which reads, “Our Community Stands With Israel.” The community replaced the banner the next day and intends to do so again now that it’s been defaced for the second time, its senior rabbi told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

“Thank God the community is OK,” Rabbi Ethan Witkowsky said. “We’re shaken, but we’re strong and we’re healthy and safe.”

The synagogue’s leadership offered a more pointed rebuke of the graffiti on Facebook. “A swastika is not a commentary on the policies

of the State of Israel, nor is it a sign of solidarity with Palestinians,” they wrote over the weekend. “It is a symbol of hatred and division.”

Lynne Balaban, executive director of Temple Beth Zion-Beth Israel, said Tuesday that her synagogue had captured video of two women using stencils to spray-paint pro-Palestinian messages on the sidewalk outside the congregation’s entrance. The messages blanketed not only the sidewalk by the synagogue, but also neighboring establishments, including local businesses and a church. The synagogue submitted the video to the local police.

One of the stencils read “Ceasefire now, end the occupation, free Palestine,” while the other said, “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,” Balaban said. The latter is a disputed rallying cry that many Jews consider to be a call for the destruction of the state of Israel. Pro-Palestinian activists had held regular rallies at a square near the synagogue since Oct. 7, and have torn down posters of Israeli hostages nearby.

“In my eyes it was clearly a form of intimidation and hate,” Balaban told JTA. “That’s kind of the way we feel, that it was only a matter of time before somebody decided to do something against the synagogue.”

Andrew Goretzky, the Anti-Defamation League’s regional Philadelphia director, agreed. “As a Jewish person, when we hear ‘From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,’ we hear a threat to half of the people in the entire world who share our identity,” he told local news outlets. Approximately half of the world’s Jewish population lives in Israel.

Like Beth Hillel-Beth El, Balaban said that Beth Zion-Beth Israel has no plans to take down its pro-Israel signage as a result of this incident. She added that local businesses helped power-wash the sidewalks for free.

Authorities have not indicated whether they see the cases as connected. While Shapiro wrote on X that the Pennsylvania State Police is “coordinating with our law enforcement partners” on the incidents, a spokesperson for the state police told JTA that local

authorities had rejected their offer of help and were handling each case in their own jurisdiction. Balaban said she did not believe the two cases were connected, as they involved different kinds of vandalism.

Regardless, local Jewish leaders told JTA they appreciated the broader shows of support.

“It is heartwarming to have our officials care about this,” Witkowsky told JTA. “In many ways I think that the great fear of our community is not that someone would paint a swastika on the sign. It’s that someone would paint a swastika on the sign, and no one would care.”