



Common Sense

Being Jewish in an Unraveling America

The bad guy was killed. The good guys were saved. But the reaction to the hostage-taking in Colleyville, Texas, should alarm American Jews.

Bari Weiss January 17



The scene outside Congregation Beth Israel Synagogue in Colleyville, Texas, on January 16, 2022. (Andy Jacobsohn/AFP via Getty Images).

Last week, I met a rabbi in Los Angeles. We talked about surfing where to get the best pizza in the city and her kids and politics. At the end of the evening, she was making plans with a colleague, and they extended an invitation. Would I want to go to the shooting range with them next weekend?

I thought about the rabbi with her guns a lot over this Shabbat, as Jews who had gathered for services at Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas, were taken hostage by a man named Malik Faisal Akram. After nearly 11 hours, thanks to earthly miracles of law enforcement and perhaps heavenly ones as well, they were freed unharmed. Akram, who had predicted his own death in his rantings captured on Facebook livestream, was dead.

The bad guy was killed. The good guys were saved. It doesn't often turn out that way. All the Jews I know—even the atheists—are thanking God.

But why, despite my gratitude, do I feel so much rage? Why does it feel like there is so little comfort to be found? What has changed?

I did not feel this way in the horrific aftermath of the Tree of Life massacre—the most lethal in all of American Jewish history.

Back then, in October 2018, it felt like the whole country grasped that a wound to the Tree of Life was a wound to the Tree of Liberty itself. That the monstrous attack in my hometown was not simply an attack on Jews, but an attack on our collective home. And that what was at stake in standing up against the deranged, conspiratorial mindset that led a neo-Nazi to the synagogue that morning was nothing less than America itself.

What I now see is this: In America captured by tribalism and dehumanization, in an America swept up by ideologies that pit us against one another in a zero-sum game, in an America enthralled with the poisonous idea that some groups matter more than others, not all Jews—and not all Jewish victims—are treated equally. What seems to matter most to media pundits and politicians is not the Jews themselves, but the identities of their attackers.

And it scares me.

The attack in Texas, the reaction to it, and the widespread willingness in our culture to judge violent acts based on their political utility, augurs a darkening reality for the six million Jews living in what the Founders insisted was a new Jerusalem. And for that new Jerusalem itself.

I first felt that sinking realization three years ago on a freezing day in Jersey City. If you don't think "Jews" when you hear that place name, it's because the murder of Jews that happened there in 2019 did not inspire the same national solidarity that enveloped Pittsburgh.

On December 10 that year, David Anderson and Francine Graham shot up a kosher supermarket on a street named for the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, killing three people in the process. We were very lucky the toll wasn't higher. Just to the left of the supermarket is a *cheder*, a school for Jewish children. Federal officials discovered a bomb in the killers' van powerful enough to kill and maim people five football fields away.

The pair hated cops and they hated Jews, a sentiment apparently driven by the twisted ideology of the Black Hebrew Israelites, who believe that they are the real Jews and that the real Jews are pretenders. Jews are "imposters who inhabit synagogues of Satan," Anderson [wrote](#) on social media. "They stole our heritage, they stole our birthright" Anderson said, before he murdered a young mother named Mindy Ferencz, a young man named Moshe Deutsch, and a 49-year-old Ecuadorian clerk who worked at the deli, Douglas Miguel Rodriguez. (They [murdered](#) a police officer and father of five named Joseph Seals earlier in the day.)

The day after the shooting, I went to the supermarket to do some reporting for a column I expected to publish. Unlike in Pittsburgh, there was not a single flower or condolence card. Just broken glass, and Hasidic Jews working with construction workers to

board up the ransacked building, which was riddled with bullet holes. There were no television cameras.

No one in my social media feeds, to say nothing of mainstream reporters, wanted to look very hard at the killers' motives or at the responses among some members of the community. In [one video](#) I came across, a local woman said that her “children are stuck at school because of Jew shenanigans. They are the problem . . . I blame the Jews. We never had a shooting like this until they came.”

Joan Terrell-Paige, a school official in the city, explained on her Facebook page that the murderers effectively had no choice. The Jews (she called them “brutes”) had caused their killers to murder them. “I believe they knew they would come out in body bags,” she wrote of the killers. “What is the message they were sending? Are we brave enough to explore the answer to their message? Are we brave enough to stop the assault on the Black communities of America?”

The governor of the state and the mayor of Jersey City called for Terrell-Paige's resignation, but until [earlier this month](#), she remained in her job. Shortly after the attack, John Flora, a Democrat running for Congress [described](#) her comments as “an invitation for the entire city to discuss honestly what led up to such a horrific event,” going on to talk about various ills like gentrification.

I want you to imagine if, in the wake of the Walmart massacre in El Paso of August 2019, which left 23 dead and 23 others injured, a serious person—a politician—took the shooter's complaint about a “Hispanic invasion of Texas” seriously.

When eleven Jews who look like me were shot by a white supremacist in Pittsburgh, it was a clean story. Here was unadulterated evil mowing down the innocent. But Jews dressed in black hats and strange clothes with obscure accents? The ones

in Jersey City or in Monsey or Crown Heights or Williamsburg or Borough Park?

These are imperfect victims. They are forgotten and overlooked because they are not the right kind of Jews. And because they weren't beaten or killed by the right kind of antisemites.

Neither was the hostage-taker in Colleyville, Texas. Malik Faisal Akram wasn't white, and he didn't talk about the Nazis or Hitler. He talked instead about the injustice done to his Aafia Siddiqui, a jihadi who is serving an 86-year sentence at a Texas prison for [assaulting](#) U.S. officers and employees with an M-4 rifle.

During her trial, Siddiqui told the judge she did not want anyone with "a Zionist or Israeli background" on the jury and suggested that they be subject to "genetic testing." As jurors left the courtroom at the end of the trial, Siddiqui said: "This is a verdict coming from Israel, not America. That's where the anger belongs."

Siddiqui is a committed Jew hater. But in its coverage of the Colleyville hostage-taking, the Associated Press [made no mention](#) of any of this. Instead, the AP dutifully quoted the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), an organization whose executive director, Zahra Billoo, gave a speech in November railing against "Zionist synagogues" and blaming Zionists for Islamophobia and other ills. "Oppose the vehement fascists, but oppose the polite Zionists, too. They are not your friends," she said. "When we talk about Islamophobia and Zionism let's be clear about the connections."

The AP doesn't mention that either.

Perhaps it's unfair to single out the AP when the special agent in charge of the FBI Dallas Field Office had this to say: "We do believe from our engagement with this subject that he was singularly focused on one issue, and it was not specifically related

to the Jewish community, but we are continuing to work to find the motive.”

Imagine the FBI suggesting, in the wake of the murder of nine black parishioners at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church by Dylann Roof, that it wasn't specifically related to the black community.

National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [did call](#) the event an “act of terrorism” and an “act of antisemitism” on television this Sunday. But his notable exception proves the rule. His boss, President Joe Biden, could not manage to describe what any normal person could see:



The Post Millennial

@TPostMillennial

Biden: "I don't think there is sufficient information to know why he targeted that synagogue why he insisted on the release of someone who's been in prison for over 10 years... why he was using anti-Semitic & anti-Israeli comments."



January 16th 2022

815 Retweets **1,823** Likes

It's not difficult to gin up outrage these days, yet you will not find celebrities or sports stars or influencers making #colleyville or #antisemitism go viral. Meanwhile, members of our so-called intelligentsia are claiming the real victims are not those innocent Jews held hostage, but Muslims who could face Islamophobia-inspired violence:



Wajahat Ali

@WajahatAli

You're about to hear some ugly & vicious Islamophobia & anti-Muslim bigotry this weekend from elected officials, commentators and even mainstream media. Hope I'm wrong. People will use it to divide Jewish and Muslim communities for their political agenda. Don't fall for it.

January 15th 2022

2,492 Retweets 9,979 Likes

This was a statement put out *while American Jews were still being held hostage.*

Some of my fellow Jews seem more determined to preserve the proper narrative than to protect Jewish lives:



John-Paul Pagano

@johnpaulpagano

It really is a trifecta of awful tendencies on the Left: specious medicalization to compel a political stance (in this case, police “abolition”), an obnoxious vanguard speaking for Black people, who often don’t agree, and the perfect unconcern for Jewish welfare.

A loving reminder to white Jews that talking about how important police & security are at synagogue misses

a) what those things are & do for many Jews of color &

b) the fact that the terrorist yesterday was let in because he was presumed to be unhoused.

1/x thread.

January 16th 2022

28 Retweets 148 Likes

It reminded me of a Shabbat dinner I attended a few years back in the Bay Area. I was seated next to a woman who had just come back from a retreat. She raved about the experience—its diversity, its inclusion, the fact that so many kinds of people were represented. But then, some 15 minutes in, she told me that one thing bothered her. One of the most popular people at the retreat was recommending a book to everyone. It was called “Protocols

of the Elders of Zion.” This person also insisted that the Rothschilds controlled the weather.

She did not say a word lest she offend anyone.

American Jews have always told ourselves that we were different because this country was different—that it was exceptional. That the equivocation about Jew-hate that we are now witnessing was normal in other places but never would be so here. (I think of [Sarah Halimi](#), a Jewish woman who was beaten and thrown out of her Paris window by a man screaming “dirty Jew” and “Allahu Akbar.” But French courts and much of the press decided that no motive could be ascertained. Ultimately, [charges were dropped](#) against the perpetrator because he had smoked weed before the murder.)

But America will only remain exceptional if Americans fight for it. And very few people in positions of cultural and political power seem to have any will to wage that battle. They believe that we are not the land of freedom, the country that abolished slavery, but one where slavery persists in more subtle form. That our army is not a force for liberation, but oppression. That our courts are not fair and blind, but prejudiced. And that this country and our ally, Israel, are not democracies but bastions of racial supremacy.

Today is Martin Luther King Day and I’m thinking of his understanding that the demand for equal treatment comes at no one’s expense because justice is not a zero-sum game. “We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity in this Nation,” he said. “When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men—black men as well as white men—would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Jews thrived in an America that had confidence in its goodness.
Jews are not safe—no one is—in one which does not.

Five years ago, the rabbi's invitation to the gun range would have shocked me. Now I think: I'm glad I saved her number.