

OPINION

GUEST ESSAY

# For Jews, Going to Services Is an Act of Courage

By Deborah E. Lipstadt Jan. 18, 2022



Andy Jacobsohn/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

*Baruch atah Adonai, eloheinu melech ha-olam, matir asurim. Blessed are you, God, sovereign of the universe, who frees the captives.*

Look in virtually any prayer book of any stream of Judaism and you will find this prayer in the section known as Blessings of the Dawn. The invocation comes right at the beginning. So integral is this idea to the Jewish psyche, we praise God *again* for freeing captives during the Amidah, one of the liturgy's most central prayers.

Late Saturday night, as news came of the safe conclusion of the hostage-taking at Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas, I — together with many other Jews around the world — recited that blessing. Tears, for many of us, flowed freely. We shared it. We posted it. We felt it.

Another tragedy had been averted. But the scars remain. They will take a long time to heal. I thought of the Beth Israel rabbi's two daughters who waited all day to hear of their father's fate. One rabbi recently told me that some of her colleagues' children don't want them to be congregational rabbis anymore. "It's too dangerous." They don't want to have to worry every time their parent goes to the office. The parent's office is the synagogue.

My rabbi, [Adam Starr](#), posted to Facebook that on Sunday morning, when he went into synagogue for daily prayer, it felt like "an act of courage, defiance and faith." Another friend told me that whenever she walks into a synagogue she makes a mental check of the nearest exit and figures out where the safest place to hide is. Under a pew? In a storage closet? Behind the ark, which holds the sacred Torah scrolls? She was shocked when I said I don't do that. Yet.

Jews have learned to be afraid beyond the synagogue. In May during the Gaza conflagration, people eating at [a kosher restaurant in Los Angeles](#) were beaten up by a mob. In [London](#), a phalanx of cars moved through Jewish neighborhoods chanting "Kill Jews, rape their daughters." In [Times Square in New York, a Jew wearing a kipa, or skullcap](#), was punched and pepper-sprayed.

When the attack is on a synagogue, during prayer, the pain is particularly intense. Each incident of vandalism — antisemitic [graffiti at a Tucson synagogue](#), [desecration of synagogues](#) in the Bronx in the spring — or worse, [arson](#) at an Austin, Texas, synagogue this fall, is felt by Jews far beyond the confines of that specific community.

Jews have long thought of their synagogues as both a place to pray and a place to find community. As Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker [noted after his heroic escape](#) from the gunman in Colleyville, a synagogue is called a beit kneset, a house of gathering. That is why, when traveling abroad, even Jews who are not regular synagogue attendees often seek out the local synagogue.

For decades, when I got directions to synagogues in countries outside my own — be it in Germany, Turkey, Poland, Italy or Colombia — I would be advised that, to make my search easier, I didn't have to know the precise address. When I got to the street on which the building was situated, I was told, I should just look for the police officers with the submachine guns. That's where the synagogue would be. Also: Bring my passport. And be prepared for questions.

In some cities, synagogues ask that you call ahead to let them know you are coming. In Stockholm two years ago, the guard outside had been alerted to my coming. But he took no chances. So I found myself on a snowy street, reciting select prayers for him. Only after proving my bona fides did he let me in.

That was once an experience limited to when I traveled abroad. Now American Jews like myself experience it at home — in our own synagogues, and in those we attend in American cities across this country. We look across the street at the big church and can't help but notice that there are no guards there.

A couple of summers ago, I was in the Berkshires on a Sunday morning driving through one of those innumerable picturesque small towns. Along the way, I passed a large church, right on the main street. It dated back to Revolutionary times. Something seemed off to me. The four large entry doors were wide open. Congregants stood happily greeting people as they entered. Then I realized what was discordant. No armed guard. No security check. No one told to "please use the side entrance, because it's more secure." Just an open invitation: Come in. Welcome.

I have not walked through the main entrance to my synagogue since October 2018, after the shootings at [Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Synagogue](#). For over three years now, that door has remained locked. When I asked why, I was told, "It's too wide open; it can't be made secure." I understood. You won't find wide-open doors at any synagogue in Europe or North America. It is only after you get past the guards that you find welcome, though welcome is still there for those who seek it.

It is not just the large synagogues that fear for security. I hear from students that they think twice about going to Hillel services, the campus Jewish chaplaincy. Some out of fear for physical safety. Some out of worry about the slings and barbs that might come from other students in the dorm. I met parents whose child had been accepted to a very selective college. He wears a kipa and was struggling with whether to replace it for the next four years with a baseball cap. Increasingly I hear: Jews are contemplating going underground.

We are shaken. We are not OK. But we will bounce back. We are resilient because we cannot afford not to be. That resiliency is part of the Jewish DNA. Without it, we would have disappeared centuries ago. We refuse to go away. But we are exhausted.

Rabbi Cytron-Walker [credited](#) his survival to the active-shooter training and security courses that he and his congregants took in order to prepare for just such a moment. He knew to stay calm and knew the right moment to fling a chair at his captor and dash for the exit with the other captives. The Jewish community offers such training on a regular basis to an array of Jewish institutions, especially to our synagogues and our schools.

It is not radical to say that going to services, whether to converse with God or with the neighbors you see only once a week, should not be an act of courage. And yet this weekend we were once again reminded that it can be precisely that.

Among those morning blessings that are part of Blessings of the Dawn is one that thanks God for opening up the eyes of the blind. Jewish eyes did not need to be opened. But this week we wonder if the eyes of our non-Jewish friends and neighbors, particularly the ones who didn't call to see if we were OK, have been opened just a bit.

There is an additional blessing during these early prayers that thanks God for allowing us to stand tall and straight. We are standing tall and we are standing straight.

But we are checking for the exits.