

Oct. 7 attack on Israel opened floodgates to antisemitism and hate

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By: Rabbi Michael Schwab

As we approach the one-year anniversary of the terrorist attacks that sparked the war between Hamas and Israel, a battle rages closer to home and even right here in Chicago. Thankfully it's not a clash featuring terror tunnels, assault rifles, drones or bombs, but rather a fight between those who believe in a shared future and those who see this war as a zero-sum conflict.

One can mourn the 1,200 innocent Israelis slaughtered and the approximately 250 Israelis and other foreign nationals kidnapped by Hamas on Oct. 7, and also mourn the innocent Palestinian lives lost in the war. I know I do. It isn't a binary choice.

One can hope for the war to end as quickly as possible, with the safe return of the hostages and the removal of Hamas as a threat to Israelis and [Palestinians](#) alike, but one must also be clear-eyed that the Oct. 7 attacks occurred when Hamas [broke a ceasefire](#). And Hamas has [vowed to repeat the attacks](#) again and again.

I serve a large synagogue in Highland Park whose congregation spans the political spectrum from very liberal to very conservative. The vast majority of us want Palestinians to live with dignity, respect and self-determination. And we want Israel to live in peace and security. We are trying to do our part to support those affected by the war. We have attended rallies, written checks, and even hosted a girls' soccer team from northern Israel — refugees from Hezbollah's ongoing [rocket attacks](#) — who are Jewish, Muslim and Christian. We want a shared future.

Conversely, those who chant "from the river to the sea," an [antisemitic call](#) for the [destruction](#) of Israel, represent the zero-sum camp. In this view, there can be no shared future. Sadly, this phrase was heard all too often during campus protests that have roiled local universities. Seeing the way that our students have been marginalized on campus reinforces the need for the U.S. Senate to adopt the [Antisemitism Awareness Act](#), which would protect Jewish students from discrimination based on perceived racial, national or ethnic characteristics.

Of course, no conversation of the zero-sum camp, especially here in Chicago, can exclude the abhorrent, ethnically motivated [murder](#) of a Palestinian child, Wadee Alfayoumi, in Plainfield Township last October. Political, racial or ethnically motivated violence is never acceptable and must always and unequivocally be [condemned](#).

High cost of synagogue safety

I wish this had been the response from more in Chicago's non-Jewish community following the Oct. 7 attacks, the [Hezbollah missile attack](#) that killed 12 Israeli children on a soccer field, or Hamas' recent cold-blooded murder of six hostages, including [Hersh Goldberg Polin](#), whose family is from the Chicago area.

Over the past year we have received few words of solace or solidarity from local religious institutions, either publicly or privately. It seems that many religious institutions are afraid to offer even condolences for fear of "politicizing" the issue or upsetting some in their congregation. The very limited support from other faith communities concerns me because it signals that the Jewish community may stand alone.

Meanwhile, the ferocious wave of [antisemitism after Oct. 7](#), already increasing in recent years, has impacted us in serious ways. My synagogue has received multiple bomb threats this year, and our community is still traumatized by a national wave of attacks on synagogues dating back to 2018.

In preparation for our High Holidays, this year we have added even more security staff and precautions. The cost of maintaining this level of alert is enormous, often falling on the shoulders of congregants in the form of security dues or from funds allotted to programming. This is a burden our congregation, like many others, must bear just to exercise our right to pray freely.

Smaller congregations are often unable to absorb these costs. Programs like the federal and Illinois Nonprofit Security Grant Program can help alleviate the so-called "[antisemitism tax](#)." But most grant applications go [unfunded](#). Many in my community wonder if this is our new normal — always looking over our shoulders, needing armed security for our places of worship, and advocating for our safety at universities and in Congress.

In this moment of anxiety, I urge those in the Jewish community to stand strong and not give up. And to the non-Jewish community, I implore you: if you belong to a civic or religious organization, reach out to partner with a Jewish organization. Perhaps start by simply asking how they are doing. Learn about Israel and antisemitism. Find ways to constructively engage with the Jewish community and be part of the conversation. Platform voices that make it clear that this is not a zero-sum game.

We must build bridges, not reinforce divides. That is the only way forward.

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