

One year later, Richmond Jews struggle to find safety, peace

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“I love you.” “I’m sorry.” Those were the last messages Hersh Goldberg-Polin, a United States citizen, sent to his family before being abducted by Hamas terrorists from a music festival on Oct. 7, 2023. One month ago, after 330 days of tortuous captivity, [Hamas executed Hersh](#) along with five other hostages.

The Oct. 7 massacre devastated Jews around the world and instantly became a focal point for antisemitic fervor, but Hersh’s kidnapping struck particularly close to home — before moving to Israel, Hersh and his family were dedicated members of our Richmond Jewish community.

The Goldberg-Polins lived a few blocks away from Keneseth Beth Israel, where I have been the rabbi since 2011, and were members of the synagogue. Many in our congregation remember the family fondly, including how a young Hersh starred in a synagogue play.

The shock of [Hersh’s captivity and execution](#) was perhaps the most local connection to what has been a year of horror and trauma. Oct. 7 began as a normal Saturday. It was the sabbath — when observant Jews don’t use electronics, including phones. Disconnected from technology, the horrific news came crashing in waves. Four people killed. Then 40. Then 250. We knew it was bad, we just didn’t know how bad. Later, we found out that Oct. 7 was the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust — 1,200 killed and 250 taken hostage.

Days later, as we stumbled through the haze of shock and grief, protesters down the road at Virginia Commonwealth University reopened our fresh wounds. They donned the same kinds of keffiyehs and masks worn days earlier by Hamas, and lionized the same terrorists who committed widespread murder and rape in southern Israel. Some Jewish students went into hiding, fearing for their safety.

My community tried to strike a balance between showing support for our brothers and sisters in Israel and the emotional well-being of our congregants. We displayed posters with the faces of the hostages being held in Gaza, humanizing the victims. But parents struggled to explain to their young children why these faces were on the walls, let alone why [Hamas would steal children](#) out of their homes. We replaced the pictures with a less-triggering sign marking the number of days of their captivity.

In the weeks following the attack, when we felt the most vulnerable and alone, the Richmond community showed up. We received bouquets of flowers, cards and support.

Gov. Glenn Youngkin, Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney and hundreds from the community came to stand with us in solidarity.

But not all of the comments have been so caring. Our synagogue is situated on a busy street and congregants walking to services have been subjected to verbal harassment from passersby. The tranquility of our sabbath has been punctured by shouts of “you’re killers” and “free Palestine,” as if this is a normal response to individual Americans wanting to practice their faith.

We know that all too easily this type of harassment can escalate to physical violence. In just the last several years we’ve seen Jews taken [hostage in a synagogue in Texas](#), and we’ve seen shootings at synagogues in [Pennsylvania](#), [Florida](#) and [California](#). Just weeks ago an individual was charged for planning to attack [a New York City Jewish center](#). “We are going to nyc to slaughter them,” the suspect is alleged to have written.

When I first came to Keneseth Beth Israel, our doors were open. Following a surge in antisemitism in 2014 we began to lock the doors during services. Then we got armed security. Now, physical security is a growing concern.

But this comes at a steep price, literally. The increased security measures, now a necessity, are stressing the synagogue’s budget. We are considering raising dues, but that would increase barriers to our community celebrating their identity and their faith. Richmond’s Jews shouldn’t be taxed because people want to kill us.

While federal and local grants help defray security costs, funding is limited and requires significant man-hours to ensure paperwork is filled out correctly and security measures are installed. And this year fewer than half of such [Nonprofit Security Grant Program requests](#) were funded.

I am a proud Virginian, a proud American, and a proud Jew. Richmond’s Jews shouldn’t have to hide their identity to feel safe.

As the Jewish community’s wounds are ripped open on the one-year anniversary of the Oct. 7 massacre, we should all unite around shared objectives. Educators and parents should teach their children tolerance for all minorities, and local and federal governments should provide additional money and support to defend American Jews against the resurgent scourge of antisemitism.