

Maintaining hope on anniversary of Oct. 7

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By: Rabbi Joel Sisenwine

On the morning of Oct. 7, 2023, I received a cryptic text message from a congregant who was in Israel. "This is far worse than anyone is acknowledging at this point," it said. I made my way to Temple Beth Elohim, where I have served as Senior Rabbi for the past 25 years. But this morning, the morning of our joyful holiday Simchat Torah, was different.

Without stoking rumors, I told them a little bit about what was happening, not fully knowing the extent of the atrocities. We celebrated the holiday in prayer, held by the power of community. Tragically, many of the rumors circulating that morning would be proven true: families murdered in the most barbaric ways, women raped and children, even babies, kidnapped.

But what I have come to learn over the past year is that the war that Hamas started on Oct. 7 would not be limited to the Middle East. Here in Massachusetts, the Jewish community has also been embattled amidst a noticeable increase in antisemitism online, on campus, and in our city streets, leaving our community feeling increasingly alone in the country that we love.

A prominent U.S. senator came to our synagogue the Friday night after Oct. 7. I was deeply appreciative of her presence as it provided us comfort. And yet, I was surprised when a member of her advance team did not realize that our synagogues now require security for ensuring our safety.

In fact, like many other synagogues we have had to significantly increase the amount of money that we spend on security, and we've had to raise congregational fees to meet this mounting expense. This amounts to a de facto tax on the Jewish community if we want to worship and gather safely. I know we are not the only Jewish community that has had to contend with this challenge, and yet fewer than half of nonprofit security grant applications were funded in 2024.

Fortunately, our synagogue community has felt buoyed by our neighbors, the churches, friends and civic organizations who have come to our support. Many of my Christian colleagues in Wellesley immediately reached out, just as they had done after the terrorist attack on a synagogue in Pittsburgh.

I am grateful for the Boston City Council, who denounced anti-Semitism and this year recognized Jewish American Heritage month. Yet, I must admit I was troubled when the city

council weighed in on a foreign policy matter by calling for a temporary cease-fire, a political decision that could potentially harm Israel's survival. More than contributing towards peace, it only left us feeling more isolated and alone.

Despite these challenges, our community won't be deterred. Temple Beth Elohim will continue to embrace our core values and commit ourselves to make this world a better place. We will continue to cook meals and distribute them to the thousands of individuals confronting food insecurity. We will continue to welcome refugees, having already welcomed families from Syria, Afghanistan, Venezuela and Ukraine, and few months ago, we also welcomed an LGBTQ+ family fleeing Algeria. I am proud of our work.

In the new Jewish year, we will visit the sick and care for the poor, hopefully with loving allies by our side.

I hope that people will speak out when antisemitism occurs, and name it loudly and clearly everywhere it arises. I also hope that our elected officials, religious leaders and the media stay attuned to the dangers we are now facing so that they too can be partners with us in the fight against hatred and antisemitism.

We are proudly American, and feel blessed by our country's gifts of freedom, peace and prosperity. I hope you will join us as we stand together for a better tomorrow.

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