

When a yarmulke feels like a target: Navigating Jewish life in a fractured world

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On Sept. 11, 2001, I was a student in New York City. That day began like any other — routine classes, the hum of the city in the background — until everything shattered. I remember the confusion first, then the sirens, the hurried whispers of classmates, and the abrupt shift from mundane to unimaginable. We stood glued to the TV screens as the towers fell, disbelief slowly turning to horror. I can't think of that infamous date without a deep, physical reaction — a quiver in my lip and a tremor in my body.

On Oct. 7, 2023, I was in synagogue celebrating Simchat Torah, a joyous Jewish holiday. That day, Hamas invaded southern Israel, murdering and torturing Jews in a massive terror attack that has been called Israel's Sept. 11. The emotional toll of Oct. 7 is immense, creating a bitter pit in my stomach eerily echoing the way I feel when thinking about Sept. 11.

But whereas the vulnerability I felt after Sept. 11 was one that seemed shared by all Americans, the profound safety concerns that have emerged after Oct. 7 are more personal. The Hamas attacks have cast a long shadow over the Jewish community in Minneapolis, marking a period of intensified harassment and antisemitism.

To give one egregious example from this past year, in January the Minneapolis City Council hosted a meeting in which antisemitism was on full display during consideration of a resolution on Israel. Signs were displayed with slogans such as "Both sides are thirsty / Israel for blood / Gaza for water" and comparing Israelis to Nazis.

As the local Jewish Community Relations Council [documented](#), "Council Member Robin Wonsley activated the crowd by falsely and repeatedly accusing Israel of genocide and comparing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to America's legacy of slavery and racism against African Americans."

I, along with dozens of other local rabbis, [fought back](#) against the considered resolution, noting that "Hamas has immorally chosen to embed their military operations, underground tunnels, and equipment in mosques, schools, hospitals and U.N. buildings, using non-combatant Palestinians as human-shields. Thus attacks on these military targets result in the tragic loss of Palestinian lives and infrastructure."

I, like many other Jews, now find myself hesitant to publicly wear my yarmulke, a symbol of my Jewish faith that should inspire pride but now evokes a sense of anxiety. My wife and I even took the difficult step of advising our boys to wear baseball caps instead of yarmulkes, a choice driven by the recognition that being identifiably Jewish can be dangerous in a period of [surging antisemitism](#).

And like many other Jews, we have ensured that we have passports for our children, not for international travel and vacations, but because as Jews we fear we might need to leave in the middle of the night, as our ancestors in so many places have been forced to do. This precaution speaks to the pervasive fear of being targeted that has become all too common. When we recently went to get the passport photos, we asked our daughter not to wear her Jewish star necklace in the picture, God forbid it would compromise the purpose.

Unfortunately, the St. Louis Park educational institutions that should be a source of community and greater understanding in the wake of Oct. 7 have too often fallen short of these goals. This past spring, for instance, Minneapolis Jews were shaken by a deeply problematic entry in the [St. Louis Park High School yearbook](#). The entry said that “on October 8, 2023, Israel formally declared war on Hamas,” without any mention of the horrific terrorist attack the day before. This omission erased the tragedy that began the conflict and left Jewish families in our community feeling betrayed and hurt.

The incomplete and misleading narrative in a school publication highlights how easily harmful distortions are spread, even in trusted institutions. The incident led to widespread demands for accountability and a commitment from school officials to address the oversight, but the damage was already done. This is but one example that underscores the ever-present need to ensure that educational environments are places of truth and safety for all students.

Amid this turmoil, the unwavering support from our friends has been a beacon of hope. It has reminded us of what makes America special for Jews and for people of all different faiths, colors, identities and backgrounds. Our non-Jewish neighbors have shown extraordinary solidarity, offering a sense of safety and belonging that is both comforting and inspiring. In the wake of the Oct. 7 attacks, my wife reached out to them, expressing our gratitude and requesting their vigilance.

“Hi friends — As I am sure you all know, there is a lot going on right now in the Middle East that is causing pain and strife for Jewish people. As a result, it has become increasingly dangerous and scary to be Jewish, not just in other countries but here in the U.S. as well,” she told them in an email. “Avi, the kids, and I have felt incredibly welcomed and safe in our

neighborhood since the day we moved in, and we love that we all look out for each other. We are just asking that you all look out for us a little more in the coming days and weeks.”

She requested that our neighbors drive a bit slower past our house and glance to make everything looked O.K. and there was nothing suspicious. And she invited people to reach out. “Check in on us if it feels right to you. It is exhausting to be Jewish right now and we can use all the extra love and support we can get.”

This collective effort might seem small, but it symbolizes a powerful act of solidarity and protection. Our neighbors responded with overwhelming kindness, some offering to walk by more frequently, others sending messages of support, and a few even leaving small tokens of care on our doorstep. Their gestures, no matter how small, have made us feel truly supported and safe. It is in moments like these that the strength of community becomes clear, and the commitment to one another becomes a source of profound reassurance.

Still, as we approach the anniversary of Oct. 7, I am scared. I am scared for Israel. I am scared for my Jewish brothers and sisters all over the world. I am scared that the wrong delivery person will see the mezuzah on my door. I am scared — but I hold on to hope. Through unity, vigilance and mutual support, we can navigate this turbulent period and strive toward a future in which safety and understanding prevail. It is the collective effort and compassion of our communities that will guide us through and help build a more inclusive and secure world for all.

Rabbi Avi S. Olitzky served as senior rabbi of Beth El Synagogue in St. Louis Park.