

The high price of worshipping safely

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In the aftermath of the Oct. 7, 2023 attacks, when Hamas murdered about 1,200 people in southern Israel and took about 250 more captive, Washingtonians united in grief and resolve. Our political leaders, non-Jewish clergy and friends provided an outpouring of support.

I'm grateful for this backing. I also wish that more people understood the immense strain facing the Jewish community here. In recent years, a long list of violent attacks on Jews has included the [Pittsburgh synagogue massacre](#), the [Poway synagogue shooting](#) in California, the shooting of a congregant outside a [synagogue in Miami](#), the [Monsey Hanukkah stabbing](#) in New York and the [Colleyville synagogue hostage crisis](#) in Texas.

Here in Washington, since Oct. 7, congregants at a synagogue in Georgetown were accosted with a foul-smelling spray by an assailant yelling "[gas the Jews](#)" and [multiple synagogues](#) in the [metro](#) area have been vandalized, some of them multiple times.

The threat to congregants' physical safety takes a tremendous emotional and mental toll. When people walk into Washington Hebrew, the synagogue where I serve as senior rabbi, we want them to feel confident they're entering a safe environment offering a distinctive experience, not going through airport security.

Churches in Washington don't generally require security. Most don't have guards permanently stationed on-site or police officers making regular patrols. Their entrances aren't designed to stymie terrorist attacks or their sanctuaries to protect those inside from violence.

The need for continuous security takes a financial toll on Jewish congregations as well, in building and personnel costs surpassing hundreds of thousands of dollars annually. Washington Hebrew's security expenses more than doubled after Oct. 7, and unfortunately, we had no choice except to raise our security fees to defray the cost. For many synagogues, security costs are their largest single budget item.

The Jewish community in the United States, like any other minority group, shouldn't have to absorb unsustainable costs to safely gather. The federal [Nonprofit Security Grant Program](#) has tried to help, but more must be done. Only [43 percent of grant applications](#) were fulfilled in the 2024 cycle. Without additional funding, I fear some

congregants won't be able to pay the necessary synagogue security fees, or that some congregations will have insufficient security.

I make it a point to regularly thank the police officers we hire to keep us safe. Recently, I spoke to one and noted that he and his fellow officers must be exhausted. He assured me that they were fine, that this is what the police are built for. And, he told me, this is about family. Many of the officers who protect our buildings have been with us for 20 years. Their duty to protect the synagogue feels personal to them, which speaks to the strength of our community.

Today feels like a different world for Jews in America, yet we need to keep bringing people together. We want our synagogues to be safe spaces where people can come for a sense of hope and to find the joy in Judaism because those opportunities strengthen us in those moments that shake our foundations.

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