

GUEST ESSAY

My Synagogue Was Attacked, but I Will Never Stop Welcoming the Stranger

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By Charlie Cytron-Walker

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Some teachings, such as, “Love your neighbor” or, “Care for your community,” are shared by almost every religious or ethical practice. From an evolutionary standpoint, that makes sense: In the long run, the group does better than the individual.

But welcoming strangers, let alone caring for them, does not come naturally. I was reminded recently that our brains aren’t wired for it. Strangers are, by definition, unknown. The unknown often generates fear. Strangers, in this context, are harmful.

All people should enjoy a sense of safety in their sacred space. But too many people, of many backgrounds, don’t always feel safe. My congregants and I know this well and we are all grateful to be alive.

On Jan. 15, a gunman entered our synagogue and demanded the release of a woman being held at a nearby federal prison. During the 10 hours I spent held hostage by this terrorist, all the anxiety and fear that many Jewish people live with on a daily basis were realized. No one should live like this — not the congregants of the Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, S.C., and not the members of Sikh temples or mosques that have been vandalized or our small synagogue in Texas, the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh or the Chabad synagogue of Poway, Calif.

What happened to us at Beth Israel in Colleyville is only the most recent, dramatic event. Even before the Jan. 15 attack on my synagogue, many Jewish people were on edge. Antisemitic attacks have increased in recent years. Hatred has already led to harassment and even bloodshed in too many houses of worship. These problems have been with us for far too long.

At least part of the problem is because we, ourselves, are strangers. Jews are strangers. Muslims are strangers. People with a different religious tradition — or no religious tradition — are perceived as strangers. People of different ethnicities can be considered strangers. People who hold different political views are seen as strangers. We’re strangers because one can look from afar and make judgments without understanding another’s reality. We’re strangers because it takes too much work to be curious, to give others the benefit of the doubt. It is a lot easier and a lot more comfortable to stick with one’s group. “Love your neighbor” is hard enough.

And that’s why I, and so many other religious leaders, have pointed out again and again the sacred obligation to love the stranger. The command to care for the stranger is mentioned at least 36 times in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible — more than any other mitzvah. It’s mentioned so often because we need the reminder, because it isn’t natural. It is hard. Just getting past the notion of fearing the stranger is a big enough hurdle.

I stress this teaching and try to live by this ethos even after living through a hostage situation — where every minute feels like it could be your last. I understand the temptation to seek comfort solely in those one knows and trusts. My congregants and I spent over 10 hours with a gun pointed at us in our sacred home.

Adding to the agony, I opened the doors of my synagogue and unknowingly welcomed the individual who would later attack me and my fellow congregants. That I opened the door will always weigh heavily on me. Still, I remain committed to the idea of welcoming and caring for the stranger and living that value.

I do not offer this teaching out of naïveté. We all have a responsibility to understand the context in which we live. Understanding does not mean that we expect calamity or live in a perpetual state of fear. We have a need for security action plans and preparation in case the worst happens. I've participated in, and helped organize, far too many vigils after acts of intentional hatred and violence; gathering after gathering of mourning.

That is our current reality. I believe with all my heart and soul that we can — and must — change this reality. That goes back to caring for the stranger — caring enough that we're willing to meet and talk with those who are different from ourselves. Caring enough to know that while our experiences may not be the same, and we will probably disagree, we are human beings with something to teach and something to learn. This is not easy. And right now, it feels countercultural.

Many parts of Judaism are countercultural — especially the instruction that we do what is right, not what is easy. When it comes to the care with which we are supposed to treat other people, those teachings cross religious and cultural boundaries.

We know that not everyone will meet us here now, but neither can we step away from the work. All of us have a share in it. It means clergy and community leaders from every background meeting with curiosity, to share our traditions and our lives. It means gathering communities of faith together with those who don't practice a religion, with a desire to listen, learn and the opportunity to build new relationships. This isn't just theoretical. In Colleyville and the surrounding area, more than 20 groups already meet to do this work under the umbrella Peace Together. We began gathering after Charlottesville as a mass effort to build relationships.

In the last few weeks, my congregation and I received an outpouring of love and support from strangers the world over. If we begin with that love of the stranger, but offer it not in response to violence, but encouraged by empathy, we might just change our world.

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