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With Jews Under Attack, Here is a Chance to Act

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With Jews under attack, here is chance to act

Though I had long since lost my faith in God and had left Judaism, I started carrying a kippah on the public buses I took to work and around town.

By [Bruce Ledewitz](#) June 30, 2021, 2:20 pm

The Oct. 27, 2018, shootings at three Pittsburgh congregations affected me deeply. I had been a member of Dor Hadash. I knew the victims. It could have been me.

Sure, people attended vigils, left messages and expressed solidarity. But it wasn't enough.

Then, in fall 2019, I was jolted again by a series of incidents in the New York City area, culminating in a Chanukah machete attack in the home of a Chasidic rabbi that ultimately took the life of Rabbi Josef Neumann.

I could have been there. I was raised in that world.

As a child, I attended the New Haven Hebrew Day School, one of the seven Yeshivot established in America after WWII by Menachem Mendel Schneerson, known to all as the Rebbe.

Family lore had it that the Rebbe intended to establish only six institutions. But my grandfather bankrolled the school's early years and ensured that I and my numerous relations all enrolled.

It is hard now to remember the sweetness of midcentury American Judaism. Orthodoxy had much looser rules than it does today. Boys and girls attended school together in the early grades. Men and women danced at mixed community celebrations.

The State of Israel was totally unifying. My teachers never anticipated unending enmity from Israel's neighbors. I was reminded on more than one occasion that Muslims had historically protected Jews from Christian persecution.

There were some divisions. I got into a fist fight in the second grade over Kennedy versus Nixon. But mostly, we were all Jews.

The piety of that time was palpable, at least for me. The Hebrew letters of my Chumash beckoned, portals to a different world. I could not get enough, even walking a long distance on Saturday, after a very full week of school, to study more. I fell so in love with Torah that my mother worried I might become an Orthodox rabbi. At the end of my fourth-grade year, I made the mistake of asking her why we did not keep kosher. My mother moved me to public school very quickly.

Maybe it was just as well. Continuing their Jewish education did not lead most of my relatives to deeply religious lives. On the other hand, whenever in later life I saw an Orthodox Jewish man, I was instantly transported back to my childhood.

Thus, with that world under attack, I decided to do something.

My response might strike some as quixotic. Though I had long since lost my faith in God and had left Judaism, I started carrying a kippah on the public buses I took to work and around town. It was not unusual for an identifiably Jewish person to get on the bus — mostly men but women too sometimes — and I was determined to show solidarity and share whatever danger there was by wearing a kippah in that person's presence.

What this gesture might have meant to those intended to be supported I never found out. The pandemic temporarily ended my bus riding a couple of months later.

Today, the situation is much more fraught and dangerous. Just last week, the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh issued a warning based on recent harassment and one violent assault against Jews in Squirrel Hill.

What might have once been quixotic is now pressing and real. These attacks began at a time when Israel was not even in the news. They had nothing to do with support for the Palestinian cause. But with the recent fighting between Israel and Hamas, antisemitism has been granted a kind of open season on Jews. In Europe and America, violence, including physical attacks and arson, is a growing threat.

Even in Pittsburgh, Orthodox men and women must now think twice before venturing out in public in dress that identifies them as Jewish. We are entering a time like that in Germany in 2018, when the leader of the Jewish community cautioned Jews against “openly wearing a kippah in big German cities.” The secular German response then was “Germany-wears-a-kippah” demonstrations and marches.

Marches are not enough.

Now all men must wear a kippah, and women a head covering, whenever we are in places where Orthodox Jews might be targeted. This must be a constant vigilance.

I am no longer a member of the Jewish community. I live a secular life and write about the difficulty of building a civilization without God. So, I reached out to the non-Jewish world to wear a kippah in a column last week in the Pennsylvania Capital-Star: “We Are All Jews Now.”

Many of us wonder how to confront hate. There is only so much we can do personally when immigrants are mistreated or the police target persons of color.

Here is one chance to really stand with victims of hate and share the fate of the vulnerable. Here is a chance to act. **PJC**

Bruce Ledewitz is a professor of law at Duquesne University School of Law and the author of the forthcoming book, "The Universe Is on Our Side: Restoring Faith in American Public Life," to be published by Oxford Univ. Press in October.