

North suburban Jewish leaders deal with shock and sadness: 'This is not the America we expect to live in'



A woman takes a picture of the flowers she left at a spontaneous memorial a block from the Tree of Life Synagogue on Oct. 29, 2018. (Gene J. Puskar/AP)

By **Steve Sadin and Karen Berkowitz**

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The shooting massacre that killed 11 people at a Pittsburgh synagogue Saturday has raised anxiety levels among some Jewish congregations in the north suburbs.

The rampage by a lone gunman is being described as the deadliest attack on Jews in U.S. history.

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“This is horrifying, anti-Semitism on the highest level you can imagine,” said Rabbi Yishaya Benjaminson of Rohr Chabab Center of Glenview.

The gunman, Robert Bowers, reportedly yelled “All Jews must die” as he walked into the synagogue, killing 11 people and wounding six others, including several police officers.

On Saturday night, Benjaminson asked Glenview police to provide extra patrols for Hebrew School the next day and they were very responsive, he said.

Though his synagogue adds security for the High Holidays, Benjaminson is now assessing whether extra measures are warranted for regular Saturday services. “People are nervous,” he said.

Local Jewish leaders say they are tasked with thinking about their own congregation’s safety at a time when they are also dealing with profound grief.

“We are all in mourning for our brothers and sisters in Pittsburgh,” said Rabbi Alex Felch of B’nai Tikvah in Deerfield. “All of the Jewish people in America should be mourning. All Americans should be mourning.”

Felch said his congregation held a special memorial service Sunday night because “all of us needed to be together.”

The tragedy was quite personal for Cantor Steve Stoehr of Northbrook’s Congregation Beth Shalom.

Stoehr was born and raised in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh, and the Tree of Life synagogue was one he’d attended quite regularly during his high school and college years. His grandfather had been an early member of the synagogue. It was the congregation in which his mother had grown up.

“(I’ve) tutored at the synagogue. I’ve been friends with the clergy and done weddings there,” Stoehr said. “I have a very deep and loving relationship to the community there.”

Sadly, he also knew several of the victims. Stoehr said he had coached Little League with shooting victim Daniel Stein and knew Cecil and David Rosenthal, two brothers with intellectual disabilities who were slain. The cantor remembered the brothers for their joyful attitude toward life.

As the news unfolded, Stoehr could visualize the door he believed the gunman had walked through and where the synagogue regulars who'd arrived early likely were situated when the rampage unfolded.

Rabbi Aaron Melman of Beth Shalom learned of the shootings during Shabbat service Saturday but waited awhile to say anything. He did not want to take away from celebrations going on.

"I needed some time to process the news, to the degree anyone can process news like that," Melman said. "There were people who didn't know, so when I did announce it, you could hear an audible gasp."

Within hours of the shooting, Congregation Or Shalom Rabbi Ari Margolis said his Vernon Hills congregation modified a Havdalah service, which traditionally concludes the Sabbath, with the events in Pittsburgh in mind.

"We added music and prayers of remembrance," Margolis said. "We wanted to show solidarity and hope at the end of Shabbat," he added, using the Hebrew word of the Sabbath.

While regular services were taking place around the area Saturday morning, police officers were already taking steps to amplify security for worshippers. Deerfield Deputy Police Chief Tom Keane said patrols were increased and will be ongoing for now.

"As soon as the news broke our watch commander reached out to the local synagogues and stepped up the patrols," Keane said. "We expect that to continue."

Rabbi Ike Serota of Lakeside Congregation for Reform Judaism in Highland Park said his temple reached out to the Highland Park Police Department, which provided additional security.

Serota said several hundred people came to the synagogue for a service at the time Sunday school is held. After the children left the family gathering, he said there was an opportunity for adult conversation.

"It was a chance for people to talk about their feelings about what happened," Serota said.

Rabbi Jason Fenster of Congregation B'nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim in Deerfield said officials at his synagogue were already talking about ways to enhance security, a priority that now takes on even more importance.

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Fenster said he attended an interfaith service at Beth Shalom Sunday where clergy from several other synagogues gathered as well as the imam of the Islamic Cultural Center of Greater Chicago in Northbrook and a representative of the Baha'i faith. About 400 people attended.

In Highland Park, North Suburban Synagogue Beth El quickly convened a gathering Sunday as well and about 200 people attended.

“This is not the America we expect to live in,” said Rabbi Vernon Kurtz of North Suburban Synagogue Beth El. “We cannot develop a sense of complacency and just accept this. Society at large needs to examine why these hate crimes are occurring and needs to put a stop to them.”

Kurtz said statistics from the Anti-Defamation League show that incidents of anti-Semitism are on the rise on social media and through displays of graffiti and swastikas.

His synagogue has worked with local police, Homeland Security and their own security service to constantly improve procedures.

“We continue to upgrade our security just because something can happen at any place at any time,” Kurtz said.

The Jewish United Fund/Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago sent an email to the Jewish community Sunday letting people know the coming Sabbath will be a solidarity Shabbat throughout the country with Tree of Life.

Congregations in the northern suburbs are participating in the solidarity Shabbat in a number of ways. Serota said at Lakeside and Congregation Solel in Highland Park, which are in the process of consolidating, they will read the names of the men and women murdered in Pittsburgh before the mourning prayer at the end of the service.

At B'nai Tikvah, Felch said the congregation will be remembering the victims of the Tree of Life shooting during the Shabbat service this weekend adding prayers of hope and healing.

“We will pray for strength, courage and solidarity,” Felch said. “We will pray for inspiration for those who lead our nation to find a path to end this violence.”

Margolis said at Or Shalom the sanctuary will be arranged with chairs in a circle instead of the traditional rows and columns so everyone in the community can see one another.

“Despite the sadness and fear going on in the world around us we want Shabbat to be a time of sanctuary and peace,” Margolis said.

Before the shooting in Pittsburgh and the declaration of a solidarity Shabbat this weekend, Fenster said BJBE invited the Rev. Anne Jolly, rector of St. Gregory's Episcopal Church in Deerfield, to speak.

Fenster said the service will be one of prayer, song and community. Jolly said in the aftermath of the events at Tree of Life in Pittsburgh, she is giving careful thought to her message.

“Over the years, Christians have done our fair share of promoting anti-Semitism,” Jolly said. “It is incumbent on us to work with our Jewish brothers and sisters to fight against anti-Semitism. We (should) all work together toward peace and justice on earth.”

While security is important so people feel safe in their place of worship, Fenster said love and caring is a big part of the solution toward curbing violence.

“When people bring hate our response is to bring love,” Fenster said. “We can build a powerful relationship based on peace and compassion.”

Steve Sadin is a freelance reporter. Karen Berkowitz is a Pioneer Press staff reporter.

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