UNITED STATES

The Pittsburgh shooting caught the US Jewish community off guard. Can they catch up?

BY RON KAMPEAS

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Mourners embrace during a processional outside of Congregation Beth Shalom in Pittsburgh for the funeral of Joyce Fienberg, who was killed at the mass shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue shooting, Oct. 31, 2018. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post via Getty Images)

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WASHINGTON (JTA) — Eliot Engel, a Democrat who reviles President Donald Trump, and Lee Zeldin, a Republican who eagerly embraces the president, happen to have plenty in common.

They are Jewish congressman from New York known for their pro-Israel leadership, and they share a distant relative.

They were also both blindsided by the recent season of anti-Semitic invective, culminating in the Pittsburgh massacre in October, when an anti-Semitic gunman killed 11 Jewish worshippers.

"It almost feels like we're back in the 1930s," Engel said last week at a meeting of the American Zionist Movement in the U.S. Capitol building.

Zeldin, speaking a few minutes later, said he understood how Engel felt.

"I never once experienced anti-Semitism, from kindergarten to leaving active duty in the army," he said. He then noted the flood of anti-Semitic invective he now brooks as a congressman.

"I could show you 3,500 different times, sometimes they're handwritten on heart-shaped stationery," he said. "There are some pretty sick ways of delivering the message."

Engel, Zeldin and their bafflement are emblematic of a national Jewish community dealing with the aftereffects of the worst attack on Jews in U.S. history.

Six weeks after Pittsburgh, and almost two years into a presidency that pushed discussion of resurgent bigotry to the front of the political debate, the American Jewish community is grappling with its consequences. The effort suggests that anti-Semitism in its classic form — a product of white supremacism and conspiracy-mongering — took by surprise a community focused on the threat of radical Islam.

It also exposed the way the Jewish community has come to equate anti-Semitism with anti-Israel activity. In their remarks to AZM, both Engel and Zeldin mentioned their defense of the Jewish state in describing what actions they took in the wake of Pittsburgh. Engel mentioned legislation

targeting the movement to boycott, divest from and sanction Israel, or BDS. Zeldin spoke of efforts to protect religious minorities throughout the Middle East.

The lawmakers knew their audience: Few communal lobbying efforts have been as successful in recent years as the push for anti-BDS laws, now in place in 26 states. Supporters had hoped to attach the Israel Anti-Boycott Act to the end-of-year omnibus spending package wending its way through Congress.

But feelings about Israel didn't seem to motivate the Pittsburgh gunman, who drew from ancient tropes of Jewish control, targeted a Jewish agency that assists immigrants and held a theory that lacked evidence but was shared and promulgated by President Donald Trump: that Central American migrants were intent on invading the United States.

A sense of complacency

Threats to Jews overseas — whether in Israel or elsewhere — have become preeminent in the American imagination in part because of a misconception that whatever threat there was to American Jews has passed, said Eric Ward, who directs the Western States Center, which combats bias.

"This country has not honestly confronted anti-Semitism in any real way [since] the 1970s," in part because so many doors opened to Jews in the universities, in the professions and in popular culture in the post-World War II era. As a result, more insidious forms of anti-Semitism were allowed to fester, he said.

American Jews are more ensconced in the establishment and likelier to trust its instruments of protection, like the police. That may have enhanced a sense of security in the American Jewish community.

The differences between how Jews overseas and Jews in the United States sense threat "relate to the Jewish community's relationships in this country, our incredibly strong relationship to law enforcement," said Michael Masters, who directs the Secure Community Network, the security

arm of the Jewish Federations of North America. "We simply do not face the same historic issues or concerns or threats [in the United States] we face in Europe."

A generation is entering American Jewish public life with no first-hand experience of anti-Semitism. The experience of Zeldin, who is 38, is emblematic: How does one acquire tools to combat anti-Semitism when it isn't experienced until well into adulthood?

"Our staff is very young (20s) and this was their first real experience with anti-Semitism," Meredith Jacobs, the spokeswoman for Jewish Women International, said in an email, describing a staff meeting convened in the immediate wake of Pittsburgh. "They were frightened and talked about being hesitant to go to any overtly Jewish gatherings (synagogues, Jewish groups)."

The far right crept and crawled around the margins for decades. Trump's election, and the perception by white supremacists and other extremists that he shared much of their worldview, emboldened them. The immediacy of social media made sure their message was heard.

"We are facing an unleashing of right-wing anti-Semitism we haven't seen in a long time in this county," said David Bernstein, who directs the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, the umbrella body for Jewish public policy groups. "I'm not sure everyone was aware to the degree white nationalism was focused on Jews as its main target."

Safety in numbers

In conversations with Jewish leaders coping with the issue, a number of strategies for catching up to the new reality emerged.

Brian Schreiber, the director of Pittsburgh's Jewish Community Relations Council, said his community had been striving to build alliances since a deadly neo-Nazi march in Charlottesville in August of 2017. That effort has intensified, he said.

"It's being in a coalition of those that have also suffered discrimination so that you're building a coalition larger than yourself," he said.

Asked whether such coalitions were merely preaching to the converted, Schreiber acknowledged that extremists are with some exceptions beyond reach — but that getting public figures to speak out about bigotry and hatred was also a means of reaching and mobilizing good people who had until now downplayed the dangers.

"People who were on the sidelines are saying how can I get involved, how can we expose acts of hate before they become dangerous," he said. He cited the example of a Washington D.C. man whose family turned him into police when they sensed he was planning a copy cat attack after Pittsburgh.

Awareness of hatred exuding from the margins is as important as watching out for suspicious packages, he said.

"'See something and say something' is being engaged in security and calling out hate speech," Schreiber said, referring to the Department of Homeland Security catchphrase.

Bernstein of the JCPA said cultivating community relations was key to raising awareness about anti-Semitism.

"The Jewish community needs to build the necessary political capital," he said.

JWI's Jacobs similarly described how an old friendship with a local DJ took on a surprising twist. Twelve years ago, Gregory Roche, who has a show on DC101, the capital's largest rock station, decided that it was unfair that Christmas got all the seasonal music.

"So, he decided that one night of Hannukah, he would play music by Jewish rockers (think KISS, Beastie Boys, etc.)," she wrote. Since then, Jacobs has co-hosted the annual "Jew Rock Marathon."

"Anyway, this year, for the first time, he decided to have an on-air fundraiser with proceeds going to the JCC of Pittsburgh. I do think things like 'Jew Rock Marathon' help to address hate — if someone learns a rock group they love happen to be Jewish — who knows how feelings could change," she wrote.

Matthew Berger, the vice president for communications at Hillel International, said alliance building was a natural for Jews on campus.

"Being vocal and present in the community — that's our best asset," he said.

"Sometimes people aren't aware of what we might consider dog whistles, it's not clear that everybody sees George Soros as a dog whistle so it's our duty to educate how that's been perceived by Jews," Bernstein said. The billionaire philanthropist's liberal agenda has made him a target of the right, but also among extremists who accuse him of orchestrating a global conspiracy.

Jonathan Greenblatt, the CEO of the Anti-Defamation League, doesn't think his organization was caught off guard by Pittsburgh.

"At ADL, we were shocked but sadly not surprised by the horrific synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh in October," he said in an email. "It came on the heels of a 57 percent surge in anti-Semitic incidents in 2017, the largest such spike we have seen in almost 40 years of tracking this data. It was a reminder that incitement and intolerance can yield deadly consequences."



Jonathan Greenblatt, Anti-Defamation League CEO, speaks at the ADL National Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C., May 6, 2018. He says the ADL was "shocked but sadly not surprised" by the Pittsburgh shooting. (Michael Brochstein/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images)

Still, Greenblatt said his organization was taking on anti-bias education with "renewed vigor" since Pittsburgh.

"We're working to expand our footprint and our day-to-day impact, as well as broaden our reach in schools with anti-bias education that ideally can inoculate schools from hate," he said.

Greenblatt also urged lobbying of the private sector, particularly social media magnates.

"As we saw the Pittsburgh shooter rail online just minutes before the attack, we want to see the social media companies do a better job of policing their platforms to ensure that the safety of their users," he said. "ADL recently opened a Center for Technology and Society to facilitate our collaboration with the companies to ensure that their policies and products effectively monitor hate."

Start at the top

Trump and his aides deny bias, but Bernstein said that Jews who are close to Trump should urge the White House to distance itself from hate's purveyors.

"White nationalists clearly perceive that they have been given a vote of confidence by the White House, and that places a special obligation to distance himself and his administration in every way possible," he said. "You can ensure that mainstream officials condemn it and marginalize it. You can strengthen legislation and monitoring" of hate groups.

In 2017, the Department of Homeland Security stripped funding from an Obama-era program that tracked the far right; Jewish groups have pressed for its reactivation. They also want the administration to make good on a promise to appoint a global anti-Semitism monitor and restaff the State Department's office to monitor and combat anti-Semitism.

The Orthodox Union's Washington director, Nathan Diament, said his group would intensify lobbying for security funding for non-profits at risk of attack.

"A key part of the OU's plan is to advocate for increased resources for security," he said in an email. "We are doing that in Congress and at the state level – New Jersey's legislature just passed a bill increasing security funding which we were pushing for."

Dan Mariaschin, who directs B'nai B'rith International, said his group was doubling down on gun safety.

"Our staff, in particular our policy team, met to discuss next steps on sensible gun laws," he said, adding that his group was also focusing on getting through hate crimes legislation.

Masters and Schreiber said the untold story of Pittsburgh was that it could have been far worse. The local community had a large training exercise in January, and as a result, people in the Tree of Life synagogue knew to run and hide rather than to hide in place. Schreiber said that during the training, local emergency response personnel learned the security protocols for treating the wounded while was an attacker was still loose — that likely also saved lives, he said.

Rabbi Jeffrey Myers of the Conservative movement Tree of Life congregation had until January not carried his mobile phone on Shabbat — he learned that it was safer to have it handy. His was the first call to 911.

Don't forget who you are, is what Jacobs said she counseled her frightened young staffers.

"I shared that I started baking challah because of 9/11," she said of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. "My children were in nursery school, and when I went to pick them up (it may have been a few days after, I can't remember), but one of the teachers had baked challah with the children and the smell was comforting. In a way, it made me connect with all the generations who have come before, who have also survived. I told the staff that there is much to be found in our traditions and rituals, and in gathering as a community."

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