

Interfaith support rises along with attacks

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When Adam Zeff, rabbi of the Germantown Jewish Centre in Philadelphia, a short distance from Mount Carmel Cemetery, heard that vandals had desecrated the place where several families in his congregation had loved ones buried, he felt compelled to go see.

“These gravestones weigh hundreds of pounds, and some were even reinforced with iron bars connecting them to their bases,” [he wrote in a commentary](#). “Bringing them down to the ground required great force and determination.”

Zeff was not the only one who went that day to Mount Carmel, one of the oldest Jewish cemeteries in Philadelphia.

“Some of them were Jews, some were Christians, and some were Muslims,” he wrote. “No one organized them to come, and they had no clear plan.”

The group of strangers worked together to lift all of the stones they could and replace them on their bases.

Zeff wrote: “The shock, the grief, the worry, and the fear that Jews in Philadelphia and religious and ethnic minorities across America are feeling are real. And the good people of all faiths and races who surround us, who partner with us to push back the darkness with their light—they, too, are real. Neither cancels out the other.”

Zeff’s story of concrete interfaith outreach after an attack was one of many in recent months even as other alarming incidents continued. More than a dozen headstones were knocked over and photos defaced in a Jewish cemetery in Rochester, New York, in early March.

A week earlier, after vandals damaged headstones in a centuries-old Missouri Jewish cemetery, Muslim activists raised more than \$150,000 to fund repairs. And when arsonists destroyed the Victoria Islamic Center in Texas, among those offering space

for Muslim prayers were a synagogue, a Lutheran church, and an Episcopal church.

In another instance, after the Islamic Society of New Tampa, Florida, was burned by an arsonist, Adeel Karim noticed something unusual about donations made to a repair fund he launched: the donations were in multiples of \$18: \$36, \$72, \$90, and more, which initially confused him.

“Then I figured [it] out after clicking on the names Avi, Cohen, Goldstein, Rubin, Fisher,” Karim wrote on social media. “Jews donate in multiples of 18 as a form of what is called ‘Chai.’ It wishes the recipient a long life.”

Since January 9, more than 100 bomb threats have been called in to Jewish community centers, day schools, and other institutions in dozens of states. In no case have explosives been found, but the threats have prompted evacuations. On March 3, the FBI announced the arrest of a man in St. Louis on charges of stalking a woman and making bomb threats in her name to Jewish community centers and other organizations.

Two senators, a Democrat and a Republican, introduced a bill that would allot an additional \$20 million to improve security at faith-based community centers—whether they are Jewish or affiliated with another faith—through an existing Department of Homeland Security program. The funds are not designated for synagogues, mosques, or churches, though attacks against houses of worship and religiously affiliated cemeteries have spiked in recent months. Several mosques have burned, and a bullet was fired through a Hebrew school classroom window in a synagogue in Evansville, Indiana. The Faith-Based Community Center Protection Act would also double the penalty for making a false bomb threat, from five to ten years in prison.

“This legislation would help ensure that community centers like the JCCs have the added protection they need and can focus on serving the community, while the FBI and our Justice Department track down those responsible,” according to a statement from Sen. Martin Heinrich (D., N. Mex.), who filed the legislation February 27 with Sen. Dean Heller (R., Nev.).

President Trump, long criticized for failing to address a surge in hate crimes, began his first address to Congress on February 28 by invoking Black History Month and condemning threats against Jewish institutions and the shooting of Indian men in Kansas City.

His soft-toned speech at points emphasized the commonalities among religious groups and declared that “we are all made by the same God.” And he acknowledged “our Muslim allies” fighting the militants known as the Islamic State. He called them “a network of lawless savages that have slaughtered Muslims and Christians, and men, women, and children of all faiths and beliefs.”

He also defended his January 27 executive order, currently stayed by a federal appeals court, that temporarily bans nationals of seven Muslim-majority nations from visiting the United States. And he promised to fight “radical Islamic terrorism,” enunciating the words to make the point that he would use the phrase, despite even his own national security adviser’s stated belief that it helps extremists to paint the United States as anti-Muslim.

Statistics on hate-related incidents in recent months are hard to come by, though there did appear to be a spike following Trump’s election. The FBI tracks such crimes, but the latest data are from 2015.

More apparent is the rise in the number of hate groups. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, a nonprofit that tracks hate groups and extremists, there were 917 such groups nationwide in 2016, up from 784 in 2014 but still shy of the all-time peak in 2011 of 1,018. The number of anti-Muslim hate groups nearly tripled between 2015 and 2016.

The SPLC attributes the increasing number of such groups, in part, “to a presidential campaign that flirted heavily with extremist ideas.”

These groups “see Trump as someone giving them hope that the state will act on their interests,” said Carolyn Gallaher, a political geographer at American University in Washington and author of *On the Fault Line: Race, Class and the American Patriot Movement*. “Will it only get bigger as they feel they now have a conduit to the White House? Or do people say, ‘Now we can just do it on our own, say what we want to say, and enjoy protections for it’? . . . It will depend in large part on what the administration’s posture is going forward.”

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