

Amid rise in anti-Semitism, Jews find value in being conspicuously Jewish

by [Menachem Wecker](#) in the [March 11, 2020](#) issue



Community members, including Rabbi Chaim Rottenberg, left, celebrate the arrival of a new Torah near the rabbi's residence in Monsey, New York, Sunday, December 29, 2019. A day earlier, a knife-wielding man stormed into the home and stabbed multiple people as they celebrated Hanukkah in the Orthodox Jewish community. (AP Photo/Craig Ruttle)

Pedestrians who encounter Rabbi Levi Greenberg, of El Paso, Texas, know that the Chabad rabbi, who wears a black hat and a long beard, is a Hasidic Jew. Sometimes they ask him why he dresses as he does.

Greenberg tailors his responses to the questions. He tells inquirers about his skull cap, a yarmulke, that it reminds adherents to be aware constantly of God above, and those asking about his ritual fringes, tzitzis, that the garment symbolizes the Torah's 613 commandments.

"When they see that you know what you're talking about and that you're proud of what you're saying, and that you're not ashamed about the fact that you're wearing something that is different from everyone else, they respect that," he says.

A wave of anti-Semitic attacks has American Jews on edge in recent years as attackers have targeted Jewish houses of worship, community centers, and shops. Even Jews just walking down the street have been attacked.

For Orthodox Jews, the recent attacks pose a particular challenge: how to ensure their safety without hiding their Jewish identity. This can be true both for Hasidic Jews, like Greenberg, whose black coats, yarmulkes, and tzitzis identify them as Jewish and for other Orthodox Jews, who also wear outward signs of their religion.

Zev Eleff, a rabbi and chief academic officer at Hebrew Theological College, an Orthodox school in Skokie, Illinois, knows Modern Orthodox Jews who for some time have worn baseball caps over yarmulkes in Europe. Eleff, author of a new book *Authentically Orthodox: A Tradition-Bound Faith in American Life*, said he is now hearing of American Jews covering their head coverings to "cloak" their religious identities.

The yarmulke had a comeback in the United States after Israel won the Six-Day War in 1967, according to Eleff. Rabbinic sermons of the era referred to American Jewish pride in being identifiable as such, particularly after Israel's victory, which they considered miraculous.

Current fears mark a departure from a "steady incline" in Jewish identification since the 1960s, he says. Whereas pre-1967 hesitancy to identify Jewishly in public was about discrimination, today it's about anti-Semitism.

"Now, I think there's a nervousness about it, but not from a sense of questioning their own identity," Eleff says. "It's about safety. That it's not worth the risk."

At Chicago's Catholic Theological Union, where Malka Simkovich chairs Jewish studies and directs Catholic-Jewish studies, her own students resist the notion that

she is Orthodox, because they don't think she looks or dresses the part.

She said that some of her students assume that "traditional Judaism by definition cannot evolve."

Allison Josephs, founder and director of the nonprofit Jew in the City, which works to reverse negative associations about religious Jews, spent three hours on January 13 running a pop-up coffee and rugelach (a Polish Jewish pastry) station in Harlem. The idea, she says, came from a 2013 exhibit in Germany where visitors, many of whom knew little or nothing about Jews, could observe and talk to a live "Jew in a box."

"I realized we could do this with an Orthodox Jew and do it on the street," Josephs says. "Maybe even in multiple cities at a time." She estimates about 50 people stopped by in Harlem.

Being identifiably Jewish has always been a source of pride to Josephs. "But as attacks get more violent, there is a tinge of fear mixed in," she says. "It's not just our clothing that identifies us. It's that we shop at kosher stores, regularly attend synagogues, and send our kids to Jewish schools. It is hard to not feel like all of these spaces put targets on our backs."

To pedestrians who stopped by in Harlem, Josephs explained Orthodox Jewish values.

"We believe that every person is created in the image of God, that we must love our neighbor as ourself, that we must pursue righteousness, and that the world is built on kindness," she says. "The most important thing non-Jews should know is that we are not a perfect people, but if they had a bad experience with someone Jewish or know someone who did, that shouldn't reflect on the entire people."

Rabbi Eli Steinberg, who is Orthodox but not Hasidic, says outsiders may be surprised about how much his community is "of the world" despite rejecting popular culture and about how centrally it places scholarship and study.

"It animates everything we do," he says.

Communities like the Orthodox one in Lakewood, New Jersey, where Steinberg is director of communications for the yeshiva Beth Medrash Govoha, are also a model for how communities can support each other, he says. (He spoke about his personal perspective and experiences, not for his employer.)

Steinberg's community offers privatized social services, including ambulances, essential housewares for young engaged couples, and fresh meals for those in the hospital—all things that he thinks would surprise outsiders.

In public, Steinberg is identifiably Jewish.

“It means that despite the feeling of danger the current moment has brought out, I’m necessarily comfortable proclaiming who I am and what I see as my unique role in this world—even at the cost of my safety,” he says. “The added feeling of danger makes me recognize that it’s worth it.” —Religion News Service