

Schumer announces more security funding for houses of worship after synagogue threats

by [Richa Karmarkar](#)

May 8, 2024



The congregation of Beit Simchat Torah in New York. While away on a retreat, a bomb threat was emailed to many leaders. (Photo courtesy of Congregation Beit Simchat Torah)

On May 4, some 40 New York City rabbis and synagogue staff received the same chilling email in their inboxes: “I have set a bomb in your building. You have a few hours to disarm, or else blood will shatter everywhere.”

“I have talked about this for a long time with my community,” said Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum of Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, one of the synagogues addressed in

the email. “We plan for all this. We have protocols in place and we have increased security. We always need to be well prepared.”

An LGBTQ+-affirming synagogue, Beit Simchat Torah has faced similar bomb scares before, but since the Israel-Hamas war began in October, many Jewish congregations, no matter their views on the war, have dealt with the threat of antisemitic attacks.

“I think there’s tremendous anxiety and fear and concern about the world in which we live,” said Kleinbaum. “As the LGBT synagogue, we experience the world from a place of knowing there’s a lot of hate. But we always have a choice. Do we focus on that hate? Or do we focus on love?”

Kleinbaum’s Midtown Manhattan congregation was holding its annual retreat away from the building that was threatened, but two other synagogues, Congregation Rodeph Sholom on the Upper West Side and the Brooklyn Heights Synagogue, were evacuated as a precaution.

And later, the New York Police Department swept the synagogues and found the threats to be unfounded.

“Threats have been determined not to be credible, but we will not tolerate individuals sowing fear & antisemitism,” [tweeted](#) New York Governor Kathy Hochul. “Those responsible must be held accountable for their despicable actions.”

An FBI investigation into the source of the email, calling itself “Terrorizer 111,” is underway.

According to recent NYPD [data](#), anti-Jewish hate crimes have jumped by 45 percent this year, fueled by the ongoing Israel-Hamas war and the resulting tensions among people in the US with ties to Palestine and Israel. Between October 7, when Hamas launched its attack on Israel, and March 31 of 2024, there have been 241 confirmed incidents of antisemitism, including vandalism, robbery and felony assault.

In the wake of the weekend’s false bomb threats, Senate Majority leader announced on May 5 a \$400 million increase in federal funds available for security in houses of worship. In his announcement, he added that bomb threats in New York are the highest in the country.

“The second I heard about the threats, your heart sinks, you hope it’s a hoax. And in this case, thank God, it was,” he said. “But that doesn’t (negate) the fear, the trauma when synagogues and other houses of worship have to be evacuated. The fear and trauma when they have to be evacuated stays with the congregants, and people who go the next day wonder, ‘Is it going to happen again, am I safe?’”

The existing Non Profit Security Grant Program, which offered \$305 million to accepted nonprofits last year, is administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The increase announced by Schumer will provide more money for “both security personnel to guard their institutions as well as cameras, fencing, windows that would resist any kind of attack,” said the majority leader.

Houses of worship must apply by May 21 to tap into the first round of funds. FEMA said it will assist smaller houses of worship with grant writing.

“This is a persistent cascade of intolerance and even violence, and the state of hate has become a boiling point in America, and it demands a much stronger response,” Schumer said. “We’re going to keep funding so that no synagogue or other religious institution is going to have to live in the fear that they now live with.”

State Assemblyman Alex Bores, whose Upper East Side district is home to four of the synagogues threatened on May 4, calls the attacks on Shabbat “deeply unsettling.” Bores, notified of the threats by several sources, worked with NYPD to respond quickly, as “a bomb threat is not something you make assumptions about.”

“The first promise of government is to keep everyone safe,” Bores said in an interview. “Something that we desperately need is to find ways to counteract hate, both, I would say, from encouraging more dialogue and helping to guide people to better views, but of course, also in providing hard security so that everyone can be safe.”

Just two weeks ago, he said, the state added \$35 million to its own Securing Communities Against Hate grant program. Earlier in April, New York lawmakers introduced a bill that would expand the state’s criteria for a hate crime to include trespassing in places of worship.

At Beit Simchat Torah, Kleinbaum said her congregation plans to look into the possibility of funding and that she has been “very grateful to Senator Schumer for really thinking these things through.”

But the rabbi said a more pressing goal is the “deeper level of security,” which will happen by “building a world in which God’s presence can exist without this kind of hate.”

“I always say one of the best responses to antisemitism is to be more Jewish,” she said. “And that what ultimately will defeat those who hate us is for us to build more meaningful, more engaged Jewish lives and Jewish institutions.” —Religion News Service