

Repaired Texas Synagogue Reopens Months After Hostage Crisis

In the three months since Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker and three of his congregants were held at gunpoint in their Texas synagogue, new carpet has been laid in the sanctuary, the walls have been repainted, the entry retiled and new doors installed. He said it has been healing to watch.

"Each time I came back in, I got to see us moving forward," Cytron-Walker said.

Congregation Beth Israel in the Fort Worth suburb of Colleyville was rededicated on Friday, and members will celebrate Shabbat in their own building for the first time since the attack.

After the 10-hour standoff on Jan. 15 ended with the escape of the remaining hostages and an FBI tactical team rushing in and killing the gunman, the synagogue was left with broken doors and windows, bullet holes and shattered glass.

Anna Salton Eisen, a founder of the synagogue, said the scene reminded her of abandoned synagogues in Poland still marked with bullets from World War II that she saw while visiting that country in 1998 with her parents—both Holocaust survivors.

"I was standing in my synagogue this time and it was just empty and silent and it showed the marks of the violence that had occurred," Eisen said.

Eisen said the return will help the healing process.

"We are not defeated and we are not going to live in fear," she said.

Leaders of the congregation made up of about 160 families said that as they return after holding services at a Methodist church during the repairs, they've been struck by the outpouring of love and support they've received. They also want to focus on fighting antisemitism, which led the gunman to their synagogue.

"It's my hope and my prayer that there's greater awareness about how damaging hate can be," said Cytron-Walker, who starts a new job in July at Temple Emanuel in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

He was preparing for a morning service on Jan. 15 at when a stranger came to the synagogue's door. Cytron-Walker welcomed the man who said he'd spent the winter night outside, chatting with him and making him tea.

Then, as Cytron-Walker and three of his congregants prayed – and others watched online – a click from a gun could be heard. During the standoff, British national Malik Faisal Akram demanded the release of a Pakistani woman serving a lengthy prison sentence in nearby Fort Worth after being convicted of trying to kill U.S. troops.

The hostages have said Akram cited antisemitic stereotypes, believing that Jews wield the kind of power that could get the woman released.

One hostage, 85-year-old Lawrence Schwartz was released after about six hours. At about 9 p.m., the remaining hostages made their escape as Cytron-Walker threw a chair at Akram and the hostages ran out a side door.

Cytron-Walker has credited past security training for getting them out safely, including training he received from the Secure Community Network, founded in 2004 by Jewish organizations.

The hostage-taking in Texas came just over three years after

America's deadliest antisemitic attack, when a gunman killed 11 worshippers from three congregations meeting at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue.

"We believe the training is absolutely critical," said Michael Masters, Secure Community Network's national director and CEO. "You very rarely rise to an occasion in a critical incident, you fall back to your level of training."

He said that last year they trained over 17,000 people, and that number was surpassed in the first three months of this year.

Congregation Beth Israel President Michael Finfer said Thursday that it will continue to do security training and that going forward it will have "far more police security than we've had in the past."

Jeff Cohen, one of the four hostages, said he's excited about the return.

"That's part of that processing, it's to look at where we're going to be," said Cohen, the synagogue's vice president and security director. {eo}

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