

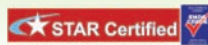
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Rising from the ashes

I will never forget Friday, June 18, 1999, when my phone rang around 4 a.m. On the line was a Sacramento County sheriff's deputy, who told me to go as quickly as possible to our synagogue on Sierra Boulevard.

He also shared with me that three synagogues were on fire: Congregation B'nai Israel on Riverside Boulevard, Congregation Beth Shalom in Carmichael and Keneset Israel Torah Center on Morse Avenue. While the damage to the three synagogues was estimated at more than \$1 million, the emotional impact was much greater. My first thought was, "How do I explain this unspeakable act to the children of my congregation?"

I was asked by the media why our congregation was not targeted. We found out that our address was listed incorrectly in the phone directory.

The FBI quickly uncovered two suspects, brothers, who had connections with two nationally known hate groups, the World Church of the Creator and Aryan Nations. The FBI informed us that a "hit list" had been found with many of our names. Patrol cars were parked in front of my and other Jewish leaders' homes for several weeks.

The fires were considered among the worst acts of anti-Semitism in U.S. history. The two brothers were arrested and pleaded guilty to the arsons, along with a later firebombing of an abortion clinic and murder of a gay couple.

I will never ever forget when, three days after the arsons, more than 5,000 people gathered at Sacramento's Community Center Theater in solidarity with the Jewish community. Leaders from all faith communities sat on the stage with one unified message: Sacramento United Against Hate.

Money was donated by organizations, faith groups and people from all over the country to help the three synagogues rebuild. The Unity Center was born with the leadership of Darrell Steinberg, then the state Senate's leader and now Sacramento's mayor.

After the arsons, our synagogue leadership devised new security measures, including a



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wrought iron fence and security cameras. How sad that we had to create a barrier to keep us safe. June 18, 1999 was a watershed moment for our Jewish community.

Fast forward to October 2018: A synagogue in Pittsburgh was attacked by a gunman who murdered 11 Jews and wounded six other people. And on the last day of Passover in April, at another synagogue in San Diego County, a gunman murdered one Jew and wounded three others, including the rabbi.

These synagogue shootings have affected Jews across America. We believed we were immune from the kind of anti-Semitism that has been rampant in Europe, but the Jewish community in the United

States has experienced near-historic levels of anti-Semitism. If the United States is not safe for Jews, then the very future of America—and indeed the civilized world—is in real danger.

As we commemorate the 20th anniversary of the synagogue fires, may all of us resolve to speak out against the scourge of anti-Semitism and hatred towards "the other." If we can transform our society into a more loving and accepting one, then the hatred and acts of violence will become a footnote in the history of our civilization. I continue to pray to see that day. □

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