

Texas rabbi urges Americans to view each other in God's image

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COLLEYVILLE (RNS)—The Texas rabbi who recently survived a hostage-taking at his synagogue gave the closing remarks at an online White House briefing Jan. 21, with an impassioned plea for civility and toning down heated rhetoric.

"I am so grateful, and I'm also a little sad that it takes something like this to bring people together," said Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker, who was taken hostage at gunpoint for 11 hours along with three other congregants at Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville on Jan. 15. The rabbi engineered his escape, along with that of the other hostages, and they emerged unhurt.

"If we can do a better job to remember that we're all created in God's image, *'b'tzelem elohim,'*" he continued, using the Hebrew phrase for "in the image of God."

"If we could all do more to tone down the rhetoric in politics and on talk shows and remember that we can debate ideas. We don't have to agree. We also don't have to attack one another personally to get our point across."

The White House briefing was hosted by Chanan Weissman, White House liaison to the Jewish community, and it included an assistant to the president for Homeland Security, the associate attorney general and representatives from the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security.

Each one of them spoke briefly about the efforts they are taking to investigate the incident and provide support, not only for Jews but for all Americans at houses of worship.

They reiterated the FBI is treating the attack on the synagogue as “an act of terrorism.” The bureau initially said the motives of the gunman, a British citizen named Malik Faisal Akram, were “not specifically related to the Jewish community.”

Akram wanted the release of Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani neuroscientist who is serving an 86-year prison sentence in nearby Fort Worth and appeared to believe the rabbi could get in touch with the right people to get her released, drawing on the antisemitic trope that Jews secretly control the moves of politicians.

‘Shabbat of peace and wholeness’

Cytron-Walker has repeatedly expressed his gratitude for the safety and active-shooter response training he received through the Jewish community’s Secure Community Network, the Anti-Defamation League and the FBI. His synagogue also received a grant from the federal Nonprofit Security Grants Program to retrofit buildings with additional security measures.

On Friday’s call, he again thanked the government for all it’s doing to buttress security at houses of worship and then reflected a bit on Shabbat, the Jewish sabbath, and on the faith’s obligation to set aside the day and make it holy.

“Shabbat in Hebrew means to cease,” he said. “God-willing, we’re all willing to just stop for a moment, with everything we’ve been through collectively—not just me and the other hostages, not just my congregation—but collectively. If we can just stop and focus on that that’s most important in our lives.”

He then identified family and community as among those most important things and wished everyone “a Shabbat of peace and wholeness.”