



Anti-Semitism On the Rise

WHERE WE STAND IN BLOOMINGTON

In January, anti-Semitic graffiti was discovered in a boys' restroom at Bloomington High School North. Among the pen and marker drawings, swastikas and the words "Kill Jews," were found on the stall walls. This was the third time anti-Semitic writing had been found in the boys' restrooms within a matter of weeks.

After the initial incidents, the restrooms were more closely monitored, with maintenance staff checking them much more frequently for signs of graffiti. Surveillance footage showed a 16-year-old entering and leaving the restroom around the time new graffiti appeared. Later, when a Bloomington Police Department detective interviewed the teenager, he admitted writing on the walls, but denied scrawling anything anti-Semitic.

"We do feel we have isolated it to one student, so while it was horrific, we need to keep it in context," says Andrea Mobley, at the time Bloomington North's interim principal. "We have nearly 1,600 students who are doing the right things most of the time."

But while the perpetrator has apparently been found, there are questions that remain

unanswered. Why did he do it? Why does he harbor these feelings toward Jews? Where did he learn to think that way? What of the Jewish students who were exposed to the threats implied by the graffiti? And why, in each instance, was the graffiti reported by a Jewish student when countless other, non-Jewish students must have seen the anti-Semitic scrawls?

The fact that the perpetrator was a high school student should be of great concern given the most recent findings of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) *Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents*. Published in 2018, the study shows the number of anti-Semitic incidents was nearly 60 percent higher in 2017 than in 2016, the largest single-year increase on record. That sharp rise was largely due to a significant increase in incidents in K-12 schools and on college campuses, which nearly doubled for the second year in a row.

Instances of vandalism with anti-Semitic messages and symbols, as well as harassment and assaults against Jewish children, increased 94 percent in 2017 over 2016 (from 235 to 457) after increasing 106 percent in 2016 from 2015 (from 114 to 235).

The ADL reports that K-12 schools have exceeded public spaces (such as parks and streets) as the locations with the most anti-Semitic incidents, and surpassed homes, businesses, Jewish institutions, and college campuses. Of incidents in K-12 schools, 231 were instances of harassment of Jewish students by their peers. These included long-term anti-Semitic bullying.

Examples of anti-Semitism among young people are easy to find.

In early March, photos appeared on social media of high school students in Newport Beach, California, giving the Nazi "Sieg Heil" salute while gathered around a swastika formed with red plastic drinking cups. They were engaging in a beer pong game some of the students called "German rage cage" on their social media posts. In the game, some cups were arranged in a Star of David pattern and others in a swastika. Players were divided into teams of "Jews" and "Nazis" The game, which has been documented at other schools across the country, is commonly known as "Alcoholocaust."

By Carmen Siering

Photography by Rodney Margison • Illustration by Joe Lee

Newport Harbor High School was quick to respond, inviting Eva Schloss, a survivor of Auschwitz and the stepsister of Anne Frank, to speak with students the following week. Many students expressed remorse in letters that were posted online. However, just days after Schloss' visit, flyers with Nazi swastikas were found posted at the high school.

Also in March, a video of teens in Alabama was posted on Twitter. In it, the teens are overheard discussing both blacks and Jews. One boy says, "If the Holocaust never happened, Jews would be running the world right now," to which a girl responds, "It's fine, we just need n-----s gone, so it's half-mixed Oreos. What are you going to do with them?" The boy responds, "You stick them in a concentration camp and fuck [inaudible] them."

It's not just among teens, however.

In February, French President Emmanuel Macron, said, "Our country, and for that matter all of Europe and most Western democracies, seems to be facing a resurgence of anti-Semitism unseen since World War II."

France has the largest Jewish population in Europe and the third largest in the world. Last year, it saw a 74 percent increase in anti-Semitic incidents. In the first weeks of 2019, 96 tombs were desecrated in a Jewish cemetery in the eastern part of the country, the word "juden" was scrawled on a bagel shop in Paris, and a street portrait of Auschwitz survivor Simone Veil was marred with a swastika. Then, on February 16, a group of Yellow Vest protestors cornered one of France's leading intellectuals, Alain Finkielkraut, taunting him with slurs and shouting "Dirty Zionist, you're going to die," and "Go home to Israel; France is ours."

In the United Kingdom, Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn is under attack for what many call his anti-Semitic political stance. In February, eight members of the Labour Party resigned, citing anti-Semitism in the party as one of their chief concerns.

Here at home, first-term Democratic U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar sent out a February tweet suggesting that Israel's allies in American politics were motivated by money—"It's all about the Benjamins baby"—drawing immediate rebuke from Republicans and fellow Democrats alike.

Omar's continued anti-Semitic comments, including a March statement that domestic support for Israel amounts to "allegiance to a foreign country," prompted Democratic leadership in the House to draft a resolution directly condemning

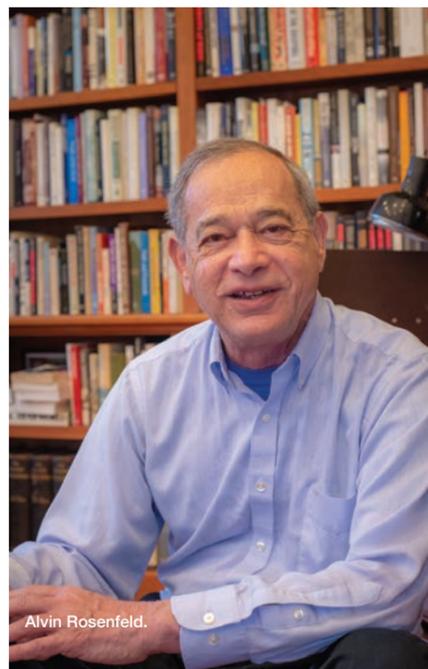
anti-Semitism. What many critics called a "watered-down" version of that resolution—one that included statements related to virtually all forms of bigotry and hatred, not just anti-Semitism—was passed by the House in March.

What is anti-Semitism?

Defining anti-Semitism is easy: hostility toward or prejudice against Jews. Understanding it, however, is difficult. As Deborah E. Lipstadt writes in her book *Antisemitism: Here and Now* (Schocken), "It is hard, if not impossible, to explain something that is essentially irrational, delusional, and absurd."

For Bloomington resident Alvin Rosenfeld, explaining and studying anti-Semitism is the work of a lifetime. Rosenfeld is the founder and director of the Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism at Indiana University. Created in 2009, it is one of just two such institutes in the country (the other is at Yale University). "I've been a long-time scholar of the Holocaust. I never set out to be a scholar of anti-Semitism," says Rosenfeld. "But I felt it was important for people to understand today's anti-Semitism, contemporary anti-Semitism, not just that carried out under Hitler."

"There is a revival of a rhetoric of Jews as the children of Satan."



Alvin Rosenfeld.

Hostility toward Jews dates back centuries. "It is the case that, for a long time, it was [based in] religion—specifically Christianity, that saw Jews as Christ killers," Rosenfeld explains. "Beginning in the 19th century and culminating in the Holocaust, you still have this fury against the Jews, but it's not fueled by religious doctrine but the fury of the Nazis. The Nazis considered Jews an inferior people who could contaminate the rest of society."

Different from the belief that the Jews are inferior, the anti-Semitism we're seeing today, Rosenfeld says, calls back to an early 20th-century rhetoric founded upon *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a fabricated text first published in Russia in 1903. "It is the idea that the Jews are organized to seize world power," Rosenfeld explains. "That the Jews are organized to control the world media, the global economies, that they are the hidden hand behind political power." While exposed as a fraud as early as 1921 by *The Times of London*, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is still available in multiple languages, in print and on the internet, and presented as a genuine document by multiple anti-Semitic groups.

Beyond that, Rosenfeld adds, there is still a bit of the old religious hatred that lingers. "There is a revival of a rhetoric of Jews as the children of Satan," Rosenfeld says. "This guy in Pittsburgh had on his website language about the Jews as children of Satan." The "guy in Pittsburgh" to whom Rosenfeld refers is Robert Bowers, the gunman who took the lives of 11 people and wounded seven more during a mass shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue on October 27, 2018. It was the deadliest attack on the Jewish community in the history of the United States. Bowers had posted anti-Semitic comments on the social media platform Gab, which is popular with white supremacists and the alt-right, just before the shooting.

Before Bowers' Gab account was deactivated by the company, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) did a screen capture and, in its analysis, found that "in the 19 days before Bowers carried out his act of mass murder, he posted memes and comments at least 68 times." The SPLC also notes evidence that Bowers "engaged with numerous anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that have long been in circulation among neo-Nazis and white nationalists." Like *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

But it's not just the alt-right spouting anti-Semitism these days. It's not even just the

far right. "The far left takes an anti-Zionist turn," Rosenfeld explains. "They don't see the right of Israel to exist."



Photographs of the anti-Semitic graffiti found in the boys' restroom at Bloomington High School North in January.

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In a recent op-ed, *Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne wrote of his experiences as a Catholic growing up in "the most Jewish neighborhood" in his city and the loving relationships he and his family had with their neighbors there. Reflecting on comments made by Rep. Omar and others, he notes, "I know full well that you can love Israel, be critical of its current government, and truly despise anti-Semitism, all at the same time. What you cannot do is play fast and loose with language that cannot help but be seen as anti-Semitic."

"They don't really mean it, right?"

The anti-Semitic graffiti at Bloomington North was discovered by a male Jewish student. He took photos, shared them with a female friend, and together they approached the school's interim principal,

Andrea Mobley. The female student, also Jewish, spoke with *Bloom* but asked that her name not be used. She says the way the incident was handled was troubling, mostly because it was not addressed in the classroom. A letter did go home to parents and students reminding them, "If you see something, say something." However, as her mother points out, no one did.

"It's clear to me that this graffiti wasn't seen only by a Jewish student," her mother says. Yet no other students came forward to let administrators know of the anti-Semitic writings.

No one tracks the number of Jewish students at Bloomington North, but the mother *Bloom* spoke with said she could speculate. "Certainly not all of them participate in Jewish communal life," she says. "But we've guessed there are maybe a dozen out of 1,600 students. So less than 1 percent."

For her daughter, being part of that "less than 1 percent" has been tough lately. "Up until a year ago, I hadn't experienced much because of

my faith,” she says. “But this year, I have experienced more and more. A lot of people joking about money. Someone made a ‘Jews killed Jesus’ joke earlier this year. And I had someone assume I was insanely smart over the summer. When I asked her why, she said Jews are smarter and she referenced a Nazi bell curve.”

What’s changed in the past year? “Her time at North has dovetailed with the Trump era,” her mother suggests. “I’m 49 and I’ve lived in some big communities and some very small, and I’ve felt marginalized at times. But if you had asked me about my sense of place in this country five years ago, I would have had a very different answer from today. We do not feel a sense of welcome and inclusion the way we did five years ago.”

She goes on to say that while their Jewish identity is very front and center, it previously felt like a non-issue. Now, not so much. “We know we have tremendous privilege as white Americans,” she says. “But that’s tricky, to be seen on the outside as part of the dominant culture but really not being part of the dominant culture.”

Her daughter, listening, reflects on her mother’s comments. “That’s where you end up gaslighting yourself,” she says. “When you see ‘Kill all Jews’ on the school walls—but they don’t mean it because they don’t really know any Jews. Or when they joke about me stealing their money. Because, they don’t really mean it, right?”

Have you heard of Auschwitz?

Looking at the findings from two recent polls, one might begin to understand where children get their anti-Semitic ideas.

A CNN “Anti-Semitism in Europe” poll, conducted in September 2018, offered evidence of the rise in those attitudes across seven countries:

- Three in ten adults say Jewish people have too much influence in finance and business across the world compared with other people.
- One in five adults say Jewish people have too much influence in media across the world compared to other people.
- Three in 10 adults agree Jewish people use the Holocaust to advance their position or to achieve certain goals.
- Over half of adults say they are not aware of ever having socialized with a Jewish person.

A comparable poll, conducted in October

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2016 and spring 2017 by the Anti-Defamation League in the United States, found similar attitudes here:

- Three in 10 Americans believe that Jews are “more loyal to Israel than to America.”
- Three in 10 Americans accept the anti-Semitic notion that the Jews “killed Jesus.”
- One in four Americans believe that “Jews still talk too much about what happened to them in the Holocaust.”

Looking at the polls’ findings, particularly those concerning the Holocaust, brings to mind the words of author George Santayana: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

Next year marks the 85th anniversary of the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws in Germany, which stripped German Jews of their citizenship. It also marks the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II. Eleven million people were killed during the Holocaust, 6 million of them Jews. Other groups targeted by the Nazis included homosexuals, the Roma, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the disabled. By the end of the war, two-thirds of Europe’s Jews had been murdered by the Nazis.

For more than 70 years, the phrase “never again” has been associated with the Holocaust and its survivors. And yet, a study last year found that many Americans lack even a basic knowledge of the Holocaust—and that lack is most evident among millennials, those 18 to 34.

The Holocaust Knowledge and Awareness Study, commissioned by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, found that 70 percent of Americans say fewer people seem to care about the Holocaust than used to and 58 percent believe something like the Holocaust could happen again.

Yet, even while believing fewer people care and worrying that something similar could happen, many of those surveyed revealed a startling lack of Holocaust awareness.

In the survey, 11 percent of U.S. adults answered that they “haven’t heard of” or “are not sure if they have heard of” the Holocaust. That number rose to 22 percent among millennials. And while approximately 6 million Jews were murdered during the Holocaust, nearly one-third of all Ameri-

cans and four in 10 millennials believe that 2 million or fewer Jews were killed.

When asked to name a single concentration camp or ghetto of the more than 40,000 scattered across Europe during World War II, 45 percent of all U.S. adults and 49 percent of millennials were unable to do so. And when asked to identify Auschwitz, 41 percent of all adults and 66 percent of millennials were unable to identify it as a concentration or extermination camp.

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum says at least 1.3 million people were deported to Auschwitz from 1940 to 1945, and 1.1 million of them were killed there. Built in Nazi-occupied Poland, it was the largest of the concentration camps.

Teaching our children

In February, U.S. Rep. Carolyn Maloney of New York reintroduced the Never Again Education Act. The legislation, which would create a U.S. Department of Education grant program giving teachers the resources and training necessary to educate children about the Holocaust, was first proposed last year.

Such a bill is necessary because only 12 states have mandatory Holocaust and genocide education; Indiana is one of them. However, even with the state law, students in school districts across Indiana can have very different educational experiences.

According to the *Indiana Academic Standards and Resource Guide*, it is left up to individual school districts to decide what to teach and how much emphasis to place on any given topic. The guide states, in part, “Academic standards do not prescribe any particular curriculum. Curriculum tools are selected at the district/school level and adopted through the local school board.”

Andrea Mobley, interim principal at Bloomington North and assistant superintendent for human resources and operations with Monroe County Community School Corporation, says, “The Holocaust and anti-Semitism are taught as part of the curriculum in all of our schools—in social studies, world languages, and in English classes, among others.”

But how those subjects are taught is up to the teacher. For example, the Jewish student at Bloomington North says she has had some Holocaust education, but it has been very cursory, and in one class the teacher emphasized that more Russians died of starvation during World War II than the number of Jews who were murdered by the Nazis.



Batchelor Middle School teacher Jeffrey Rudkin (third from left) in Poland with Holocaust survivor Eva Kor (in the red hat) and B-TV students for the 65th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz in 2010. Courtesy photo

Naomi Young is a junior at Bloomington High School South. She says when she was a seventh-grade student at Towles New Tech Intermediate School, a magnet school in Fort Wayne, Indiana, she studied the Holocaust and the Syrian genocide in a combined social studies/English class. As an eighth-grade student at Jackson Creek Middle School here in Bloomington, *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank was required reading. Now in a U.S. history course, Young says she is just starting a section on World War II where Holocaust education will be taught.

Former Bloomington North student Caleb Poer, now a freshman at Indiana University, had yet a different experience. “The Holocaust was discussed briefly, if at all, and only as a component of World

War II in a U.S. history class,” he says. “I do remember discussing *Kristallnacht* [the “night of broken glass,” a 1938 pogrom in Nazi Germany], but certainly no mention of anti-Semitism.”

Poer did read *The Diary of a Young Girl*, but that was on his own, and he remembers *Night* by Elie Wiesel (Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize recipient) being optional reading in middle school. He also remembers that he read (on his own) “about Auschwitz and Josef Mengele in the book written by the twins that survived the Holocaust who live in Indiana.”

Bloomington kids visit Auschwitz

Poer is referring to Terre Haute, Indiana, resident Eva Kor, 85, and her twin sister, Miriam. The two were born in Romania and, in May 1944, at the age of 10, were transported with their parents and two older sisters to Auschwitz. Their parents and sisters were taken away and almost immediately killed. Eva and Miriam joined 3,000 other twins who were forced to take part in genetic experiments conducted by Dr. Josef Mengele. (See “Eva Kor of Terre Haute: A Holocaust Survivor Who Believes in Forgiveness” in the August/September 2015 issue of *Bloom*).

In 1995, two years after the death of Miriam, Kor opened the CANDLES Holocaust Museum and Education Center in Terre Haute. (The acronym stands for Children of Auschwitz Nazi Deadly Lab Experiments Survivors. Kor first used it when she began searching for the twins’ medical files in 1985). Kor’s message of healing, hope, and forgiveness, as well as her ongoing remembrance of the Holocaust, has reached an audience far beyond Indiana. And her friendship with one Bloomington teacher has allowed students here—and across the state—to learn much more about the Holocaust.



(left) Caleb Poer. (right) Naomi Young.

Jeffrey Rudkin has been a teacher at Batchelor Middle School for 27 years. For most of those years he's taught video production, and his B-TV students have produced thousands of videos, winning more than 600 awards. On his B-TV webpage, Rudkin states: "We are constantly looking for ways that middle school kids can help to repair the world."

Rudkin's teaching philosophy and Kor's worldview so neatly align that back in 2003 he and a group of students made a trip to the CANDLES Museum. "That's where they first got introduced to Eva," Rudkin says. "We went there and initially thought it would be about a 15-minute interview. It lasted closer to two hours." The friendship between Rudkin and Kor has lasted much longer.

After that interview, Rudkin says his students became captivated by the Holocaust and sought out other survivors. They made a documentary that won several awards, and shared it with Kor, who, in turn, invited Rudkin to select a group of students to join her when she returned to Auschwitz on the 60th anniversary of its liberation.

Since then, Kor has invited Rudkin and his students to travel with her to Auschwitz two more times, in 2010 and 2015. Eighteen students have had the experience, and Rudkin says he plans to take another group next year. "This is going to be a big one—the 75th. They feel it will be the last of the ceremonies with actual survivors there," he says.

Rudkin says it's an important trip for the students. That first trip allowed them to capture footage and interviews to include in a nine-hour, six-part documentary about World War II (with 90 minutes devoted to the Holocaust). The Indiana Department of Education asked that the video and its accompanying book be sent to every middle school in the state. Rudkin says he's received requests for the video from schools in other states, as well.

"The trip makes a big impression," Rudkin says. "It's been very emotional each time. It makes them think, and they learn to value other's opinions and to treat others with respect—because they see what happens if you don't. They saw the worst of humanity by going to Auschwitz. It changed their lives in many ways. And it's also changed the lives of the students back here who saw their video when they returned."



The situation at IU

Talia Schiff is a 20-year-old Jewish student at IU. She hails from the Chicago suburbs where she was surrounded by a large Jewish population. While Schiff feels that most people she's encountered in Bloomington don't harbor any anti-Semitic sentiments, she's learned that a lot of them don't know many Jews, or much about Judaism, either.

"I was the first Jewish person my roommate had ever met, but she was very welcoming and she wanted to learn about the Jewish religion," Schiff says. "And my friends from the dorm didn't know anything about Judaism, either, but they wanted to learn, too, so I brought them all to Hillel [the college Jewish center] with me."

Another thing Schiff learned was that when people don't know about Judaism, they tend not to know about the Holocaust, either. "One of my good friends hadn't even heard about the Holocaust," she says. "They just had never taught it at her school. I vividly remember her telling me she didn't know what it was until I explained it to her."

Schiff's experiences may be typical for Jewish students at IU, both in being the first Jewish person an undergraduate has encountered and in not facing anti-Semitism here.

The *Hillel College Guide* notes there are approximately 4,000 Jewish undergraduate students at IU. According to Rabbi Sue Silberberg, executive director of the Helene



(top) The Helene G. Simon Hillel Center on the campus of Indiana University; (above) Talia Schiff. *Courtesy photo;* (opposite page, clockwise from top left) Günther Jikeli; Rabbi Brian Besser. *Photo by Shannon Zahnle;* and Rabbi Sue Silberberg.



G. Simon Hillel Center at IU, the majority of those students feel very welcome on campus and in the Bloomington community.

"The problem is that you could be here for five minutes and have something horrible happen, or you could be here for four years and have nothing happen," she says. "I've literally had students who have had a swastika drawn on their door the first day they were here and others who have never experienced anything anti-Semitic."

Others on campus agree—Jewish students at IU generally feel safe. But Günther Jikeli, visiting associate professor of Jewish studies and the Justin M. Druck Family Scholar at the Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism, says watching anti-Semitism develop so quickly in Europe has led him to be wary.

"This campus is a welcoming environment for Jewish students, but there are incidents happening," he says. "Swastikas are drawn in dorms, anti-Semitic jokes [are shared]. There are signs that something we hoped was dead is not dead, that it didn't die out with the old Nazis."

That's because there are neo-Nazis and other white supremacist groups taking their place. A report by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) Center on Extremism tracked an increasing number of white supremacist propaganda efforts on college campuses, verifying 1,187 incidents in 2018, a 182 percent increase compared to 421 incidents in 2017. The report notes



that the propaganda often features a recruitment element and frequently targets minority groups, including Jews, blacks, Muslims, non-white immigrants, and the LGBTQ+ community.

The postings were generally done by groups not associated with the universities, and there were more efforts near but off campus. The center found white nationalist literature posted 868 times off campus in 2018 compared to 129 times in 2017.

An *Inside Higher Ed* analysis of the study noted that the ADL attributed the somewhat modest rise in on-campus versus off-campus incidents to "attempts by college police forces to stop white nationalists from trespassing."

There are only one or two anti-Semitic incidents reported at IU each year. IU Police Department Captain Craig Munroe says making sure everyone on campus feels secure and protected is the IUPD's highest priority.

"Our mission is to create a safe environment—respectful, fair, and impartial policing," Munroe says. "People can't study or work if they don't feel safe. And when it comes to bias, we have a low tolerance for that."

Anti-Semitism in town

Anti-Semitism in Bloomington is rare, but it happens (see sidebar on page 113). The most violent act of anti-Semitism took place more than 35 years ago.

On August 15, 1983, the white supremacist group The Covenant, the Sword and



the Arm of the Lord (CSA) detonated a firebomb at Beth Shalom. There were no casualties, though a Torah and curtains were set ablaze. According to the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), the perpetrators were identified as James D. Ellison, CSA founder, and former CSA member William Thomas.

In the 1980s, the CSA was considered one of the best-trained and most dangerous domestic terrorist groups. The Beth Shalom firebombing was just one of many acts for which Ellison and his group were wanted on federal charges. On April 19, 1985, more than 300 federal, state, and local authorities surrounded the group's compound in Mountain Home, Arkansas. With patient negotiation, authorities prevented anyone from leaving, and on April 22, Ellison and 55 followers surrendered without bloodshed.



Congregation Beth Shalom.

“The situations where Jews feel uncomfortable here are cases of ignorance, not prejudice.”

According to the GTD, Ellison was convicted on federal racketeering and weapons charges for several arsons (including the one at Beth Shalom) and other crimes and received the maximum 20-year-sentence; Thomas received a similar sentence. Ellison was released in 1987 after agreeing to testify against members of the Aryan Nations.

Most acts of anti-Semitism in Bloomington aren't violent. In fact, most aren't even deliberate, says Congregation Beth Shalom Rabbi Brian Besser.

“Overall, Bloomington is a very inclusive community,” says Rabbi Besser, who has lived here since 2012. “In most cases, I would say the situations where Jews feel uncomfortable here are cases of ignorance, not prejudice. Because there are so few Jews, people just don't know.”

That's been the experience for A John and Judith Rose, who are both 69 and owners of Textillery Weavers. The Roses have lived in Bloomington since 1976. They raised two children (De John, 31, and Hele,



(l-r) Judith and A John Rose.

28) here. A John grew up east of Cleveland, Ohio, and says he was the “only Jewish kid until high school.” Judith's experience was just the opposite. She grew up in Skokie, Illinois, outside of Chicago, among a large Jewish population.

“There's always been an awareness that we are Jewish and most people here aren't,” A John says of living in Bloomington. “But there's not a lot of anti-Semitism here. I don't

even hear the common slurs around Bloomington that I heard growing up.”

Judith says one thing that stood out for her as a religious minority, especially when their children were in public school, was the lack of acknowledgement of Jewish holidays.

“Our kids resented all of the emphasis on Christmas music at the holidays, and the lack of consideration for Jewish holidays when setting up the schedule,” she says.

Two Decades of Anti-Semitic Incidents in Bloomington

NOTE: These are selected incidents from the Bloomington Human Rights Commission Hate Incident Reports since 1999.

April 1999—A bust of Adolf Hitler is found on the lawn of the Hillel Center. The bust has a note attached that reads, “Happy Holocaust Day from the one who made it all possible—The Fuhrer.”

May 2002—Hate-oriented graffiti, including a swastika and an expletive directed at Jews, is found on the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

April 2003—Numerous reports of swastikas and the word “Jew” being painted on a Jewish student's car. The community holds a rally in response, and funds were raised to repair the damage.

September 2004—An expletive directed at Jews is keyed into the trunk of a woman's car, and other expletives directed at Jews are written in the dust of her car and another woman's car in the same parking garage. Both cars have New York license plates. There are unconfirmed reports that other cars in the garage with New York plates have similar messages on them.

October 2004—Numerous reports are received that swastikas have been painted on yard signs for a school board candidate.

June 2005—A Jewish resident reports that several Jewish scrolls or symbols were removed from his garage door. They had been screwed to the door and had been forcibly removed.

April 2006—Instances of more anti-Semitic graffiti are found around the city and of a swastika being painted on a medical office sign.

June 2006—Anti-Semitic graffiti is found on a privately owned building.

July 2006—The letters “BPNA” (presumably for Bryan Park Neighborhood Association) and a swastika are spray-painted on a vacant building.

August 2006—Two women are verbally and physically attacked by two other women. The attackers ask the victims questions related to being Jewish, such as, “Where are you going, Jewish girls?” and “Are you going to have your daddies sue us? Oh, you little Jew girl!” The victims are knocked down and receive physical harm.

March 2007—Two men, one of whom is Jewish, are harassed by three other men who pound on their apartment door at 2 a.m. and yell, “You're going to get kicked out of here, you Jewish <expletive>s.”

August 2007—A man reports all four of his tires have been punctured and a swastika drawn on his car. He had been on television speaking out against the distribution of KKK fliers in his neighborhood.

November 2007—Vandalism at the Jewish Student Center/Chabad House includes a beer bottle thrown through an upstairs window. A few weeks later, someone removes the letters spelling the word “Jewish” on the building.

March 2008—Two elementary-age students report a Nazi symbol near their school playground. They report it to their teacher, saying it scares them.

January 2010—Racial slurs and swastikas are painted on government buildings.

April 2010—A woman reports her neighbor yells anti-Semitic slurs at her and threatens her. Bloomington Police Department officers talk to the man, who says he has problems with the neighbors because they always call the police on him, but that “was okay because they were just a bunch of Jews anyway.” He is arrested for intimidation and an outstanding warrant.

November 2010—Several incidents are reported against the Jewish community, including rocks thrown through the windows at Chabad House and the Hillel

Center. Hebrew texts are taken from the Wells Library research collection; they are later found urinated on in the men's restroom. Similar texts are found in the toilets of the Monroe County Public Library.

November 2011—Two Hebrew characters are removed from Chabad House.

April 2012—The word “Hitler” and a swastika are scrawled on a Jewish Studies poster in Goodbody Hall on the IU campus.

May 2014—Two men engage in a fight outside of a local bar after one of the men calls the other a “kike.”

July 2015—A home is shot with a paintball gun; the words “Fuck Jews” are spray-painted on a nearby bridge.

November 2016—Swastikas and the letters “KKK” are painted on light poles and along the B-Line Trail.

May 2017—A homeowner reports finding swastikas and a phallic symbol spray-painted on the back of his home.

October 2017—Several incidences of racially offensive graffiti, including the letters “KKK” and images of swastikas, are found at the East 10th Street underpass, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington, the intersection of College Mall Road and Sare Road, and the railway underpass at North College and 14th Street.

December 2018—Anti-Semitic graffiti is found in restroom stalls at Bloomington High School North. Custodians paint over the graffiti before police are notified.

January 2019—More anti-Semitic graffiti is found at Bloomington North, including swastikas and “Kill Jews.” Police are notified and an investigation is pursued.



The Peace Bridge connecting Congregation Beth Shalom and University Baptist Church. Rabbi Brian Besser says the sign “just appeared” following the October shooting of Jewish congregants at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. “The connections between Congregation Beth Shalom and our neighboring churches have never been stronger,” Rabbi Besser says.

“Sometimes homecoming would fall on a high holiday. And because it was at the beginning of the school year, it was always a rush to get permission forms [to excuse absences from school]. It was never an easy thing. It was always sort of questioned and had to be explained every year. But that’s from a lack of knowledge. And we’re a very small minority in Bloomington, so you can see why they don’t take us into consideration.”

While Bloomington has been good to the Roses, their feeling about the country as a whole has changed. “For the past 50 years, there really was a stomping down on the persecution of minorities in general,” Judith says. “Now, it’s back with a vengeance.” With that comes a sense of vulnerability.

“We are the only synagogue between Louisville and Indianapolis,” she points out. “There is a whole group of white supremacists 45 minutes south of here in Paoli [she’s speaking of Matthew Heimbach’s Traditionalist Worker Party]. So, to a certain extent, we are a target. What do you do about it? Who knows. It’s disconcerting.”

Incidents like the mass shooting at the synagogue in Pittsburgh bring that vulnerability to the fore. Judith says there has

“It is anti-Semitic when Jews, all Jews, are held responsible for the policies of Israel.”

been a group seeking additional security for the synagogue.

“And we’re very mixed as a group,” she says. “We want to be welcoming. Whether it’s a church or a synagogue, you want people to be able to freely walk in. But national and international circumstances show we would be foolish not to take on additional security measures. I was talking to another congregant, and he said it feels like we are giving in. But I said another way to look at it is that we are fighting back. I don’t want to unwittingly give the people of hatred an advantage.”

Beth Shalom held a vigil the week after the Pittsburgh tragedy. It was open to the public. “We had people spilling out into the corridors because they all couldn’t fit into the sanctuary,” Rabbi Besser says. “More people than I’d ever seen. More than the high holidays. Mostly Gentiles. And such

beautiful sentiments from many Christian clergy, from the evangelical community, from the president of the Islamic Center.”

The rabbi says the outpouring of support shows that hate doesn’t win: “The backlash against it is far more overwhelming.”

Israel and anti-Semitism

Right now, there is a lot of debate about the line between criticism of Israel and anti-Semitism. Rabbi Besser says that while the issue may be complicated, it’s important to keep that line in mind.

“Since World War II, an important ingredient of anti-Semitism has to do with Israel,” Rabbi Besser says. “That’s a very tricky issue. On the one hand, being critical of the Israeli government is not anti-Semitic. It’s legitimate to criticize the governmental policies of any nation. But it is anti-Semitic when Jews, all Jews, are held responsible for the policies of Israel, or when Israel is held to a different standard than other nations.”

Rabbi Besser explains anti-Semitism is the dehumanization or demonization of Jews. “Hallmarks would be when you

call Jews ‘children of the devil’ or perform violence against them just because they are Jews,” he says. “That’s different from being critical of the Israeli treatment of Palestinians. I guess it crosses the line when somehow ‘the government of Israel is doing bad things’ becomes ‘Jews are an evil people.’”

With arguments in Congress surrounding anti-Semitic rhetoric at a fever pitch—and much of that discussion centered around U.S. relations with Israel—it’s easy to forget that for Jews, Israel is a homeland. For many, it brings to mind the Robert Frost poem “Death of the Hired Man”: “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”

On July 5, 1950, the Jewish Law of Return was unanimously passed by the Knesset, Israel’s Parliament. It states: “Every Jew has the right to come to this country as an *oleh* [immigrant].”

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, this made sense, as many of Europe’s remaining Jews didn’t have homes to which they could return and, if they did, they faced continued anti-Semitism when they arrived. Israel offered a safe haven.

For many, living life as a Jew—or just staying alive—was a struggle following the war.

Didi Kerler is the director of education at Beth Shalom. She and her husband, Dov-Ber Kerler, came to Bloomington in 2001 with their children Moyshe (now 29) and Miriam (now 26). The couple met in Israel, where Dov-Ber’s family had emigrated.

“My husband’s family, his mother’s family, was killed in the Holocaust,” Didi says. “She escaped because she was away at summer camp in Russia and the family was in Poland.”

Dov-Ber’s father served in the Russian army against the Nazis. After the war, he and his wife were imprisoned as *refuseniks* (Jews in former Soviet bloc countries refused permission to emigrate to Israel) in the 1940s and ’50s. The family was finally granted permission to emigrate in 1971 when Dov-Ber was 13. Israel was the only place they could go.

“His mother was a nurse and his father was a poet, so it wasn’t in anyone’s interest to take these refugees,” Didi says. “I don’t know where they would have gone. Israel was important to them. It was the Jewish homeland.”

In today’s globally anti-Semitic climate, many Jews across Europe find themselves in a similar situation.

As a researcher of anti-Semitism, Günther Jikeli says he has seen a shift in attitudes in Europe. “There was a lot of hope

until the end of the 90s,” he says. “Hope that there could be safe Jewish communities not only in France and Great Britain but in Germany.” Then, Jikeli says, in the early 2000s, there was a very sharp, sudden, and unexplained rise in anti-Semitism across Europe.

“The majority of Jews see it as a very big problem,” he says. “A lot of them don’t see their children’s future in the country they live in, or in Europe.”

That’s why Israel remains important to Jews. “When you think about anti-Semitism in France, there is a huge contingent going to Israel now,” Didi Kerler says. “And if other countries are stopping immigration, where are people going to go? That’s what the right of return is all about—you’ll never be turned away. You can always return to Israel.”

“Anti-Semitism isn’t a Jewish problem—it’s everybody’s problem.”

Judith Rose agrees. “Part of being Jewish is always wondering, ‘What if I have to leave?’” she says. “That’s what’s so great about Israel. Because in any other country, you always have one foot in, one foot out.”

‘A bellwether for society’

Anti-Semitism is rare in Bloomington. When it does occur, the community rallies. Groups like Bloomington United make it clear that hate has no place here.

“That’s gratifying and heartening,” Rabbi Besser says. “The overwhelming majority of people get it and are supportive of the Jewish community, so we all stand unified against expressions of hate.”

And while Bloomington’s Jewish community may be small, it is strong.

“For me, growing up in Chicago, almost all of my friends were Jewish,” says Judith Rose. “I didn’t place a high value on having Jewish friends; it was just an assumption. Here in Bloomington, we’re a very close-knit community because we’re small. We place a higher value on each other than we might in other, larger communities.”

Didi Kerler says the synagogue is a place where kids can feel that sense of belonging that maybe they don’t feel anywhere else. “This is the place where kids can talk about Hanukkah or they can nudge us for *hamentashen*—little triangle cookies you eat on Purim [a holiday commemorating the salvation of the Jewish people in ancient Persia],” she says. “This is the place where they get together and talk about their culture, their religion.”

Teaching others about that culture and religion, thereby eliminating anti-Semitism, is the real challenge. Rabbi Besser sees anti-Semitism as the canary in the coal mine—something we would all be wise to heed.

“I would really love to get across the message that anti-Semitism isn’t a Jewish problem—it’s everybody’s problem,” he says. “Historically, anti-Semitism is a bellwether for the overall health of society. When Jews are attacked, it’s usually a sign that society is unwell, that people are looking for scapegoats, and that there are serious divisions in the cohesiveness of society.” ✖

Editor’s Note: As this story went to press, the Muslim community was rocked by an attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, that left 50 dead and dozens more wounded. Just as the Muslim and Christian communities reached out to Beth Shalom after the attack on the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Rabbi Brian Besser said he would be speaking at the vigil to be held at the Bloomington Islamic Center following the attacks.

“A strong motive for me is that the Muslim community rallied around us and showed their support and solidarity in our time of need. It’s only just and proper that we do the same for them in their time of need,” Rabbi Besser says. “Hatred and bigotry are social issues for all of us, and anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are manifestations of the same social disease, so I’m pleased to be able to represent the Jewish community in allying ourselves with the Muslim community to combat hatred in all of its forms.”

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