

What if there's no way to stop another synagogue shooting?

Poway prompts another cry for scapegoats and solutions to a problem with many causes, none of which may be susceptible to fixing. Accepting that is difficult.

By Jonathan S. Tobin

(JNS) Who caused a madman to enter a synagogue in Poway, Calif., and begin shooting? And what can we do to stop another such extremist from committing the next atrocity?

These, aside from our grief at the murder of an innocent woman and our pride in the courage of the rabbi and the congregants, are the questions that all of us are pondering in the aftermath of the latest attack on an American synagogue. That we should be posing such queries after the tragedy at Chabad of Poway is natural. And it would be as irresponsible for society not to debate how to cope with extremism, as it would be for those in charge of houses of worship and other public institutions not to consider how best to improve security at all such places.

But the problem we face as we mourn the loss of 60-year-old Chabad congregant Lori Gilbert-Kaye and praise the heroism of those who stood up to the killer, as well as the first responders, is that there are no easy answers to our demands for scapegoats and solutions.

As was the case after the even more murderous assault on the Tree of Life*Or L'Simcha Synagogue in Pittsburgh last October, we want someone to blame other than just the man who pulled the trigger. And we want our leaders to do something to make sure it doesn't happen again. The fact that this is the second such incident at an American synagogue in six months makes our anger and frustration even more pressing.

But as much as the need to succumb to those impulses seems irresistible, such talk will lead us nowhere. Even more to the point, the venting of this frustration and the exchange of

accusations by those who have injected politics into the discussion does more harm than good.

At the top of most lists for chief scapegoat on Poway is the same person many chose to blame for the Pittsburgh shooting: U.S. President Donald Trump.

It's a narrative that has been repeated so often that it has now been treated as self-evident conventional wisdom. According to critics, including the Anti-Defamation League, Trump's unpresidential behavior and willingness to use invective against both political opponents and his own list of scapegoats for society's ills has emboldened extremists and opened a Pandora's Box of social pathologies that is creating a surge in hate crimes.

The evidence for this largely consists of ADL statistics from the last two years that, while accurate in terms of counting all sorts of troubling acts, tells us little or nothing about causation, and mixes in a variety of incidents and contexts that undermine the broad conclusions these numbers are supposed to support.

There's no arguing with the observation that Trump has helped coarsen our public discourse, but the notion that he is solely or even principally responsible for the bitter and vulgar nature of adversarial political debate is something of an overreach in our 24/7 cable-TV news world, in which conspiracy theories from the left and right fly freely around the Internet every day. Both the Pittsburgh and the Poway shooters were avowed opponents of Trump specifically because they viewed him as an ardent supporter of Israel and a friend of the Jews.

Trump should be held accountable when he says things that can be misinterpreted as support for extremism, as was the case when he conflated the debate over whether Confederate statutes should be removed from public spaces with the presence of neo-Nazi marchers in August 2017 in Charlottesville, Va. But the people who demonize him for that gaffe (and his stubborn refusal to apologize for it) ignore his condemnations of hate and anti-Semitism, as well as his gestures towards American Jews and his historic support for Israel. The attempt to depict him as the patron of white-nationalist shooters is partisan politics, not rational analysis.

Six months after Pittsburgh, it's even more apparent that making Trump part of the conversation about such incidents is a way for

his opponents to lump him in with everything they hate about the world. That may make it easier for them to cope with a complex and scary universe, but it does nothing to illuminate the problems of anti-Semitism and violence.

Though it has not yet manifested itself in violence in the United States, anti-Semitism from the left has far more influence than the right-wing variety. That includes the halls of Congress—as we've seen with Reps. Ilhan Omar (D-Minn.) and Rashida Tlaib (D-Mich.) and the mainstream press, as the instances of anti-Semitism from *The New York Times*.

Even if we take Trump out of the conversation, we are still left with the illusion that government can do something to stop anything bad that might happen. Poway, like Pittsburgh, has led to more calls for a greater focus on stopping right-wing extremism. That makes sense, though groups that encourage extremism have always been under scrutiny from the government.

That was made clear by the discovery of another murder plot in southern California, in which Jews and others were the intended targets. That made the ADL's scolding of the administration for not paying sufficient attention to the issue seem even more absurd that it did when the words came out of ADL leader Jonathan Greenblatt's mouth.

Nevertheless, Federal agencies will not always be able to predict when extremist speech that is protected by the constitution will lead to actual violence because these crimes are the actions of individuals, not groups. Expecting some new federal directive or anodyne gun regulation short of banning all firearms to ensure that some other mad individual won't strike elsewhere is absurd.

Accepting that anti-Semitism is a virus that continues to mutate and attach itself to different ideologies and groups, and particularly inspiring violent individuals, is difficult to accept, but necessary if the problem is to be dealt with rationally. As much as we must protect our institutions and speak out against hate of all kinds, part of living in the real world, as opposed to the realm of magical thinking, means understanding that there is no complete fix to this problem. Picking the right scapegoat or seizing on false solutions can't win the fight against anti-Semitic hate.

As with every generation that has come before, we must accept that Jew-hatred is not going away, yet still remain confident

that it will never defeat the spirit of Judaism and the Jewish people.

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