



United States

## LOCKED DOORS

American Jews aren't threatened by their synagogues turning into fortresses, they're threatened by armed anti-Semites walking in through open doors

By [Jacob Siegel](#)  
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The first fortress synagogues were built in Eastern Europe in the latter part of the 16th century. They were imposing structures, designed to repel invaders sweeping in from Russia, the Ottoman Empire, and other points east of the Volga River. The buildings married Renaissance aesthetics to the practical requirements of a military defense with, “solid walls, narrow elevated windows, [and] slits in the attics where cannons were positioned.” According to one [academic paper](#), they “turned the synagogue into the equivalent of a feudal castle.” When the Russian army invaded Ostrog in 1792, the Jews of the city sheltered inside the Great Maharsha Synagogue where, according to both local legend and some historical accounts, they were protected by its reinforced and consecrated walls from Russian cannon fire, surviving unscathed.

A year after the massacre at Tree of Life in Pittsburgh, synagogue security remains one of the most frequent and heated topics in the Jewish world, yet the practical matter of how to keep worshippers safe is being held hostage to a pair of rotten metaphors: the synagogue-as-fortress and the “open door.”

The fortress has become the security debate’s go-to image over the past few years, deployed in articles like, “[The American Synagogue as a Fortress](#),” to evoke in a single word the new reality of American Jews. But it’s a cliché, detached from the history of actual fortress synagogues, and an

inaccurate representation of contemporary reality in the United States. It relies on a false dilemma by suggesting that American Jews are being forced to isolate themselves and accept a state of abject and onerous guardianship as the price of their physical safety.

The truth is less dramatic, of course. Violent attacks on Jews, which always ebb and flow, are currently on the rise in the U.S. but still nowhere close to constituting a state of siege—and remain well below post-World War II norms. On the other hand, the increased threat requires an improved set of security protocols to protect Jewish communities that were formerly lacking in baseline protections that are regularly provided in other public gathering places, like theaters, college lecture halls, and sports stadiums. These basic security improvements involve such modest and un-exciting measures as shutting doors, making sure those doors are safe, implementing and rehearsing standard evacuation plans, having guards, and monitoring who enters and exits a building.

In fact, the actual fortress synagogues of the 16th and early 17th centuries were symbols of Jewish power as much as Jewish vulnerability. They arose in the era of the Council of Four Lands, a semi-autonomous Jewish General Congress organized within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The new stone temples were also expensive, and were therefore public displays of power and wealth; where they appeared in Krakow or Lviv, they mapped the unofficial capitals in the Pale of Settlement. Some survived into the 20th century only to be destroyed by Nazis or in Soviet anti-clerical campaigns. A few, like the Great Maharsha Synagogue, are still standing today in towns that Jews fled generations ago; monuments to a particular form of Jewish power as well as reminders of its limits.

While American Jews are in the midst of a necessary and discomfiting period of social and political adjustment, it's only the distorting effect of Jewish anxieties that turn security protocols on par with those you'd find at your average Chelsea nightclub into something terrifying and fortresslike.

The insistence on having no security protocols at all—and advertising that fact, and even turning it into a point of quasi-religious virtue—seems much more likely to discomfit your average club or concertgoer. Yet bizarrely, that is exactly what some Jewish community leaders have been doing.

“There are still so many people who say: ‘There’s no threat; people are overreacting; what do we have to worry about?; this is not Europe,’” said David Bacall, director of West Coast operations for

**Community Security Service**, a nonprofit founded in 2007 to protect “the people, institutions and events of the American Jewish community.”

Bacall could have been describing the sentiment of the synagogue president who wrote an **open letter** after Poway to declare that he would not be locking his temple’s doors or hiring guards for public events. “We will continue resisting hate by continuing to be a welcoming and open community, not by closing our doors and posting arm [sic] guards at our entrance.”

The commitment to open doors has the character of a religious conviction but where does it come from? Not from the Talmud, which provides a detailed account of the Levites role as guards in the original temple, establishing an early and authoritative precedent for religiously ordained security plans. The open door can be a useful metaphor, when taken as a reminder to treat strangers kindly. But its limits are summed up in the Talmudic saying “respect them and suspect them,” a common-sense injunction to temper openness with an instinct for basic self-preservation.

Rather than looking for metaphors to express or quell their anxieties, American Jews might stop fetishizing open doors and acknowledge the less dramatic and more practical realities that pertain to public gatherings: Locked and guarded doors make you more secure. Entry points that are clearly secured and protected create the appearance of a “hard target,” which alone can deter attackers who just want to kill defenseless people and would rather run and not have to fight for the chance. In the event an attacker does try to force entry, a secured door buys time to send out alerts and initiate an emergency evacuation plan.

In the months before the massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh the community and temple leaders had **taken a number of steps to improve security**. But the doors to the temple were not locked or guarded on Oct. 27 of last year, when a shooter entered the synagogue and killed 11 people. “Like most other religious places we have an open door,” the synagogue’s former President Michael Eisenberg said at the time.

Six months after Pittsburgh, another anti-Semitic white nationalist entered the Poway Chabad in California through another open door and began shooting. He killed 60-year-old Lori Gilbert-Kaye and wounded two other congregants including the rabbi before his weapon jammed and two members of the congregation rushed him. One of them, an off duty **Border Patrol** officer was armed, and returned fire at the fleeing shooter, hitting his car.

Last month on Yom Kippur, a neo-Nazi planning to kill Jews at the Halle Synagogue in Germany found a different welcome: A locked, reinforced door. The entrance to the Halle Synagogue had also been outfitted with surveillance cameras, which allowed members of the congregation to see the shooter outside, decked out in military gear. Both the reinforced door and the security cameras that helped save the congregants’ lives had been purchased as part of a Europe-wide security initiative funded by the United Israel Appeal and the Jewish Agency. Unable to get into the synagogue, the shooter moved on to more vulnerable targets, killing a woman he encountered on the street and a worker at a nearby kebab shop.

One obvious lesson to draw from these three attacks is that secure doors protect the lives of those inside. It also seems clear that having a trained law enforcement officer carrying his weapon among the congregants in Poway helped cement the attacker’s decision to flee.

Every eligible Jewish institution, which includes most all synagogues, can avail themselves of the same free resources that funded the security measures that saved lives in Halle. In addition to the training and expertise available at no cost from organizations like CSS, tens of millions of dollars in local and federal grants are earmarked for improving security at faith-based institutions. There's so much money at stake that one practical consideration for Jewish institutions is avoiding the security charlatans and insta-experts who swarm around federal dollars like flies to a steady drip of honey. This is where organizations like [CSS](#) and the [Secure Communities Network](#) (a nonprofit security initiative launched in 2004 by the Jewish Federation of North America) can play a critical role.

Putting aside distracting cliches about fortresses and open doors, there are still plenty of hard choices for communities to make. One synagogue might be more comfortable locking its doors and using volunteers to watch them, while another might prefer to leave its doors open but guarded by a professional, armed security detail. Both options might fail purity tests or involve tradeoffs. These are unavoidable choices, but they are ours to make.

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