

When the Glass Shatters

I was 15 years old when a neo-Nazi used an assault rifle to shoot up my hometown synagogue.

Temple Beth Israel in Eugene, Oregon, was my spiritual home, the place that shaped my Jewish life and learning. On March 20, 1994, a white supremacist opened fire on the building. Glass shattered. The building broke. And in an instant, the place that was a sanctuary and a haven was desecrated by hate.

I did not know then that this would become part of a longer pattern. Years later, white supremacists would throw rocks etched with swastikas through Temple Beth Israel's stained-glass windows while the community was praying. Attacks would continue. To date, TBI is the most attacked synagogue in America.¹ Again and again, the target was Jewish glass. Jewish visibility. Jewish life seen from the outside.

Those were the same years when I was beaten for my Jewishness. I carry scars on my face and hands from learning the lessons of hate up close. And I learned to defend myself.

I am grateful that I learned. There is no holiness in helplessness. Jewish dignity sometimes requires a guarded door, a trained eye, a clenched fist. But what is necessary in the face of hate is different than our purpose, and when the fist begins to shape the contours of our soul, when the hardness of the world begins to calcify our own heart, we see another danger from within.

That is one of the questions before us on this Yom Kippur. What happens to a Jewish community when the glass shatters? What is the response that we must muster?

After the shooting, the Temple Beth Israel community made a choice I have never forgotten. One of the sanctuary's stained-glass windows had been punctured by bullets. The community chose to save it, and to hang it on the wall near the ark. The broken window would bear witness to a Jewish life that would continue. And, in turn, we would witness that pierced pane every time we gathered.

Jewish tradition has a strange and beautiful teaching about windows.

The Talmud says:

¹ <https://www.justice.gov/crt/religious-freedom-focus-volume-18-0>; <https://www.justice.gov/usao-or/pr/oregon-man-charged-federal-hate-crime-defacing-synagogue>; <https://www.adl.org/resources/profile/volksfront>

- לעולם יתפלל אדם בבית שיש בו חלונות - A person must always pray in a room that has windows.²

Our rabbis rest the proof on the Book of Daniel.³

The royal edict criminalized Jewish prayer. Daniel knows the decree and the danger. And still, he goes upstairs, where his windows face toward Jerusalem, and he prays three times a day, as he had always done. Our tradition remembers his courage through our own obligation to always keep the window. Daniel's window is orientation. It says, even here, even now, under threat, I know where I face. I know to whom I belong. I know what story holds me.

We are commanded to pray in spaces with windows so we are always oriented to our larger story and ideals. But also to ensure that what takes place in this sacred space calls out loudly and proudly into the wider world.

On Chanukah, amidst the darkest days of the year, we hold two obligations – to light the *Chanukiyah*, and to place the light near the window.⁴ It is not enough to simply bask in the glow and joy of the holiday. We are commanded to *pirsumei nisa*, publicize the miracle. Jewish light is meant to travel. A Chanukiah in the window says that the inner life of the Jewish home must shine into the public square.

Jewish law has always anticipated danger. In a time of real peril, the light may be moved inside. Our tradition is pragmatic enough to know that visibility can cost something. Yet the ideal is light in the window. The ideal is a Jewish home whose inner flame reaches outward.

Our Torah also commands us to build a parapet around the roof of a home.⁵ When we construct a house we are obligated to construct it with protections. Protect life. Prevent danger. Faith is no substitute for responsibility. A synagogue needs a parapet and a window; a parapet because life is sacred, and a window because fear must never become our architecture.

This is where we stand.

We need stronger glass. We need protected doors. We need effective security, dedicated civic partners, and governments that treat Jewish safety as urgent and precious. These are sacred responsibilities. I thank God for every person who helps keep our community safe. And we cannot become windowless Jews. We cannot allow antisemitism to turn Jewish life into a boarded-over shell, protected perhaps, yet increasingly hidden from view.

The physical danger is no longer abstract or distant. Jews are being beaten, burned, stabbed, and shot right here on the streets of America, right here mere feet from this building. Nearly 60% of violent hate crimes in America target Jews, who comprise just over 2% of the population.

² Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 34b.

³ See Berakhot 34b which references Daniel 6:11.

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 21b.

⁵ Deuteronomy 22:8

Synagogues and Jewish businesses are vandalized and attacked with such regularity that we can barely keep up. Online hatred spills into neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and sanctuaries.

But Jew-hatred aims at something deeper than Jewish safety. It seeks to determine what Judaism becomes. It tries to drive us farther from the window. It tries to make our symbols smaller, our commitments softer, our relationship to Am Yisrael more embarrassed, our Jewishness more conditional. It tries to teach our children that Jewish identity is principally something dangerous to carry through the world. And this is why our response matters so much.

Antisemitism is a civic diagnostic. It tells us whether a society can resist the seduction of scapegoats. More precisely, antisemitism operates as a conspiracy structure. It turns anxiety into accusation. It offers a false explanation for disorder: somewhere, somehow, there must be a hidden Jewish hand.

Dara Horn makes this point with clarity in her recently published book, *The Final Solution to the Jewish Question*. The through line of antisemitism, she writes, is “the denial of truth” and the power of lies. Horn reminds us that societies have repeatedly defined their own ideals by projecting their opposite onto what they call “the Jews.” If piety is prized, Jews are impious. If nationalism is prized, Jews are rootless globalists. If human rights are prized, Jews become human-rights abusers. The moral vocabulary changes. The function remains. Antisemitism dresses hatred in the language of virtue.⁶

Jews have been cast as communists and capitalists, weak parasites and all-powerful puppeteers, disloyal cosmopolitans and dangerous nationalists. The accusations do not need to agree. Jews become whatever color window the age wants to smash.

Antisemitism does not require us to be particularly Jewish. It is perfectly capable of inventing the Jew it needs. Hiding our Judaism therefore offers an illusion of safety while surrendering something precious before hatred has even reached the door. We see that machinery operating now whenever distinctions collapse.

When a Jewish child in New York is held responsible for the actions of the Israeli government, that is collective guilt. When synagogues are torched or vandalized in rage over events taking place thousands of miles away, hatred has found a substitute target. When Jews, Judaism, Zionism, Israel, an Israeli government, a prime minister, and every Jewish community in the Diaspora are fused into one monstrous abstraction, an ancient conspiracy has found contemporary language.

And there is another seductive idea circulating now, one that my friend and our CRS member Shai Davidai lays bare in his forthcoming book *American Intellectual Antisemitism*.

⁶ Dara Horn, *The Final Solution to the Jewish Question: A Love Story for the Living* (New York: Avid Reader Press/Simon & Schuster, 2026), publisher’s excerpt from chapter 1, “The Return of the Big Lie.” See also David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013).

The idea goes something like this: If Israel behaved differently, Jews here would be safer. If this Israeli government fell, Jews here would be accepted. If you condemned Israel loudly enough, perhaps you would be spared. If you distanced yourself sufficiently from Zionism, from Jewish peoplehood, from the complicated fact that half of the Jewish people live in the State of Israel, perhaps the hatred would pass over your house.

I understand why this idea is tempting. It offers the illusion of control. It says that antisemitism follows a rational equation. Say the right words. Hold the right signs. Create enough distance. Demonstrate that you are the “good” kind of Jew, and perhaps acceptance will follow.⁷

History offers no reason to trust that bargain. Antisemitism existed before this Israeli government, before 1948, before Herzl, before modern Zionism, before the word Zionism was ever spoken. The categories shift. The hatred adapts. And every generation of Jews faces a version of the same temptation: perhaps if we make ourselves smaller, quieter, less troublesome, less distinct, we will finally become safe.

That bargain extracts an enormous spiritual price. Because eventually someone else begins determining the terms of our Jewishness. Someone else decides which parts of our people we may love. Someone else decides which symbols we may display. Someone else decides which griefs we may mourn. Someone else decides how loudly we may speak as Jews and how visibly we may live as Jews.

Psychology is beginning to describe some of the mechanisms Jews have experienced for generations. A special issue of *American Psychologist* published this summer examines antisemitism as a distinctive distortion of perception. As the journal puts forward, antisemitism supplies hostility with a moral alibi.⁸

Mijal Bitton has written powerfully about precisely this danger. She argues that this moment has exposed the fragility of a Jewish identity too dependent on external approval. When acceptance is offered only on the condition that Jews hollow out their own peoplehood, the bargain has turned sour.

⁷ Shai Davidai, *American Intellectual Antisemitism*. (Wicked Son Publications: New York, NY, 2026), pp. 168-177.

⁸ See Michał Bilewicz, Florette Cohen, and Ayal Feinberg, eds., “Antisemitism and Psychology,” special issue, *American Psychologist* 81, no. 4 (May–June 2026); Kent D. Harber et al., “Antisemitism, Conspiracy Beliefs, and Anti-Israel Attitudes,” *American Psychologist* 81, no. 4 (2026): 463–477; Britt Hadar et al., “The Perils of Perceived Power: The Dual-Threat Model of Antisemitism,” *American Psychologist* 81, no. 4 (2026): 516–530; Bella Qing Dong, Margaret Shih, and Todd Pittinsky, “From Praise to Prejudice: How Positive Stereotypes Reinforce Antisemitism,” *American Psychologist* 81, no. 4 (2026): 531–543; Johannes Due Enstad, “Holocaust Inversion and Justification of Anti-Jewish Aggression: Evidence From Two National Surveys in Norway,” *American Psychologist* 81, no. 4 (2026): 478–489.

Bitton invites Western Jews to recover older instincts of Jewish flourishing: family, communal participation, responsibility, practice, and a Jewishness rooted less in the need to be liked and more in the strength of belonging.⁹

We need a bolder Jewish life. A thicker Jewish peoplehood. A stronger Jewish spine and a more passionate Jewish heart. Because the deepest answer to a world trying to define Jews from the outside is to know more fully who we are from the inside. And a window can only transmit the light that already shines within the house.

Before we ask how visibly Jewish we are prepared to become, we have to ask what Jewish life is actually burning within us. What do we know? What do we practice? Whose stories do we carry? To whom do we feel responsible? What songs live in our mouths? What rituals shape our homes? What Jewish wisdom has become indispensable enough that we cannot imagine keeping it hidden?

Jewish visibility cannot mean merely wearing Jewish symbols more prominently. Wear the Jewish star. And let it become an invitation to discover more of the civilization it carries. A Jewish life so alive within us that it naturally travels outward. Torah that changes the way we think. Shabbat that changes the rhythm of our homes. Hebrew that connects our mouths to generations before us. Community that teaches us that another Jew's grief and joy make some claim upon us.

Jewish light is meant to travel. And perhaps that is one of the central choices before us now. The forces of antisemitism would push Jewish life away from the window. Our task is to bring it closer.

And Rodeph Sholom has faced this question before.

Ninety years ago, Rabbi Louis Newman, our former Senior Rabbi, stood on this very bimah. It was 1936. Darkness and hate were spreading across Europe. On the High Holy Days, he called this congregation to action with these words: “Each year [on these sacred days] the congregations of Israel ... re-consecrate themselves to the holy cause for which, as congregations, they have been summoned into being.”¹⁰

Summoned into being. That is what we are doing here. We have not assembled as an audience for a service. We are a congregation summoned into being for something larger than ourselves.

Newman also warned that “the beauty of the edifices” can mask the weakness of the institution within. “No congregation,” he wrote, “is greater than the individuals who comprise its membership.” That sentence pierces. A synagogue can have beautiful windows and still become

⁹ Mijal Bitton, “The Fast-Changing Future for Jews in the West,” *Future of Jewish*, May 21, 2026, <https://www.futureofjewish.com/p/the-future-of-jews-in-the-west>.

¹⁰ Louis I. Newman, “Kehillah Kedoshah — The Holy Congregation,” reproduced in *The Message of Israel* in 1936.

darkened inside. A congregation can have a magnificent sanctuary and still forget how to become a people. A community can hire security, issue statements, and join coalitions while outsourcing Jewish life itself to professionals and organizations.

No congregation is greater than the individuals who comprise its membership. No Jewish future is greater than the Jews willing to carry it.

And sometimes, in a single human gesture, we can see what carrying it looks like.

Five days after eleven Israeli athletes were murdered at the Munich Olympics in 1972, a drawing appeared on the Op-Ed page of The New York Times. There was no essay beside it. No argument. No explanation.

The artist was Mark Podwal, a 27-year-old Jewish medical resident. He drew a faceless Israeli athlete, a Star of David on his chest, standing beneath an ornate arch. And above him appeared four words in Aramaic:

*Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei rabbah*¹¹

Mourner's Kaddish. Think about what Podwal did. He did not answer their hatred in the language of hatred. He did not argue for the value of Jewish life or attempt to prove the scourge of antisemitism. He reached into the vocabulary of our people and placed Jewish words in the center of the American public square. He answered with Jewish language and resolve.

Forty-six years later, on October 27, 2018, eleven Jews were murdered while praying at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Five days later, across the front page of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, appeared those same four words:

Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei rabbah.

Beneath them, the newspaper explained that these were the opening words of the Jewish mourner's prayer, to be recited that evening on the first Shabbat after the massacre.¹² In 1972, a Jew carried the language of Jewish mourning into the American public square. In 2018, the American public square broadcast those Jewish words to the world. Jewish light had traveled.

Kaddish cannot be said alone. It requires a minyan. It begins with a call and waits for a response. It responds to inner grief with the communal sounds of our people. This, too, is how we answer antisemitism.¹³

“What happens to a Jewish community when the glass shatters?”

¹¹ Mark Podwal, *Munich Massacre*, drawing, *New York Times*, September 10, 1972, E17. The drawing appeared on the Times Op-Ed page five days after the Munich massacre and was Podwal's first work published by the paper.

¹² *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, front page, November 2, 2018. The paper printed the opening words of Kaddish, יתגדל ויתקדש שמה רבא, across the front page on the first Friday after the October 27 Tree of Life massacre.

¹³ For more on this, see Tamara Mann Tweel, “Be a Jew in Public: Mark Podwal and *The New York Times*,” *Sources: A Journal of Jewish Ideas*, June 28, 2026.

We protect the Jewish community fiercely. We prosecute those who attack us. We expose conspiracies and lies. We demand protection from governments, universities, corporations, and civic leaders. And then we build something larger than a defense.

We build Jewish lives substantial enough to share. We need neighbors who know more about Jews than antisemitism. Who know more about Judaism than our fear. Who know what Shabbat sounds like. Who have sat at a seder table, argued over Torah, danced at a Jewish wedding, tasted the sweetness of a Jewish celebration, heard Hebrew sung in joy rather than only encountered Jewish words after tragedy. We need fellow citizens who encounter Judaism as a living civilization rather than a political abstraction.

Because if the world encounters Jews principally through the people who hate us, then we have granted the antisemite far too much power to define who we are.

And all of this requires something from each one of us. A thicker Jewish life has an interior and an exterior: enough substance to sustain us, and enough confidence to share.¹⁴

So let this be the year we shine brightly. Before you leave this sanctuary, choose one Jewish commitment you will deepen, and one way you will let it become visible. Learn more Torah. Learn enough Hebrew that the words of our people begin to belong to your mouth. Build Shabbat into the rhythm of your home. Learn Krav Maga and discover what it feels like to stand upright in your own body. Go to Israel with open eyes and an engaged heart. Take care of the person sitting beside you. Invite someone to your Shabbat table. Bring Jewish wisdom into your workplace, your friendships, your civic life. Let your children see Judaism generating joy and obligation, curiosity and belonging, laughter and pride. Let them know far more about being Jewish than whom Jews have needed to fear.

We cannot allow the people who hate Jews to become the people who most reliably define what it means to be Jewish. Our Judaism has to be larger than them. More interesting than them. More joyful than them. More demanding than them. More beautiful than them.

And so, yes, we may need stronger glass. We may need guards at the door. We may need cameras and training and the courage to defend ourselves and one another. But we will not become windowless Jews.

We will make Jewish life safer, and we will make Jewish life more visible. We will protect the flame, and we will place it where it can be seen. We will study and sing and argue and celebrate. We will carry Jewish words into the public square. We will teach our children that Judaism is the story of a light that kept traveling through us.

¹⁴ Liel Leibovitz, "What Happens When Jews Don't Fight," *Tablet*, August 18, 2026, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/what-happens-when-jews-dont-fight>

When I was fifteen years old, bullets struck the windows of the synagogue that raised me. They broke something. And for years, I thought I understood why our community saved that shattered pane of stained glass. I thought we kept it so we would remember what hatred had done to us.

I understand it differently now. We kept it to remember what hatred could not do. It could pierce the glass. It could desecrate a sanctuary. It could frighten a community. It could leave scars on bodies and memories. But it could not extinguish what shone through that window. Today, the boy who prayed in that synagogue stands before you as a rabbi. The people who saved that window helped raise a Jew who would one day stand before this congregation and ask you to carry our story forward. They could never have known all the places their light would travel.

May we be the ones to carry that light to the window again. Because Judaism has earned our courage.

We will carry every grief and every scar, and we will live a Jewish life larger than fear.

Because the miracle was never only that the flame survived.

The miracle was that someone dared to let it be seen.