

HOUSES OF WORSHIP & HIGH HOLIDAYS

Scenario

James, the Superintendent at Central Temple of East Cupcake, was dedicated to his job. Earlier in the afternoon he had his staff wipe out the basins and make sure there were plenty of paper towels. But he went into the Men's Room to check that everything was in tip-top shape just before the Kol Nidre service.

He looked down to see some papers that he was confident were not there before.

Opening the largest one he read:

You Jews will see. You have much to atone for. Think that you run the world? We'll see that you don't even feel safe on your so called holy days.

Your building will be blown to bits at 7:30. This will be your only warning.

The Universal Adversary

James took the note to Leonard, the Head Usher, and asked, "What should we do now??"

Leonard rushed to consult with the chair of the Security Committee. Together, they ran up the stairs to the bimah and explained the situation to the rabbi and their decision to evacuate the building. The rabbi approached the lectern and announced, in a calm voice, "Due to a security situation we are asking everyone to please leave the building immediately."

He didn't even finish his sentence when people started running for the doors. It was not a pretty picture. Parents ran towards the back to get their kids. A huge bottleneck developed at the main door. People trying to exit through the back doors tripped over piles of prayer books, elderly congregants using walkers were pushed aside. Barely half of the congregation left the sanctuary. It was 7:29.

NEW FACES

During the High Holidays regular worshipers are joined by those who might not know your facility and may not be known to you. For example, they may not know the "back way out". On the other hand, unscreened strangers present security risks. These realities must become part of your security and emergency planning.

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Planning for the High Holidays

More people attend High Holiday services than any other synagogue event. At the same time that congregations around the world are busy planning meaningful services, they are faced with the additional burden of ensuring that congregants are as safe as possible. A keen sense of “security awareness” should enter into all phases of High Holiday planning.

In these uncertain times people appreciate security measures rather than resent them. Since some of these measures have *halachic* implications, they should only be implemented after appropriate consultation with your rabbi.

The following are recommendations regarding issues that should be considered during your holiday or special event planning process:

Police Liaison

One of the most important components of your security planning is coordination with local police authorities. Notify your local commander or community affairs officer of your schedule of meetings and all religious services (including *selichot* and *tashlich*). Your local commander can best determine what resources should be made available for security, crowd control and traffic control purposes.

Tickets

Many institutions require High Holiday tickets as a matter of course. In the current environment High Holiday tickets can be an important component of a security plan. Institutions should assume that those in possession of legitimate tickets should be admitted to services. How secure is your High Holiday ticket? Do you give blocks of tickets to third parties (e.g., Hillels) for distribution? Could it be counterfeited on easily obtained card stock or on a color copier?

If tickets are to play a role in your security plan, those receiving tickets should be pre-screened. There is an obvious hierarchy to those attending High Holiday services: long-term members, long-term casuals (who regularly attend only on the holidays) and new casuals. Your concerns should be commensurate with the congregant’s place on the hierarchy, i.e., you usually worry more about the people you don’t know than the people you do know.

WORK WITH YOUR LOCAL POLICE

Make sure that your local police know you, your schedule and your building. Inform the commanding officer and/or community liaison officer of your events ahead of time so that they can best determine the resources necessary to protect you. Ask for their direct contact information so that you can easily reach them if necessary.

New casual attendees require the greatest scrutiny. If someone calls to purchase tickets their identity should be confirmed. Are they in the phone book? Did they pay by check or credit card? Is their name and address printed on their checks? Be suspicious of anyone who insists on paying in cash.

Training

As plans are developed, staff and volunteers should be informed and trained to carry them out. Specific concerns include screening and monitoring congregants, evacuation procedures, etc. Written policies and procedures are the easiest to carry out effectively.

Let your congregants know what you are planning

Use newsletters and flyers to inform your congregants about visible changes in security and any changes in policy, e.g., advising congregants to carry fewer bags, that weapons will not be allowed, etc. Attendees tend to feel reassured if they know that security concerns are being addressed.

Emergency communication

How will you communicate in case of emergency? Does the staff have walkie-talkies or cell phones? Are there “panic buttons” at key locations that signal a central alarm company that there is an emergency?

Vendors

Be prepared to look gift horses in the mouth! Be suspicious of vendors offering prices that are too good to be true. How well do you know your caterer, baker, florist, security or janitorial supplies dealers? Known purveyors are less likely to be abusing their relationship to gain illicit entry to your building. If you are going to make a change be sure to ask for and to check references.

Crowd Control/Access

The general rule is that no unauthorized person should be admitted to any Jewish facility and this holds true of synagogues on the High Holidays and during special events. Wherever possible, tickets should be required. Tickets are, simply put, a sign that the holder of the ticket has been pre-authorized.

ACCESS CONTROL

The general rule is that no unauthorized people should enter any Jewish facility. During the High Holidays you can use your tickets to pre-determine who is authorized to enter. If you decide to admit those without tickets be prepared to conduct appropriate questioning and searches.

Those checking tickets can be assisted by long-term members or staff who can personally identify congregants. Synagogue leaders should discuss whether security concerns outweigh the wish to be welcoming. When security concerns are high, only those specifically identified by ticket or by a known person should be admitted to your services. Before the holidays develop a policy about handling people without tickets. If you don't want to require tickets, do you have an alternative method of identifying congregants? Should you prepare signs to inform your congregants of any changes in policies? Do you have a way of immediately notifying the police if you need assistance?

Disposable Cameras

It's a good idea to keep a disposable camera handy in case you see something suspicious or if a suspicious person approaches your facility. The mere fact that a picture is being taken could prove to be a deterrent.

Searching People and Bags

Determine your policies ahead of time. Should everyone be searched or should you "profile" those wishing to enter? Should you use metal detectors?

What happens if your searchers find something? E.g., what if someone is carrying a gun or other weapon? As a private institution you have the absolute right to establish criteria for entrance to your facility. If you decide that no one with a weapon, except law enforcement personnel, should be allowed onto your premises you may legally bar anyone with a weapon from entering. You may wish to notify people in a flyer and/or to prominently post such a policy. Note: holding a weapon for someone (even in a locked box) may expose your institution and staff to criminal or legal liability. Your policy should be set in advance, be consistent and be reviewed by legal counsel.

Evacuation Planning

In the event of a threat or an actual emergency it may be necessary to evacuate the building. If a threat is received it should immediately be reported to the police.

Each congregation should have an evacuation plan. The plan should explicitly:

- *Determine lines of authority.* Who makes the determination to evacuate the building? One person must be in charge. How will the decision be communicated?
- *Map out logistics.* If your sanctuary has several exits plan which rows or sections should use each exit—ahead of time. How will you notify each of the services or classes meeting in your building that an evacuation has been ordered?
- *Have family assembly areas.* Since many synagogues have several, simultaneous services any announcement should include provisions to reunite families. For example, parents should know that they can meet their children at a specific location outside rather than adding to the chaos by trying to find them inside the building.
- *Print your evacuation plan.* Include a sanctuary plan, showing the exits. You might want to add information (e.g., the location of the family assembly areas) and/or suggest (graphically) that different sections of the sanctuary use different doors so as to avoid bottlenecks at the main door. Place copies of the plan at every seat. Make similar information sheets for the other services in your building.
- *Pre-prepare the evacuation announcements.* Emergency instructions must be clear and concise. Have explicit directions, in writing, available on the bimah and other convenient locations in case it is necessary to order an evacuation. Consider how you will tell congregants which door to use or where to meet their children.
- *Identify mutual support agreements with neighboring institutions or facilities.* An evacuation could be necessary during inclement weather. By pre-arranging an agreement with a neighboring facility you can instruct your congregants to relocate to a specific site should an emergency occur.

Although it is impractical to conduct a drill during the holidays themselves, the synagogue staff and ushers can conduct an evacuation drill/tabletop exercise before the holidays. Use the scenario above or make up your own. Your tabletop exercise/drill should be designed to prepare the ushers and staff for both bomb threats and fires.

Security Guards

While police departments in the region will give extra attention to synagogues during the holidays (Remember: notify your local police precinct of the times of all services.), it is rare that police will be stationed inside the

EVACUATION DRILLS

It's impractical to conduct a drill during services, but you can practice with your staff and ushers so that you can improve your response should an emergency arise.

building. Many synagogues hire extra staff at this time. While anyone in a uniform provides some benefit of deterrence, the most effective guards are those with adequate training and supervision (Note: Some states and provinces require all security guards to be licensed). If you choose to use an outside security company make sure to request and to check references.

Many people ask whether they should hire armed guards. Experts believe that the most important qualification of a guard is his/her training. Putting a weapon in the hands of a poorly trained individual can be more dangerous in an emergency than not having an armed person. Alternatively, many security companies employ off-duty and retired police and corrections officers. Their training is a distinct advantage.

Learning from the scenario

In summary, there are many things that you should learn from the above scenario. They include:

Training your staff and ushers

- *Know your building.* While preparing for any special event be especially aware of what is right and what seems wrong. Lock the doors of rooms that will not be used. Look for anything that seems unusual or out of place (both inside and out). Anything that “just doesn’t look right” should require further attention.
- *Assign roles.* People (staff and volunteers) should be assigned to facilitate an evacuation. Make sure that every section of the sanctuary and every door has someone who knows your plan, can answer questions and assist your congregants. Others should be assigned as “runners” to alert other areas of your facility that an evacuation is in progress.
- *Pay attention to child care responsibilities.* Those in charge of child care/junior and teen services should know their responsibilities and participate in your drills. As parents drop off their children they should receive a flyer notifying them where to pick up their children in the event of an emergency.
- *Plan for people with disabilities.* Assign people to assist them in the event of an evacuation.
- *Take the time to stage an evacuation drill.* Drills will identify glitches in your plan. Assemble your team before the holidays and use the above scenario or develop your own.

Pre-planning your announcements and other information

- *Write a script for the rabbi or other person who will make any emergency announcement.* Direct people to use all the exits because people tend to use the door they entered. Tell people where to meet (e.g., the teen

service will be at the north end of the parking lot).

- *Have direction sheets in the pews* including maps showing the exits and the family assembly areas. People tend to read other announcements during the service, why not give them information that might save lives?

Collecting the necessary equipment and information

- *Have flashlights and emergency lighting available.* Even a common fire can cause a power outage.
- *Develop a communications and have the necessary equipment.* How will you call 911? Do you want to use your fire alarm system even in the event of a bomb threat? Is it legal to do so? Can you alert your staff in various areas of your facility? Do you have “runners” specifically assigned to ensure that everyone is notified?
- *Have a binder prepared and readily available,* including floor plans, lists, phone contacts, etc.