



*The Diocese of New Jersey*

THE RIGHT REVEREND WILLIAM H. STOKES, BISHOP OF NEW JERSEY

**A Pastoral Letter from the Bishop of the Diocese of New Jersey  
to the Clergy and Laity of the Diocese of New Jersey  
on the Commemoration of Kristallnacht  
in light of Current Threats Against the Jewish Community**

Dear Clergy and Laity of the Diocese of New Jersey:

*"We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must—at that moment—become the center of the universe."*

Elie Wiesel—Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, December 1986

Last Thursday, November 3, The F.B.I. issued an alert indicating they had received "credible information of a broad threat to synagogues in NJ." On Friday, November 4, this threat alert was circulated to news media across the state. [\[1\]](#) By late Friday morning, the F.B.I. had "neutralized" the source of the particular threat, but synagogues were warned to remain vigilant "just in case." [\[2\]](#)

Upon learning of the threat, I contacted some Rabbis with whom I have a relationship including [Rabbi David Levy](#), New Jersey Regional Director of the America Jewish Committee, [Rabbi Matthew D. Gewirtz](#), Senior Rabbi of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in Short Hills, and [Rabbi Arnie Gluck](#) of Temple Beth-El in Hillsborough, to express my concern and to offer my solidarity and that of the people of the Diocese of New Jersey.

On Friday evening, after emailing Rabbi Gluck, I drove up to Hillsborough to join the people of Temple Beth-El for the Shabbat Family Service. As I pulled into the Temple Beth-El parking lot, several police vehicles from the Hillsborough Police Department were scattered around the lot with their lights flashing. Officers scrutinized everyone who came in. I was grateful for their presence, as were, I am confident, the members of Temple Beth-El, but it was discomfoting.

In the lobby of the synagogue, I was greeted by a young woman who was serving as host. I stood and chatted with her for a while. She shared with me her distress and fear as a result of the threat warning. A friend of hers came and joined the conversation. She was a young mother and expressed her fear and anxiousness about being there that night, and especially about bringing her children with her. My heart broke for her, for all of them.

A short time after that, before the worship service began, I had a brief chat with Rabbi Gluck. We both expressed our concern and sadness about the threat warning from the F.B.I., and also about the [increasing number of anti-Semitic incidents in New Jersey](#) and across the country this past year. “Why?” he asked me. “I don’t understand it. Why are we so hated?” I didn’t have an answer for him. I don’t have one now. I couldn’t help thinking of the psalmist’s lament from the Hebrew scriptures, *How long, O Lord?* (Psalm 13:1).

It was Temple Beth-El’s family service night. Lots of families with children were present. They were beautiful but you could feel the tension of fear. It grieved me that these families must live with this threat. Of course, they are not alone.

Parents of Black children in this nation live in fear for their children every day and have done so for four centuries. This nation, marked by the original sin of racism, always seems to take one step forward and three steps back. The rights of people of color, especially those in Black and Brown communities continue to be methodically and systematically eroded. The stock of White Supremacists and Christian Nationalists in this country, always present, along with the violence and hatred they foster, is on the rise.[\[3\]](#)

According to a June 2021 report from the National Security Agency a key aspect of today’s domestic terrorism threat “emerges from racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists and networks whose racial, ethnic, or religious hatred leads toward violence.” They observe:

*These actors have different motivations, but many focus their violence towards the same segment or segments of the American community, whether persons of color, immigrants, Jews, Muslims, other religious minorities, women and girls, LGBTQI+ individuals, or others. Their insistence on violence can, at times, be explicit. It also can, at times, be less explicit, lurking in ideologies rooted in a perception of the superiority of the white race that call for violence in furtherance of perverse and abhorrent notions of racial “purity” or “cleansing.”*[\[4\]](#)

According to the [Anti-Defamation League](#):

*“Antisemitic incidents reached an all-time high in the United States in 2021, with a total of 2,717 incidents of assault, harassment and vandalism reported to ADL (the Anti-Defamation League). This represents the highest number of incidents on record since ADL began tracking antisemitic incidents in 1979—an average of more than seven incidents per day and a 34 percent increase year over year.”*[\[5\]](#)

They add:

*“ADL’s annual Audit of Antisemitic Incidents, issued today, found that antisemitic incidents reached a high watermark across virtually every category. Attacks against Jewish institutions, including Jewish community centers (JCCs) and synagogues, were up by 61 percent, incidents at K-12 schools increased 106 percent, and incidents on college campuses rose 21 percent.”*[\[6\]](#)

This should concern us all.

November 9–11 will mark the 84th anniversary of *Kristallnacht* (“Crystal Night”). This three-day period was a time of unchecked violence committed by members of the Nazi Party and by German citizens against the Jewish population. As members of Hitler’s Sturmabteilung (SA) paramilitary and Schutzstaffel (SS) paramilitary engaged in vandalism and committed atrocities, the authorities looked on or looked away. According to *Wikipedia*:

*Jewish homes, hospitals and schools were ransacked as attackers demolished buildings with sledgehammers. Rioters destroyed 267 synagogues throughout Germany, Austria and the Sudetenland. Over 7,000 Jewish businesses were damaged or destroyed, and 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and incarcerated in concentration camps.*<sup>[7]</sup>

All of this happened with the world’s knowledge. It was widely reported as it was happening.<sup>[8]</sup> German citizens, ordinary people, allowed it to happen. Moreover, from then on it would get worse as the so-called “Final Solution” was implemented and increasing numbers of Jews were sent to their deaths in concentration camps, in short, to Holocaust. And the vast majority of the German people, most of whom identified as Christian, did nothing to stop this. I used to wonder how this could happen. I used to wonder how Fascism and Nazism arose in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. I don’t wonder anymore. I know now. Make no mistake, it could happen here, in the United States.

Jonathan Greenblatt argues the very real possibility of this in his important book of the same name, *It Could Happen Here—Why America is Tipping From Hate to the Unthinkable and How We Can Stop It* (Boston/New York: Mariner Books—HarperCollins Books, 2022). Greenblatt writes, “America has been moving perilously up the Pyramid of Hate in recent years. Hate crimes have soared including horrific acts of mass violence aimed at Jews, APIs, Black Latinos, LGBTQ people, Muslims, and others.”<sup>[9]</sup>

Greenblatt offers a “framework” for persons of good will to stand up to hate: ***Speak Up, Share Facts, Show Strength***.<sup>[10]</sup> Greenblatt explains:

- ***Speak up*** means when you see something say something, even if it’s uncomfortable. Muster the courage to step up and step out, even if you’re alone.
- ***Share facts*** means grounding your response in evidence and data. If you’re engaging on-line, speak as calmly and respectfully as you would if the conversation were occurring face to face.
- ***Show strength*** means digging deep and boldly defending yourself but also looking out for those in need of protection. Stand up for yourself and serve as an ally in situations when hatred doesn’t affect you directly.<sup>[11]</sup>

A few months ago, I read a book titled *Preaching in Hitler’s Shadow: Sermons of Resistance in the Third Reich*.<sup>[12]</sup> The book explores the preaching context of Nazi Germany after the rise of Adolf Hitler in the 1930s and throughout World War II. The volume includes a variety of sermons from minority voices, those pastors, mostly of the so-called “Confessing Church,” who preached a gospel urging resistance to Hitler and Nazism, preaching this message at great risk to themselves. Some, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, paid the ultimate price

and were sent to prison/concentration camps, were tortured and executed. Others, like the lesser known [Helmut Gollwitzer](#), survived the war, and continued to serve the gospel as preachers and teachers.

In an early section of the book commenting on Kristallnacht, editor Dean Stroud observes, "*In one night, Germany ceased to be a land of laws and turned into a state of terror, a nightmare where Kafkaesque madmen ruled with impunity.*"[\[13\]](#)

Sadly, as last week's F.B.I. terror threat indicates; as the ongoing persecution of Black, Brown, and Asian people underscores; as the ominous normalization of authoritarianism in this country and around the world forebodes, we as a church continue to preach and teach in Hitler's shadow.

As we commemorate the 84th anniversary of *Kristallnacht*, I call the congregations of the Diocese of New Jersey to stand in solidarity with our Jewish brothers and sisters, with our brothers and sisters of Color, with LGBTQ people, and with all who are being threatened by the increasing rise of hatred directed at persons because of their religion, race, ethnic background, or gender identity. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are commanded to reject hatred and violence in any guise or form, no matter its source.

Tomorrow evening, Wednesday, November 9, Fr. Rick Morley of St. Mark's, Basking Ridge will be part of the Kristallnacht Commemoration with Rabbi Robert Green at Congregation B'nai Israel at 7:00 PM. The service will be on YouTube and you can find the link [here](#). I am grateful for this witness and urge other clergy and congregations to seek similar opportunities.

I am issuing this Pastoral Letter in accordance with Canon III.12.3 (b)[\[14\]](#) and ask that this letter be read or otherwise disseminated by the clergy, or if there be none, by the lay leaders of a congregation, to the people of the diocese under their charge and care.

May God bless you and keep you. *Shalom*.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "W. H. Stokes". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

The Right Rev. William H. Stokes  
Bishop of New Jersey