

Albany Orthodox Congregation Petitions To Build Fences, Not Bridges

By Marc Gronich

The Board of Directors at Congregation Beth Abraham-Jacob (CBAJ) wants to become the first congregation in upstate New York to build an eight-foot fence around its six-acre campus. CBAJ is a Modern Orthodox synagogue in a peaceful, low-crime area of Albany. The CBAJ leadership has petitioned the Albany Board of Zoning Appeals to allow for decorative metal fencing around the building, including opaque walls around a children's playground on the property.

During a public meeting members of the congregation expressed their fear of anti-Semitic incidents. After attacks in other communities like the deadly shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018, they spoke of the need to enhance their own security measures.

"In 2019 the Albany Jewish community received multiple bomb threats," said Joshua Gurrook, chairman of the CBAJ security committee. "We're asking you to allow us to do what we feel is in our best interest in protecting ourselves, our children and our community."

Seth Rosenblum, chief executive officer of the Rosenblum Companies, a property developer in the Capital Region and an executive board member of CBAJ, framed the need for additional security in context of religious freedom. "I approach that weekly expression of my freedom of religion with a lot of trepidation lately," said Rosenblum. "The rise of the radical right in our country and the recent arms shootings leave us very concerned about our ability to exercise our freedom of worship."

"The men wear kippot or skull caps which make us sort of visible and potentially vulnerable to people with hostile intentions," said Arthur Brenner, president of CBAJ.

"Of the 125 members of the congregation, 80 to 100 people attend services on Shabbat. He said he has 'fears of a hostile intrusion.'

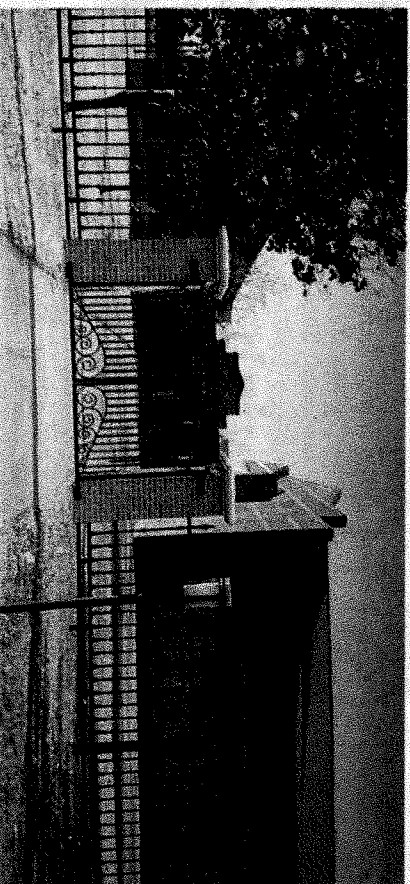
"During my time as president, I've participated in a number of security briefings that were given by the Jewish Federation's Community Relations Council. They always talk to the FBI Counterterrorism Task Force and the state police, and tell us about 'no known threats.' It's not the known threats that concern us. It's the random unknown threats. We have people walk literally right outside our office windows on a regular basis. We have people dumping things in our parking lot and coming up to our doors at all times of the day or night."

Rabbi Roy Feldman, who plans to leave his position later this month, said that the synagogue has experienced vandalism and threatening phone calls, letters and emails. "We are in a vulnerable position. We believe we have spent tremendous resources both in our volunteers and in our funds for armed security guards, with volunteers patrolling outside instead of being inside the volunteer services. Although we plan on still having volunteer security, we do feel that we could ease up some of that by having a fence, which we know could keep people away. It's a deterrent, and anybody entering your property can enter only from one particular entry point, which can be visible from a number of angles for our volunteer security team to observe."

(Although the outgoing rabbi noted incidents of hate towards the congregation, he did not provide

specifics. None of the incidents were officially reported to the Albany Police Department.)

"Jewish tradition teaches in Hebrew *Hacham Anov Verosho*, a wise person can look ahead and see what's in the future, which means in Jewish tradition we don't wait for bad things to happen," Feldman said. "We can foresee things that might happen. We do everything that's in our power to prevent those things from happening so it never comes to that. We don't want to be in the news-



Proposed gate superimposed in front of CBAJ.

papers as another Pittsburgh or another Poway or another Riverdale. We'd rather not be known for that."

Not everyone agrees with CBAJ's petition for the fence. CBAJ is in between two other Jewish institutions – the Albany Jewish Community Center on the east side and Congregation B'nai Sholom, on the west side. Private homes sit across the street from the three Jewish institutions. Sanford Rosenblum, a prominent local attorney,

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ney, noted during the public comment period of the meeting that the safety and danger arguments made by the CBAJ members are essentially moot.

"The opening words of the 2017 code that you administer talked about avoiding danger, and the word 'safety' appears. You have to go deep down into the code to see anything about fences, and the impression one gets in reading about fences is that the issues are aesthetic. They're not about danger, they're not about safety. But that's what this issue is," Rosenblum told the panel.

In a 70-mile radius around Albany there is no Jewish leadership admitting to the fear of anti-Semitism. Instead, they emphasize their current security precautions. All said their security entails various layers of security including special coded security locks, lights on all night, cameras for recording unsolicited movement around the property and local police patrols on a regular basis.

"Given the nature of our building I don't know that putting up a fence would be effective," said Rabbi Meir Rubashkin, director of the Oneonta Chabad, serving students at Oneonta State College. "We're set pretty far off the street, like CBAJ

is. I don't think a fence would be the correct way. We were recently awarded a \$100,000 national Security grant from the Department of Homeland more at upgrading our surveillance and access control more than really fencing."

"After the past few years, after every incident, we assess what's going on," said Rabbi A.B. Itkin, operating officer of Agudas Achim, a Chabad-run congregation in Kingston, 50 miles south of Albany. "The shul's been locked. We have codes to get in. The whole place is lit up at night with cameras. We're pretty well set here in that field. We also have a very good relationship with local law enforcement. Those are the different levels of security we have. Whenever there are more incidents the state police actually come around more often. There have been no major incidents locally. No blatant anti-Semitism. We try to take down fences in life."

"The more funding an institution has you can have more layers of security. We would consider putting up a fence around the synagogue if someone was to fund it. Every layer of added security is a big deal if it's done tastefully, not if it's barbed wire," Itkin told The Jewish Press.

Across the Hudson River from Kingston is the town village of Rhinebeck where Rabbi Hanoch Hecht runs the Rhinebeck Jewish Center.

"A fence here would deter people from coming to shul," Hecht told The Jewish Press. "It would discourage people if we say, 'Hey, we have to hide out to daven or to get together to study Torah.' We ultimately have to put security into place so we can live within society and still be proud Jews. We need to figure out how to be safe in an open way and be proud Jews living in the community we live."

"Do I think you need an eight-foot fence, plus hired security, plus the police department, plus volunteers? I think it's a little bit much. I would think you would also deter people from coming to shul. I would think CBAJ would work together with the Albany JCC and the reform synagogue to have one cohesive security plan." The Albany Board of Zoning Appeals tabled the fence proposal, seeking additional information from the synagogue leadership regarding a clear rationale for an eight-foot fence. The matter will be taken up again at the Board of Zoning Appeals' June meeting.

On the state level, in response to several attacks on Jews in New York City, Governor Andrew Cuomo recently ordered stepped-up security by the state police.

"When you discriminate against a Jewish person, a Hispanic, a Black, you decimate against every New Yorker. Every New Yorker believes in that acceptance, in that mutuality and in that collegiality. We have no tolerance for antisemitism," Cuomo said. "We're going to provide additional state troops to Jewish communities and especially Jewish religious and educational facilities. We're going to be affording priority protection during Shabbos because as you know there has been a disturbing number of incidents and I want our message to be very loud and clear that New Yorkers stand together in solidarity. We have no tolerance for discrimination against anyone. That certainly applies to our Jewish brothers and sisters."