

Proponent Testimony: HB 504 – Sacred Spaces Act
Ohio House of Representatives Committee on Criminal Justice
March 3, 2022

Chairman LaRe, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Leland, and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee:

Our synagogue was Zoom bombed during my weekly Torah study class for B'nai Jeshurun Congregation on Zoom, Monday morning, April 13, 2020 with approximately 30 class participants (all members of our congregation). A Zoom bomber entered the class about 40 minutes into a 60-minute online class. That device logged into the class using the photo of a young boy around 12 years old and asked if this was his school's English class. Suddenly, another unidentified user joined the Zoom and they took control of the Zoom controls playing what sounded like a pre-recorded audio that repeated over and over "Heil Hitler" with dramatic loud music and noise in the background. They also made racist remarks to Blacks, "Kill the N..." For a time, I was unable to mute any participants or to end the session. Finally, I was able to shut down the Zoom after about 30 seconds, but the attack felt like it lasted for more than 15 minutes. In fact, everyone I spoke to told me that they felt like it was 15 minutes and that they were personally attacked.

Our entire class was traumatized. I spoke with almost all of the participants shortly after the attack. They were all shaken. Some were elderly members that were scared to come back to another Zoom class. Some class participants had Holocaust survivors in their family and this brought up more fear and trauma for their own safety. Everyone shared with me that they felt vulnerable to more attacks and feared when it would happen next. At a time early in the pandemic when we are all anxious, isolated and scared, the Zoom bombing only exacerbated all of those. Some class participants were angered and understood it as part of the significant rise of antisemitism in America.

After the Zoom bombing attack, I filed a report with the Pepper Pike Police Department and reported it to the Cleveland FBI office. The session was recorded and I shared the recording with both the police and FBI. After the incident, our synagogue tightened our Zoom security protocol and no longer share any Zoom passwords on the web and only share them with members via direct email. This has been highly effective but it makes it more difficult for our members having to find passwords for each session, service, class and program.

As a congregational rabbi, I lived, worked, preached, taught and counseled all on Zoom that first year of the pandemic. Honestly, I always was worried and fearful that there would be another attack. I was always on edge, always preparing to have to hit mute or end meeting. I still feel that way today, two years into the pandemic. Every time that I log in to lead a service, teach a class, officiate at a funeral or counsel a grieving family, I fear a Zoom bombing.

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