

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:

On Wednesday January 5, 2022, I gathered with members of one of our families and their close friends for the graveside funeral of their mother and grandmother. It was a very emotional funeral, because she had severe dementia before she died and they were all grappling with trying to separate out their memories of her in these last years – when she did not know them – from all the good memories of many long years. The family has a very wide circle of both relatives and friends in and out of town. Many could not travel to Cleveland because of Covid or were not comfortable being in a gathering even outside. In order to make sure that all who desired would be able to see and be a part of the funeral service, we arranged for the service to be on Zoom. We created a Zoom link and used my phone on a tripod at the cemetery as the camera.

Normally, because we fear Zoom bombers, we do not post the link and password on any websites or in any obituaries. We send out that information by email directly to our members, and family can choose to send it to others. This family, however, are leaders in our synagogue and in the community and their friendship casts a wide net. There was no other way for them to get the information to all who might want to attend virtually, so they put that information in the obituary.

We began the service at graveside. We cut the ribbons worn by the mourners. The Cantor chanted a psalm. Then one of the sons got up to speak. As he did, Zoom bombers took over the Zoom. They played some mixture of what sounded like rap music and a mix of overlapping broadcasts whose words and noise were loud and disruptive and contained a number of expletives. A woman shouted loudly, “I hope he’s dead, I hope he rots in hell,” and a man shouted loudly “N****r! N****r! N****r!”

We had no choice but to shut down the Zoom. The family was shaken by what occurred but soldiered on through the funeral. It was very traumatic and disturbing to them have to listen to their words being interrupted by vile curses and foul, racist language as they were trying to lay their mother to rest. On top of that, because we had no choice but to shut down the Zoom, it cut the many family and friends on Zoom off, leaving them unable to see and hear the funeral. This included close relatives who were denied the opportunity for healing through community and for closure.

Zoom bombings like this are an emotional attack on the family and also destroy their sacred occasion, and rob them of the ability to be with their community in times of grief. I hope the legislature will pass legislation that will label such Zoom bombing a hate crime. There needs to be consequences for those who hurt families and communities in this way, in order to discourage such attacks.

Thank you.

Rabbi Stephen Weiss
B’nai Jeshurun Congregation
Pepper Pike, OH