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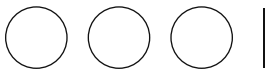
### LOCAL

## Houston's Jewish community remains plagued by threats as antisemitic incidents reach record levels



**Jonathan Limehouse, Staff writer**

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The Congregation Beth Yeshurun celebrated the first night of Hanukkah on Sunday, December 18, 2022 in Houston, Texas.

Meridith Kohut/Contributor

Houston's Jewish community has been plagued by threats, harassing voicemails, vandalism, racist flyers and white supremacist propaganda as antisemitic incidents reached record levels across the country in 2022, an Anti-Defamation League audit found.

The ADL documented 3,697 reported antisemitic incidents across the United States in 2022, an increase of 36 percent over 2021, according to the report released Thursday. A total of 73 incidents were reported in ADL's Southwest Region that stretches from El Paso to Beaumont, an 87 percent increase over 2021. Of those

incidents, more than half – 46 – occurred in the Houston area, the ADL reports. There were about 18 incidents in 2021, according to the group's [HEAT Map](#) that tracks such incidents.

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“We’re extremely disturbed that the national and regional numbers once again set records,” ADL Southwest Regional Director Mark B. Toubin said. “The fact that it is happening in multiple places throughout the community, that's what's really worrisome.”

While the country saw 111 antisemitic-fueled assaults last year, ADL did not find any reports of assaults in Houston last year, Toubin said. But if not stopped in its tracks, the rise in incidents could influence people to inflict violence upon the city's Jewish community in the future because “hateful actions and words don't stop there,” he added.

“We have far too many examples of the influence that it can have on others who at one point or another will act in a violent manner,” Toubin said.

In addition, the audit showed 2,298 incidents of harassment nationwide in 2022, a 29 percent increase, and 1,288 incidents of vandalism, a 51 percent increase. New York had the most incidents with 580, while Texas ranked fifth with 211.

Joel Dinkin, CEO of the Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center, recalled his institution receiving some bomb threats a number of years ago. But most recently, the distribution of antisemitic flyers has become rampant throughout the city.

Sandwich bags filled with small rocks and hateful antisemitic printed messages were discovered just last month in the front yards of residents of the Riverside Terrace area, a historically Black and Jewish neighborhood.

**'THE REALITY WE LIVE IN': Black Kingwood family targeted with racist threats, slashed tires**

On the same day, flyers with antisemitic propaganda were also found in the driveways of at least five residences in a Pearland subdivision.

“It's clearly on peoples' radar,” Dinkin said about the flyers.

## Confronting antisemitism in Houston

Rabbi Annie Belford recalled feeling “devastated” when a counselor with Houston

Independent School District called her last year and said a student voiced antisemitic threats toward her then 14-year-old son and his friend.

"I was really surprised," Belford, who has served a congregation in west Houston for 13 years, said. "As time passed, the rates of parents reporting that their children had been facing real challenges at school had been steadily increasing. It's a sort of thing where you say, 'Well, I didn't expect it to happen to me.'"

Belford contacted the ADL which told her how to talk to the school's personnel, detailed the legal ramifications if the school didn't respond appropriately and offered her family support and affirmation.

Initially, the school suggested Belford's son stand in front of his eighth-grade class and teach about the Holocaust, which "would've been terrible," the rabbi said, as her son was already feeling uneasy about the antisemitic remarks.

The student who communicated the threats received in-school suspension, but neither Belford nor her son wanted to punish the teenager.

**PATTERN OF HATE:** Bags with hateful, antisemitic flyers found in Riverside Terrace, a historically Black and Jewish area

"We were more interested in education and repentance," Belford said.

The middle school's vice principal, who's Jewish, worked one-on-one with the student and taught him more about the Holocaust and Jewish history, according to Belford.

"The student who had been attacking the Jewish kids, I think he really was able to learn a lot and he stopped the behavior," she said. "He didn't know it was so wrong, and so I think he just needed to learn."

Belford said the incident in a way even helped her son strengthen his commitment to Judaism.

"He wears his Jewish star necklace every single day, and he wasn't really doing that before," she said. "Not every child feels safe enough to express their Judaism that way."

And while fortunate it took until the eighth grade to experience antisemitic comments, Belford said her son is one of many teenagers at her temple who have been told they "were going to hell" and "that they killed Jesus."

## Education could 'open hearts and minds'

Conversations and more educational opportunities are ways to circumvent antisemitic incidents, Joel Dinkin, CEO for the Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center, said.

"It's a huge concern and it's going to take everybody to come together and work together to address this situation," he said.

Belford echoed Dinkin's sentiment, but she highlighted how education can combat the disinformation of antisemitic tropes that have been resurrected and become more widespread. Racism and anti-LGBTQ rhetoric has also been amplified due to disinformation, she added.

"I think until we get to the point as a society where we realize that we all are created in God's image, period, then we have a lot of work to do to open hearts and minds," Belford stated. "I think education is a part of that."

**OPINION:** As anti-Semitic incidents surge, how did we forget Holocaust?

## **OPINION: As anti-Semitic incidents surge, how did we forget Holocaust Remembrance Day? (Essay)**

We live in an environment where more and more people are comfortable expressing themselves in a way that is antisemitic or hateful, which in turn emboldens extremist groups and influential figures to spew insensitive remarks, Toubin stated.

According to the audit, 59 antisemitic incidents around the country were directly related to statements made last year by rapper Kanye West, who in early October 2022 tweeted that he was "going death con 3 on Jewish people" once he awoke from his slumber. DEFCON is an acronym that refers to the state of alert of America's militaries.

"So 59 out of the total number doesn't explain everything, but it certainly is a lot based upon the comments of one individual," Toubin said.

Toubin wants more elected officials and community leaders in Houston speaking out against antisemitism to stop others from expressing hateful statements.

"We know that there are more people in our community and in our country who don't harbor the kinds of antisemitism and hate that are represented in these incidents," he said. "If those people don't stand up and speak out, then the few who do harbor this level of hate are going to prevail."

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