

This week,

Almost a month after a rabbi and three congregants were taken hostage at a synagogue in Texas, Congress held two hearings related to Jews: A Senate hearing on the position of global antisemitism monitor, and a House hearing on nonprofit security. They were...interesting. Let's get into it.

I'm Lev Gringauz, and welcome to The Jews Are Tired, your podcast about Jewish news.

If you like this podcast, or Jewfolk generally, and the work that we do, support us by buying our merch. We just updated our store, so when you're really exhausted about everything, pick up a shirt that says "The Jews Are Tired — stop tweeting, like, now." Or for your morning coffee, start your day with a mug that has The Jews Are Tired podcast logo on it. Or take a nap with a The Jews Are Tired pillow. People will get the hint, I think.

You can also get in the Minnesota spirit with our "Ope, It's Shabbat Again" merch; feel good with a "10,000 Ways To Be Jewish" shirt; and make your rabbi laugh with a "10,000 Opinions On The Sermon" mug. In true Minnesota fashion, you also can passive-aggressively give "10,000 Opinions On The Sermon" merch to family members who have *way* too much to say at Passover seder.

There will be more on the way — I want to put together a disappointing-your-family series of designs. You know, "10,000 ways to disappoint your parents" mugs, or "The Jews Are Tired — my parents won't shut up because I'm still single" shirts.

The point is, a link to our Teespring store is available in the podcast notes, so please check that out. And there's just a link to donate to Jewfolk, Inc in the podcast notes as well if you want to give directly. We appreciate any support you can give.

Ok, now let's get to these two congressional hearings, which actually happened at the same time on Tuesday, Feb. 8 — starting with the Senate hearing on the Special Envoy To Monitor and Combat Antisemitism, which is an ambassador-level position that requires Senate confirmation. The position is pretty much what it sounds like: The United States point person for antisemitism worldwide.

Filling the position of antisemitism monitor is a big deal when we know antisemitism has been on the rise globally, and it's also a huge deal for Jewish representation in this country — that we have a federal spokesperson on issues of hatred against Jews.

But there has been some drama getting in the way of the position being filled. This past summer, President Joe Biden nominated renowned Holocaust historian and antisemitism

scholar Dr. Deborah Lipstadt to be the antisemitism monitor. And Republicans decided not to give her a committee hearing and not to move forward on her confirmation vote.

That's because shortly after the Jan. 6 right-wing insurrection at the Capitol of the United States, Sen. Ron Johnson, a Republican from Wisconsin, said in an interview that he wasn't concerned about the insurrection because the rioters storming the capitol love America and respect law enforcement. But, he would have been concerned if the mob was Black Lives Matter or Antifa.

Johnson's comment is largely seen as racist, essentially boiling down to 'I would have been concerned if the people entering the building were Black, but they were white and supported President Donald Trump, so it's ok.'

As an aside here, just a reminder that the rioters supporting Trump on Jan. 6 beat police officers, strung up gallows to hang the vice president and speaker of the house of this country, and smeared poop all over the capitol building. These are the people Johnson is defending.

On Twitter, Deborah Lipstadt responded to Johnson's comment by saying that QUOTE "This is white supremacy."

Johnson, and many members of the Republican party, did not take kindly to being called out. And, incidentally, Johnson is also a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which vets ambassador nominees before they can get a full Senate confirmation vote.

So because Lipstadt called out this racism from a Republican, the Republicans on the committee refused to hold a hearing for her and move the process forward of confirming her to be the antisemitism monitor, leaving the position empty for over half a year. They ignored a joint letter to the Senate from the Jewish Federations of North America, the Orthodox Union, and the Anti-Defamation League all asked the Senate to confirm Lipstadt already as antisemitism envoy. These are major organizations representing much of American Jewry, asking Senators to take antisemitism seriously, and Republicans ignored them.

But then, the hostage crisis at Congregation Beth Israel, a synagogue in Texas, happened in January. A British Muslim took the rabbi, Charlie Cytron-Walker, and three other congregants hostage for 12 hours while they were livestreaming services to the rest of the synagogue community. The hostage taker is now dead, while the rabbi and three congregants are alive.

Something like this, not only a blatantly antisemitic attack, but perpetrated by someone who flew in from outside of the U.S. to do so, put new pressure on Senate Republicans to have a hearing for Lipstadt and move forward on her confirmation. I mean, dealing with international antisemitism that can lead to these kinds of attacks is basically the whole point of the antisemitism monitor.

Which brings us back to the actual hearing on Feb 8. Republicans still played up their shenanigans, but before getting to that I want to give you the broader takeaways of the hearing itself.

Which, truthfully, is annoying because minus Republican shenanigans, the hearing was pretty boring and lacked any notable substance. Maybe I just expected too much of Congress or of Deborah Lipstadt. First of all, this wasn't just an event for Lipstadt, there were three other people there who were nominated to be ambassadors to Portugal, Jamaica, and Honduras respectively. But most of the focus was on Lipstadt.

And she spent a lot of time saying she is an equal opportunity critic of antisemitism, no matter where on the political spectrum it comes from, she'll call it out. Which is fine, but doesn't tell us anything new. If you want to read Lipstadt's statement at the hearing, by the way, that's linked in the podcast notes.

Also, in response to a question about what her priorities would be as antisemitism monitor, Lipstadt said "to fight [antisemitism] wherever I find it," and she talked about making people and countries understand the "pernicious nature of antisemitism." Which, again, great, but I was expecting something a little more concrete from the preeminent scholar of antisemitism given the resources of the State Department of the United States of America.

But, ok, fine, not every Congressional hearing can be riveting material. What's less fine are the Republicans at the hearing, who showed no remorse for holding up Lipstadt's confirmation. And if you're unsure, by the way, why this matters so much, and why I'm emphasizing it, it's because it is extremely important to recognize when a political party says it loves Jews, says it loves Israel, and then gaslights and BSs us when it comes to a real American Jewish communal priority like having an antisemitism monitor. That's an issue we should not be having to navigate, but it's one that is present here.

Senator James Risch, a Republican from Idaho and the ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said there had been some QUOTE "grumbling about how quickly Ms. Lipstadt's nomination moved forward." First of all, that's Dr. Lipstadt, not Ms. Lipstadt to you, Senator, and second of all, I wouldn't call the Jewish community asking again and again and again to fill this important position "grumbling."

But the hits just keep coming. Sen. Marco Rubio, Republican from Florida, had an otherwise amicable conversation with Lipstadt, but kept emphasizing, as other Republicans did, that the position of antisemitism monitor needs to be "nonpartisan." Lipstadt has criticized Democrats and Democratic members of Congress in the past. But it seems like the issue of being "nonpartisan" was only a concern because she had criticized a Republican. I don't remember "nonpartisan" to be a word that means "you can't criticize Republicans." But that was absolutely the implication here.

To Lipstadt's credit, she responded by saying QUOTE "those people who only see antisemitism or any form of prejudice...on the other side of the political spectrum are not really interested in fighting antisemitism, they're weaponizing antisemitism." ENDQUOTE

But this stuff just keeps going. Rubio also said that though he is concerned about Lipstadt's ability to be nonpartisan QUOTE "we don't believe in canceling anybody." Seriously? Oh, sure, not cancelling, just holding up Lipstadt's confirmation because you don't like something she said, and only begrudgingly giving her a committee hearing after a hostage crisis involving Jews. The absolute chutzpahdik quality of this, the sheer audacity.

And if you really want audacity, Sen. Ron Johnson showed up to the hearing just to act offended and take punches at Lipstadt, after which, he left, without any other interest in any of the other nominees or any other conversations with Lipstadt. You can find a link to the video of the hearing in the podcast notes, and if you really want to have a bad day, go one hour and eight minutes in, and watch Johnson be a rude brat to Lipstadt.

He complained that QUOTE "calling someone a racist is just under murderer and rapist," called Lipstadt "partisan," and said she engages in "malicious poison" on social media by having called Johnson out on his white supremacy. First of all, Senator, if you think being called a racist is that bad, maybe don't be so racist. But anyway, Lipstadt was the bigger person, and took the L, she apologized to Johnson, said she still disagrees with his statement, but her tweet was not nuanced and she did not mean what she said as a personal attack on Johnson.

As an aside, somebody buy this woman a present for keeping her cool and apologizing to the unprofessional and gaslighting man in front of her. Johnson, by the way, said he appreciated and accepted Lipstadt's apology, but said she was "simply not qualified" and opposed her confirmation as antisemitism envoy. And then he left the hearing.

It's just embarrassing. Truly. If you're hiring someone to call out antisemitism, that means they'll call you out too if you're being a schmuck. And if they don't, just because you're a Republican or whatever, then what's the point of having an antisemitism monitor?

And again, by messing with Dr. Lipstadt, you're also messing with a core American Jewish communal priority. For the love of God, antisemitism is a real issue that has killed and endangered Jews at what are unprecedented levels for what we expected of the 21st century. Why did any of this need to be an issue, why the drama around Lipstadt? Cmon Republicans.

But, finally, it does look like Lipstadt is clear to get her confirmation vote in the Senate and, far more likely than not, will become the antisemitism monitor. But no one knows when the confirmation vote will happen. So that may be on Democrats to hurry up and schedule the vote, seeing as they technically control the Senate. So somehow this whole saga isn't over yet.

So now, let's get to the second Congress hearing involving Jews on Feb 8. This one was a House hearing on the Nonprofit Security Grant Program, which is administered through FEMA, it

gives money to nonprofits to improve security systems and help pay for trainings — like the ones that helped Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker navigate the hostage situation in his Texas synagogue. If you want to check out the hearing for yourself, a link to it is available in the podcast notes.

The grant program was actually started thanks to lobbying from Jewish organizations after 9/11, and for a long time Jewish organizations received most of the money that FEMA was giving out. Obviously, of course, Jews are not the only minority who need this security funding.

But the program has several issues, so that's what the House Committee on Homeland Security came together to talk about in the wake of the hostage crisis. By the way, refreshingly, there were basically no shenanigans, it was Republicans and Democrats truly focused on an issue and wanting to fix it. So kudos to actual bipartisanship, especially on such a Jewish communal priority.

So here's the lowdown on what needs fixing with the Nonprofit Security Grant Program, and it's important to understand that every issue feeds into every other issue with the program:

- First of all, there is not enough money in the program. At the moment, funding is at \$180 million, but the Jewish community is asking for that to be doubled to \$360 million.

- That feeds into the fact that almost half of all applicants to the program are rejected, and there is no feedback process to tell nonprofits why they did not get the money they need for security. It's unclear if so many applicants are rejected because there is not enough money to go around. Not only does this make it difficult for nonprofits to know what they need to fix to apply next year, but it's also an issue of scale. Eric Fingerhut, President and CEO of the Jewish Federations of North America, testified that there are roughly 350,000-400,000 houses of worship in the U.S., and another 1.2 million registered nonprofits, all of whom could be eligible for this program. And he pointed out that even if just 1% of all of these organizations applied for the security grant program, FEMA would have to deal with around 15,000 applications. That's five times the number of applications that FEMA received in 2021. So if you don't have enough money, how can you be ready to help all these organizations that could apply?

- This is also all tied into an administrative problem, that if FEMA can barely handle 3300 applications in 2021, they need some help with capacity. And giving feedback on applications? That also takes extra administrative headroom, more people, more time, more money. It doesn't help that there's a lot of paperwork that goes into applying to this program, which also clogs up the process. So one of Fingerhut's asks was to reduce the amount of paperwork to streamline the application process for everyone.

- And all of these things together make an environment where it's easier for large nonprofits to apply to this program and get the security funding. But small organizations, synagogues, mosques, churches? They're screwed, even though they need this money just as much if not more than larger organizations, because larger nonprofits might already have money they can

set aside for security, where most small nonprofits, particularly religious nonprofits, are hanging on by a thread.

Rabbi Cytron-Walker testified at this hearing, and he mentioned that his synagogue only got the Nonprofit Security Grant because of one volunteer who worked on the application basically full-time. Many small religious nonprofits and organizations don't have the money, time, and people to be able to work on something like this. That's a huge barrier to getting much-needed security funding.

The Nonprofit Security Grant Program also has an obscurity problem, in that many religious leaders and institutions in this country, again, particularly at smaller organizations, have no idea that this program exists. And though this Congress hearing only had Jews testifying, everyone was really clear that this program is needed for everyone — Black, Asian, Muslim Americans, I mean, the list of minorities under threat in this country is so long. And this security grant program needs to be improved a lot.

It's unclear what will come next from this hearing, where or who the bill that fixes this program will come from, but there is one bipartisan piece of related legislation that could help with some of these problems. It's called the Pray Safe Act, introduced in 2021. There's a link to the official press release about it in the podcast notes, but it aims to create like a centralized hub of security information and guides and best practices to help nonprofits figure out what they need to do with security, and where to get help — for example, by applying to the Nonprofit Security Grant Program. But I have no idea when the Pray Safe Act might actually get voted on and become law, so it's nice, but sort of far off to these more pressing direct concerns.

There are two bits from this hearing I want to leave off on. First of all, there was some great testimony from Michael Masters, the CEO of the Secure Community Network, which is the official security organization of the Jewish Federations of North America. He brought up the need to improve hate crime reporting across the country, because most law enforcement agencies report no hate crimes at all, which we know does not reflect reality for minorities like Jews or anyone else in the U.S. And Masters gave this fascinating statistic, that when a local Jewish Federation creates a security program, reporting on hate crimes goes up 78%. I don't know what that's relative to, but it makes sense that if a nonprofit is given the money and the support to create a security framework, which means building relationships with local law enforcement, all of a sudden more attention will be paid to hate crimes.

But this also points to the kind of uncomfortable reality that we actually have no idea what the hate crime statistics are. Often, Jews will point out that FBI statistics on hate crimes show that in 2020, over half of all religiously-motivated hate crimes targeted Jews. And we are definitely targeted by hate crimes, do not get me wrong, but that number might be completely false. Isn't that kind of wild. I'm always amazed by how we hold on to these kinds of statistics to make sense of our place in America, but we don't actually know. And if we don't know the real numbers, that makes it harder to figure out how to address hate crimes and get law enforcement to take them seriously. So this is kind of a massive issue.

By the way, this is also something that has been a priority of the Jewish community in Minnesota for the past several years. You can find a story in the podcast notes about a coalition of all different communities targeted by hate crimes advocating for laws that help law enforcement do better about tracking and understanding hate crimes in the state. We're not 100% there yet, but the effort is not going away, so if you live in Minnesota, keep an eye out for this.

The last thing I'll leave off on is a clip of some of the testimony Rabbi Cytron-Walker gave, a kind of horrible but also incredible reflection on the tension between having security and almost needing to be suspicious of everyone, but also being welcoming and open as a community. It's something on all of our minds right now after the rabbi survived being taken hostage by someone he welcomed into his synagogue. So take a listen, and, um, there's a lot to think about here.

[RABBI SPEAKING]

"When the gunman arrived, it was me and one volunteer in the building. I was running late. I was finishing my preparations for the tour reading, organizing the online setup, checking sound. And in the midst of trying to do a million different things. I had a stranger come to the door. I have of course thought about that moment a great deal. I welcomed a terrorist into my congregation. I live with that responsibility. It's important for you to understand that this was not a matter of me opening the door just because I value hospitality. I do value hospitality.

The torah scroll that we read from each week was gifted to our congregation thanks to hospitality. I strive to live that value every day. Like so many congregations of all backgrounds CBI strives to be a house of prayer for all people. At the same time, I also value security, and a small congregation. I'm Rabbi in tech support, and gatekeeper. When our member asked if I knew the person at the door, I was distracted, but I still did a visual inspection.

And after a brief word, he appeared to be who he said he was a guy who spent a night outside in sub 40 degree weather. But that was just the first analysis. Yes, I served him tea. I also spoke with him throughout the process to learn his story. Who was he? How did he get to CBI? Such conversation is welcoming. And it gave me the authentic, it gave me an opportunity to see if he was acting nervous. Or if his story added up. Security and hospitality can go hand in hand. I was running late, but I spent time to see if there were any red flags. I didn't see any. Of course, I was wrong. I share this because despite all the plans and funding in courses, I still open the door."

End:

This has been this week's The Jews Are Tired podcast, I'm Lev Gringauz, don't forget to subscribe and share, and hopefully next week, the Jews will get some rest.

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