

by **RAFAEL HOFFMAN**

THE STORM *That* *Came* **BEFORE THE** **HURRICANE**

Perspectives on months of attacks in Williamsburg that preceded Jersey City, Monsey, and national attention to the rise of anti-Semitic violence.

For more than a year before the murders in Jersey City propelled violent attacks on Orthodox Jews to the front pages of national media, and a mass stabbing in Monsey further shocked the region, a string of lower-level assaults had become commonplace, just across the Hudson River. Most were concentrated in Crown Heights and Williamsburg, though in recent months the number of similar incidents has risen in Boro Park and other sections of Brooklyn as well.



Johannes Eisele/AFP/Getty Images
On the streets of Williamsburg.



JOHANNES EISELE/APP via Getty Images

Some of these acts were a push or a shove to a person, or a baby carriage; others were a punch or a pummeling. Some men had their *shtreimels* knocked off, and some women's *sheitels* were pulled. Few victims sustained serious injuries, but the number of incidents quickly mounted, becoming increasingly common throughout 2018 and 2019. By now there have been many dozens of such incidents — few of which involved any theft.

Though relations between the Lubavitch community in Crown Heights and the Caribbean immigrant population with which it shares the neighborhood have had their share of flare-ups over the years, tensions — and certainly physical threats — decreased significantly since the infamous riots that rocked the neighborhood in 1991. This past October, *Hamodia* published an extensive article looking at causes of the seeming reemergence of old animosities in Crown Heights.

Williamsburg, where such assaults have followed a similar pattern, seems to present even more of a mystery. Of course, street crime that affects nearly any urban neighborhood has occurred from time to time. However, the area — home to one of the city's largest and most conspicuous Jewish communities — had never before experienced an extended period of targeted violence.

Such attacks have seen periods of peaks and lulls, but over the past year, those lulls never lasted long enough to say the trend has subsided.

Increasing concern in New York Orthodox communities over these assaults



comes at a unique time in the city's criminal justice history. While violent crimes are at record lows, hate crimes have spiked, with 277 complaints registered in the first half of 2019, as compared to 192 in all of 2018. More than half of the 277 incidents were anti-Semitic in nature.

The phenomenon went largely unnoticed for some time, until it caught the attention of some — mostly Jewish — media outlets. Over time, elected officials and activists representing the Jewish community had called on the city to take stronger and broader-based action to address the trend. Yet it was not until after Jersey City and Monsey spun the situation into overdrive that federal, state and city officials rolled out aggressive plans to combat the trend, and organized a massive “solidarity march” in the streets of Manhattan.

Reasons for the rise seem to defy the cookie-cutter answers largely focused on by large national organizations that deal with anti-Semitism. Incidents like the shootings at the Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh and the Chabad of Poway in California left clear links to the rise of the ultra-nativist camp. A much more extensive, but largely non-violent, list of acts targeting Jews on college campuses and in left-wing civil activism have strong roots in pro-Palestinian ideology and the BDS movement. Yet, assaults on the streets of Brooklyn, mostly perpetrated by young black men, seem unlikely to spring from either of these ideologies.

This past September, Mayor Bill de Blasio announced the founding of a special city office designed to study and prevent “hate crimes.” As the overwhelming majority of victims of such crimes in New York City have been Orthodox Jews, assessing this phenomenon was presumed to be of high priority. Following a spate of attacks in the city over Chanukah, the Mayor pledged increased patrols in Jew-



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ish neighborhoods and tougher prosecution of perpetrators.

Yet answers as to what is motivating the string of assaults seem non-existent, and even well-reasoned theories for what is behind the phenomenon are scarce.

THE GREAT (AND DANGEROUS) UNKNOWN

Since its founding, Deborah Lauter has served as the executive director of the city's Office for the Prevention of Hate Crimes (OPHC).

"It's been an incredibly active first three months," she said. "I've spent most of my time out in the communities most affected, meeting with leaders and officials, trying to get a handle on what is going on. ... There clearly is a consistent frame of heightened concern, and I can say that that feeling is shared by the city as well, from the top down; the NYPD and the Mayor are very concerned about what's been going on."

OPHC is tasked with coordinating the work of a long list of city agencies and community organizations in an attempt to combat hate crimes. While it is charged with addressing targeted attacks against all groups, the Mayor's choice of Mrs. Lauter, who, prior to taking the job, spent 18 years at the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), signaled a clear focus on the Jewish community.

The office was given a \$1.7 million annual budget, and at the time of *Hamodia's* interview with Mrs. Lauter in the last week of November, she had nearly finished filling its six full-time positions.

Mrs. Lauter expressed a desire to better understand what was driving attackers, saying, "I can't address it unless I can assess it."

When asked if she had consulted with police or the city's justice department officials to discuss the findings of interrogations, depositions, or other first-person contact with the perpetrators, her reply was, "Not yet, but that's a real important question."

There were multiple requests from *Hamodia* to speak with the NYPD's hate crimes division in an attempt to get the feedback they have gleaned, though queries went unanswered.

While upfront about the lack of clarity behind assailants' motivations, Mrs. Lauter postulated that the violence was driven by broader trends not directly connected to anti-Semitism.

“People who use gentrification as a way to blame Jews know we aren't at fault for skyrocketing prices, but it fits into the old 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion' conspiracy theory.”



An image from surveillance video showing a group of teenagers knocking the hat off a Chassidische boy in Williamsburg.



Williamsburg Shomrim
Williamsburg Shomrim members working together with the NYPD.

Jews know we aren't [at fault for] the skyrocketing prices, but it fits into the old 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion' conspiracy theory, so they use it to justify their hatred."

Mr. Stern also felt that, despite declining levels of crime, the spate of attacks on Orthodox Jews serves as a proverbial canary in the coal mine for a brewing culture of lower regard for law and police, stemming from a liberalization of criminal laws in the state.

"I believe there is an environment of lawlessness starting in the city," he said. "It could be that other communities are being harassed more as well, but these are low level crimes — which the city is deliberately paying less attention

to. It comes from a bigger picture; the police have basically been told to tolerate drug use — which likely plays a factor in some of these attacks. Bail reform is a done deal now, and when people don't fear the consequences of their actions, they feel freer to act out. I think attacks on Jews are how this is starting, but I think the city should be concerned, if for no other reason than to stop it before it moves to whatever is next."

Mr. Asher Markowitz, a coordinator for Williamsburg Shomrim, said that, while the vast majority of perpetrators have been black teens, no more consistent profile has been established. He added that while some perpetrators were Williamsburg natives, several others came from other neighborhoods in the city — some in Brooklyn, and others from different boroughs. No single school was consistently implicated, either.

Mr. Markowitz cautioned against painting the attacks as part of the story of rising anti-Semitism.

"I don't think these kids hate Jewish people," he said. "They are looking for fun and so they see a group of people walking at night who look very different than them, and they decide to knock off a *shtreimel* or to pull off a lady's *sheitel*. That I know of, none of them said 'dirty Jew' or anything like that."

The assertion that the number of incidents has sharply spiked was also one that he questioned, raising the possibility that higher reporting of crimes by victims and the 24-hour news cycle had made both the public and the city more aware of such incidents.

"We are living in a time of social tension, if not upheaval," she said. "We have officials at the very top of our government who engage in dangerous rhetoric and name-calling; that's the reality our kids are living in, and the next step is for these feelings to be expressed in a physical way."

When questioned further about her apparent reference to President Donald Trump, Mrs. Lauter acknowledged that it was unlikely that any direct connection could be found between the president's sphere of influence and the inner-city youth responsible for the recent wave of attacks on Jews in Brooklyn. Yet, she added, a cocktail of issues was driving the citywide hate-crime spike.

"When you look at the totality of what's going on, like gentrification issues and a number of things that are creating a storm of negative energy, it's not just something targeted at the Jewish community. Many other communities are being targeted as well, but some, such as immigrant groups, report much less for a number of reasons."

Mr. Shmuel Mordechai Stern, a Williamsburg resident who serves as a community advocate with city agencies and elected officials, said that gentrification in north Brooklyn might indeed play a role in the local rise in anti-Semitism, but rebutted the presumed connection to the Orthodox community.

"Really, we are also being squeezed by gentrification caused by luxury housing development. It's something being driven by young artsy types that are making it hard for young Chassidic families to settle here in Williamsburg as well," he said. "People that use this as a way to blame



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“It’s not as new a thing as it looks, but with social media and all kinds of groups, you hear about every little thing and it looks like there’s constantly another story,” he said.

The lack of a cohesive narrative has not gone unnoticed. In November, an article by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency on a \$250,000 city grant awarded to ADL to expand their “no place for hate” educational initiative in public schools ran under the title, “Anti-Semitism is Spiking in Brooklyn and Officials Don’t Know Why.”

Several commentators have advanced theories that the uptick has its roots in anti-Semitic rhetoric used by some prominent controversial black leaders.

A piece in *National Review* by Zachary Evans titled “Anti-Semitism Grows in Brooklyn as Its Roots Remain Misunderstood” blasted several city and nation-

al officials and media figures for suggesting that violence against Orthodox Jews is linked to “white supremacist” actors, with the suggested narrative of such groups becoming emboldened by the election of President Trump. He goes on to document a thorough study of black-Jewish tensions in the city dating back to the 1968 teachers strike. The piece blames New York’s political establishment for embracing some of the most infamous stokers of these tensions throughout the decades, including Al Sharpton and a handful of openly anti-Semitic leaders of the Black Power movement. Yet, Mr. Evan’s narrative ends with the Crown Heights riots in 1991 and fails to draw any direct connections between the historical background he culls and the present phenomenon.

In an article that works with

some similar reasoning, Mr. Jonathan Tobin, editor-in-chief of the Jewish News Syndicate, suggests that the notoriously anti-Semitic rhetoric of Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan could potentially be trickling down to the streets of Brooklyn. By his own admission, however, Mr. Tobin presents no empirical evidence to back up his hypothesis, nor does he explain why, after decades of anti-Semitic rants by Mr. Farrakhan, the past two years have brought with them such a sharp spike in violent incidents against Jews.

Rabbi Moshe Dovid Niederman, president of the United Jewish Communities of Williamsburg and North Brooklyn (UJO), has been at the forefront of efforts to stem the continuing threats facing Jews in his community, working closely with the city. Following the attacks in Jersey City, which left two Jews with Williamsburg roots dead, he appeared at a press conference with Mayor de Blasio, Mrs. Lauter, and other top police and political officials.

His years of advocacy for the Orthodox community, however, have led Rabbi Niederman to a different hypothesis as to what is driving the assaults.

“It’s become socially acceptable to ridicule and demean Chassidic Jews,” he said. “When *The New York Times* can write editorials blaming us for spreading measles and turning us into pariahs on society for simply continuing to live with our set of values and our educational system, when other media and public officials and celebrities feel free to make us an object of disdain and no one says anything about it, so they talk and talk

and spread an image that Chassidic Jews are fair game, then someone on the street puts it into action.”

Rabbi Niederman said that while several established national Jewish organizations with a mission to combat anti-Semitism have spoken out against attacks and offered rewards for the apprehension of some of the perpetrators, they have been silent on the rhetoric he blames for the animosity against Orthodox Jews and the Chassidic community in particular.

“Once upon a time, if someone spoke against Chassidic Jews, he was looked at as a regular anti-Semite and nobody wanted to associate with that, because it was socially unacceptable, and one would be called a bigot; the repercussions for doing it were too strong. Now, that’s changed,” he said. “Over the last few years, more and more, the mainstream and even the secular Jewish media and some people in public go out of their way to draw attention to anything about Orthodox Jews that they can portray as negative. The social elite of the broader Jewish community don’t say anything about it and that sends a message that this is something that’s OK, so it becomes more prevalent and uglier.”

SHOTS IN THE DARK

While the lack of clarity about what is driving attacks presents an obvious challenge to addressing the situation, one factor that plays the most direct role in protecting Jews as they walk the streets of Brooklyn is deterrence from the NYPD. Following the recent attack in Monsey, both Mayor de Blasio and Governor Andrew

Rabbi David Niederman, president of UJO, at a recent press conference with city officials.



Cuomo pledged increased security and a more comprehensive approach to the Jewish community's safety, but few ambitious plans were actually announced.

Rabbi Niederman said that the department has been highly responsive to assaults as they occur, but that the irony is that Williamsburg is a low-crime community and that fact has left it more exposed to would-be criminals.

"New York is a big city with limited resources, and since the Chassidic community has virtually no violent crime, we get penalized on security — the city would rather spend their resources elsewhere and we get less of a police presence than other zones. Under normal circumstances, it's not such a problem, but if something happens that turns us into a target, it can get very dangerous here very quickly," he said.

Rabbi Niederman added that, on several occasions, such as over Sukkos, the NYPD made a conscious effort to flood the neighborhood, knowing of additional risk factors such as more people out late at night and *sukkos* as potential targets for vandalism.

"Under the circumstances, the neighborhood needs more patrols, and not only on Yom Tov," he said. "It's not just about numbers, but patrols need to be strategic also. Over Sukkos, a few police set up in some places with floodlights. It sends a strong message that we're here and we're watching."

Councilman Chaim Deutsch chairs the City Council's Jewish Caucus and has played an active role in coordinating city resources to better protect Jewish communities through both legislation and advocacy.

He credited the NYPD's hate-crimes unit and Shomrim volunteers with putting in time-consuming efforts to identify and apprehend many of the suspects in assaults against Jews over the past year, but said that there is "a lot more to do on preventative measures."

It was through Councilman Deutsch's sponsorship that the OPHC was created, which was one of many steps that he hopes will build a multi-agency infrastructure to address the rising threat to Jews in the city.

"Each time there was an attack, we found ourselves scrambling to put together a response. What I am trying to do now is to build a foundation and see what resources can be brought in to tackle this problem," he said. Councilman Deutsch pointed to a new program that made NYPD auxiliary volunteers available to protect houses of worship as another aspect of these efforts.

While he was encouraged to see measures implemented, the Councilman criticized Mayor de Blasio for not taking a sufficiently active role in the search for solutions.

"It boggles my mind why these things took legislation to accomplish," he said. "Our city has two million Jewish New Yorkers who are facing a serious and sustained threat. When an issue comes up, the Mayor can't sit back and wait for a bill to mandate action; he should be the one being proactive here. The only silver lining is that working directly with the Police Commissioner and others from NYPD have

made a lot of headway, but security should not have to be legislated." Councilman Deutsch also voiced suspicions that after arrests were made, perpetrators have been dealt with lightly by the city's justice system.

"Officials are fast to tweet to condemn a hate crime, but we have to look into what happens after an arrest is made, and if the DA is not prosecuting to the fullest [extent] or judges are letting these attackers go, that has to be made public, and they must be held accountable."

Hamodia submitted to the Brooklyn District Attorney's office requests for information on the status of several suspects who have been arrested for physical assaults on Jews in Williamsburg.

In one case, Deandre Diagle, 19, of East New York, and Michael Bellevue, 20, of Flatbush, Devante McDougell, 17, of Bay Ridge, and Elijah Hodge, 20, were arrested for an assault and robbery that occurred in August 2019. They are all awaiting trial for between eight to 10 counts of various forms of assault, robbery, and harassment. The victim was a Chassidic man, but the attack was not classified as a hate crime, possibly due to the theft element.

Enrique Gerena, 32, was arrested for an attack committed in December 2018 and has been charged with two charges of assault and one of harassment, all as hate crimes. As none of these defendants have been brought to trial, resolutions are yet to be determined.

Many more of Hamodia's requests for information on juvenile suspects, who comprise the vast majority of arrests for the present wave of assaults, were forwarded to Family Court. However, no information was obtainable, as criminal records for juvenile offenders are not public information.

OPHC and other city agencies have made a concerted effort to encourage victims to report even seemingly minor acts such as verbal abuse or vandalism that could be perceived as hate crimes. Councilman Deutsch also said that this is essential to both effective policing and broader efforts to stem the trend, but felt that criminal justice reform efforts on the state level, which have done away with bail for a long list of crimes, and efforts to release all witness information to defendants even in cases where no trial takes place, discourages victims and others from coming forth with complaints.

Mr. Stern shared concerns that suspects in the attacks are not being fully prosecuted and that this perception has a cooling effect on reporting.

"People are frustrated because, on the one hand, they are encouraged to report, but then they turn around and see a revolving door for these criminals," he said.

A week after the Monsey attack, and after an alleged assailant in Crown Heights had been released according to new bail laws, only to be re-arrested for a similar crime, some of bail reform's initial supporters called for the law to



Williamsburg Shomrim
The image shows Williamsburg Shomrim members detaining a criminal suspect.

be amended to create a carve-out for hate crimes.

Councilman Steven Levin, who represents Williamsburg, stressed the seriousness of the threat his constituents are facing, but felt solutions were to be found in education rather than criminal justice.

“We need to be much more aggressive in building our public school curriculums to address the totality of what it means to live in New York City where you very likely live on the same block as someone who comes from a radically different background than you,” he said. “Just throwing someone in juvenile detention will not decrease this phenomenon; if anything I think it will have the opposite effect. ... If you really wholeheartedly engage young people they will respond and will be far less likely to commit these types of acts.”

While Department of Education (DOE) curriculums do focus on trying to sensitize students to the city’s diverse populations, Councilman Levin felt that despite the large population of Orthodox Jews in New York, since the group does not attend public schools, they have fallen by the wayside in this effort — a point he felt needs to be addressed.

“This is not some PC thing. What’s going on is very serious, and I don’t think New York City’s education has done a good job of looking at this head-on and trying to give students a deeper understanding of what a Jewish person is and why they look the way they do,” he said. “Brooklyn, unlike the rest of the country where the majority of Jews are not easily identifiable, has a very large number of Orthodox who wear hats and have beards and wear distinctive clothing and have a very different way of life. It’s part of a bigger issue of teaching them to overcome bigotry about people who don’t look the way we do, and it has to be fought against wherever it comes up.”

Education initiatives have been universally backed by those publicly engaged on the issue. It is another element that was addressed through legislation sponsored

by Councilman Deutsch, and Rabbi Niederman has discussed various options for programs in Williamsburg public schools with Mrs. Lauter.

“Some good work is being done in school districts where Orthodox Jews live, some Rabbis are going into schools and the DOE will be at the table for our interagency task force,” said Mrs. Lauter. “I’ve had meetings with the superintendent in Williamsburg who really wants to address this, so it’s on everybody’s agenda ... [but] there’s not going to be a short-term fix to the longest-running hatred.”

Multiple requests for responses to questions from Hamodia regarding plans to address anti-Semitism in the curriculum and about common attitudes towards Jews in Williamsburg-area public schools addressed to the area’s Superintendent, Janice Ross, were never answered by the DOE’s public affairs office.

Rabbi Niederman said that he felt the problem, especially in light of the far more violent turn it had taken in Jersey City and Monsey, could not be addressed by city government alone or by a single agency or organization. He called for a conglomerate of city, state, and federal resources to be committed to engage experts to make a deep study of both causes and strategies to address what seems like a still rising threat. A day after the Monsey attack, Senator Charles Schumer and other elected officials said that the crisis had reached a point that demanded federal intervention.

“This is real. There are a lot of people who live with more and more fear of walking the streets,” he said. “Right now, no one seems to understand what is going on but there are enough professionals out there that have the ability to analyze this in a sophisticated way. Government at all levels has to employ them and bring together different agencies to get to the bottom of this and to ... [act] to improve security before the situation gets even worse.” ■