

# High Holiday Safety for LGBTQ+ Jews of Color with Joshua Maxey

During the High Holiday season, many Jewish congregations will hire additional security to keep the community safe during a busy time. However, this security can also perpetuate harmful impacts that are most felt by Jews of Color and LGBTQ+ members of the community.

We chatted with Joshua Maxey, a leader in the DC Jewish community and an LGBTQ+ Jew of Color, to talk about how organizations can ensure safety and dignity for all members.

## Tell us a bit about yourself!

My name is Joshua Maxey (he/him), I have been in the Washington, DC area for almost 10 years! I moved to DC to volunteer with the unhoused community as a part of a year-long service program. Working with one of the most vulnerable populations in our society and for a community that many times gets treated without dignity and respect helped to form me and my call in life to make sure that we live in a society that is not only inclusive but celebrates our many differences and values each individual as a unique and divinely created being. In Judaism, we often hear the phrase B'tzelem Elohim (made in the image of the divine). It is my mission in life to ensure that this powerful principle is fully recognized, both for Jews and non-Jews.

Here in the DC community, I am incredibly blessed to wear many hats that allow me to actively participate in creating spaces of belonging. I have the privilege of serving on the Board of Directors of several different organizations within the DC Jewish community that actively work to create these sacred spaces of belonging: Washington Hebrew Congregation, the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, the Edlavitch DC Jewish Community Center, and the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism. Professionally, I am the Executive Director of [Bet Mishpachah](#), DC's LGBTQ+ synagogue. In my role, I get to take part in creating vibrant and affirming programming for the LGBTQ+ Jewish community.

**Within your work, you've been deeply involved in discussions about security practices during high-stress periods, such as the High Holidays and, notably, post-Oct 7th. What harmful biases and misconceptions have you encountered within these discussions about security?**

As the Executive Director of a Jewish institution, ensuring our community remains safe is always a top priority. In this post-October 7 world, we are seeing a horrific rise in antisemitism and the spread of anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric. In these times, heightened security measures are implemented, but with this implementation, there needs to be a reminder that our institutions, especially synagogues, can not become cold and hostile to those who may be attending services or programs when they are seeking solace and peace. Often, when I attend community safety briefings in preparation for major events or services such as the High Holy Days, I am always left feeling a little uncomfortable when security officials say something along the lines of “If you see a stranger entering your building...”

The use of the word “stranger” in this context always invokes memories for me of entering into a communal Jewish space that I have never been to before, and then being treated in a hostile manner by either security or staff. Instead of a friendly hello or smile, I am greeted with invasive questions that only seek to prove why I should be allowed to enter into the space. We read many examples in the Jewish canon of how we as a people are meant to welcome the stranger among us.

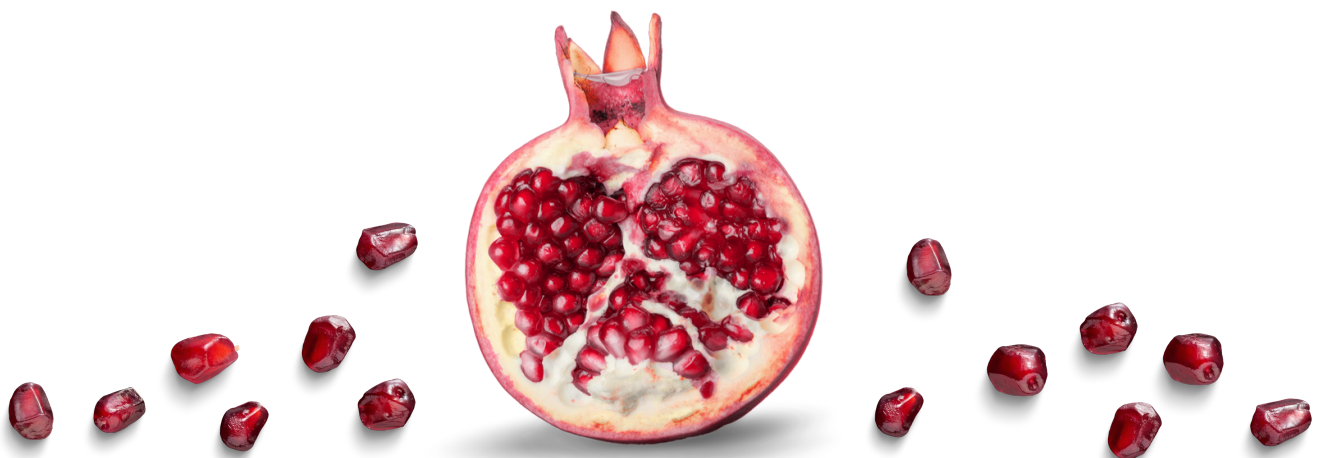
**What are some potential challenges or negative impacts that security practices might have on LGBTQ+ Jews of Color who want to engage in Jewish community activities? How might these challenges be amplified compared to Jews of Color who are not LGBTQ+?**

When our security procedures alienate and isolate those who are “othered,” we risk not only causing harm but also risk losing the potential to engage all members of our vibrant community. When preparing for the High Holy Days, I often remind myself and others who are directly involved with security or greeting that one of our jobs is to check our assumptions at the door. Don't assume to know the identity of visitors walking into Jewish communal spaces. Don't assume because I am Black that I may not be Jewish. Don't assume because I physically present as masculine and a male that I identify that way. As leaders, we also need to take into consideration how the sight of armed guards or members of law enforcement might affect certain members of the community.

**Recognizing that different communities will make varying decisions about security, what steps can Jewish leaders take to ensure that these security protocols respect and protect the diverse identities within the community, including LGBTQ+ Jews of Color?**

Safety and security should not just be for one segment of our population, it should be for all who enter our communal spaces. To me, an organization succeeds in having a proper security protocol when those protocols not only care for the physical security of community members, but also for their mental well-being as well. Now is the time for those in leadership to review their security protocols and check to see what unconscious bias they may bring up. If synagogues are actively engaged with Diversity, Equity Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) work, then what practices of DEIB are being implemented into their security plans? When hiring security contractors or training volunteers, are they given enough information about the diversity of the congregation or organization?

For example, our synagogue is made up of many interfaith couples and individuals from different faith traditions who feel a deep connection to Judaism. Sometimes these individuals may come to services in religious dress that may look different in a synagogue space. If we hired outside security, it would be a priority for me that the contracted security team gets a briefing on our community's makeup so that no one would potentially be made to feel like they did not belong. One approach to ensuring that the security protocols respect and protect our community is to consider having volunteers or staff stationed next to paid security officers. That way security officers can do their jobs, and a volunteer staffer — who more likely than not will recognize faces — can serve as a warm and friendly greeter.



**What individual actions can Jewish community members take personally to ensure true feelings of physical and mental well-being and security for all, especially for LGBTQ+ Jews of Color?**

Jewish community members should help to foster a safe and welcoming environment by striving not to make assumptions or put LGBTQ+ Jews of Color under a microscope to be treated as a “thing” to dissect.

**What words of encouragement/advice would you offer to LGBTQ+ Jews of Color who might be feeling hesitant about participating in Jewish community events due to concerns about security or being questioned?**

First, you belong! Second, if you are feeling hesitant about participating in communal events due to security concerns or being questioned, I would go on a fact-finding mission and either email or call the organization or event hosts and express your concerns. If you are comfortable, I would also ask if they know of any LGBTQ+ individuals, Jews of Color, or even affinity spaces within the community that they could connect you with.