



SINAI TEMPLE

An Interview with 2019 Scholar-In-Residence Dr. Matthew Levitt

By Vida Keyvanfar, High School Senior & Sinai Temple Teen Center Co-President

The very first thing Dr. Matt Levitt, renowned counter terrorism expert, said to describe himself was that he is a Boston Red Sox Fan! I refrained from replying...gooooo Dodgers! And let him continue.

When I asked him what accomplishment he was most proud of, he revealed that at age 35, he led an analytical counter terrorism team as a Deputy Chief of the FBI. He said he wishes there would not have been the need to work on the 9/11 investigation, but when it happened, he was glad that he was able to contribute and make a difference.

I was very curious as to how Dr. Levitt would address his career with regard to Judaism. Levitt stated, "I am an observant Jew. I am Modern Orthodox." He explained that religion is not just about how often you pray or observing rituals, but rather about how it affects you as a human being. "I look to see what skills I can develop to add value to what is important to me." He stated that he had discussed his job with his Rabbi, who told him that for the sake of "Pikuach Nefesh," the principle in Jewish law that the preservation of human life overrides virtually any other religious rule, he could work on Shabbat or Yom Tov. The Rabbi explained that working on the 9/11 emergency was a situation that merited this exception.

He also stated that he constantly tries to do things to remind himself of his religion; for example, taking the stairs instead of the elevator when working on Shabbat. He stated, "I was blown away by how this affected my surroundings." Dr. Levitt infused his answers to my questions with sweet anecdotes. He explained an instance when he and his coworkers had a high-level security briefing on the 11th floor of the FBI building. Since it was Shabbat, he decided to take the stairs rather than the elevator. As he was going up the stairs, he heard something behind him, and when he turned around, he realized that his entire team had chosen to take the stairs with him. He said, "They respected me. I was pulling my weight and contributing without giving up my observance."

I later asked him how extremism influences our community. He replied, "Terrorism is scary, it terrorizes people, it scares people. It makes people afraid to go about their daily lives." Dr. Levitt explained that although the odds of getting hurt in a terrorist attack are very low, it still has a significant impact on people because it is spread all over the news.

Mr. Levitt explained that the greatest terrorism threat for many years has and continues to be radical Islamist terrorism, a type of violent political ideology, rather than the religion of Islam. No one religion has a monopoly on extremism. In fact, what draws people to extremism is a type of grievance: a personal, societal, or political conflict. What will help us get ahead of the curve is working within communities, where teachers, librarians, youth leaders, and others must continue working on reducing corruption.

At the end of the interview, I asked Dr. Levitt what message he wants to convey to youth. He responded by explaining the danger of identifying those who seem different than us, due to religion, race, or ethnicity, as "other." He emphasized that it is diversity that makes us unique and strong.

Our Jewish religion has a commandment to see what can you do to make the world a better place. Look inside to see what you are passionate about, become good at it and use it to help others.