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Page 20

SENIOR LIFESTYLE APP-SOLUTELY FABULOUS

Page 24



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Page 39



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Minority Israelis speak at GMU

By Jared Foretek
Staff Writer

A touring group of Israeli reserves members came to George Mason University last week to try to shake up the boycott, divestment and sanctions debate on campus. Their weapon: none of the speakers was Jewish. Their message: Israel is not to blame for the lack of lasting peace in the region.

Five members of Reservists on Duty — Muslims, Druze, Bedouins and Christians — told 40 students that they all consider themselves proud Israelis. And they brought a clear message: “I would like to tell you that there is always hope,” said Nizar Graisi, a Christian from Maalot-Tarchisha, when asked about the prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace. “But [the Palestinians] have to stop the hate and the incitement in their schools.”

The Feb. 22 event was sponsored by George Mason Hillel.

Mohammad Kabiya is a Bedouin who finished his service in the Israeli Air Force’s search and rescue division last year, said the Israel Defense Forces is a mix of diverse backgrounds and religions.

“Christian people, Jewish people, Muslim people and Druze, all calling themselves ‘my brother,’” Kabiya said. “Only in the IDF.”

He said he often gets asked why, as an ethnic minority, he feels such a connection with and loyalty to Israel.

See **MINORITY**, page 13



Bagels and lox at Josh Neirman’s house: What millennials do “is sort of DIY Judaism,” Neirman says.

Photo by Jared Foretek

Millennials charting their own course

By Jared Foretek
Staff Writer

Third in a series

Josh Neirman is, by almost any measure, an active Jew. The 32-year-old’s house in the Petworth neighborhood of Washington serves as a regular hangout for millennial Jews; he hosts about two events per month, be they Shabbat dinners, brunches, or something else for friends and newcomers. He spent a year

in Avodah: The Jewish Service Corps upon moving to Washington in 2009, he helps out with events at Sixth and I, and

See **MILLENNIALS**, page 14

Protestors playing dead after shooting

By Dan Schere
Political Reporter

Five days after a gunman opened fire at a Florida high school, Bethesda resident Dana Margulis and her two elementary school-age daughters were lying on the ground in front of the White House, playing dead as part of a demonstration in favor of gun control.

Margulis, who said she doesn’t consider herself a “political person,” has friends in Parkland, Fla. Their children attend a middle school adjacent to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, where 19-year-old Nikolas Cruz shot and killed 17 people.

The number of school shootings is “out of control,” Margulis said, and she “can’t sit this one out.”

As the gun debate returned with a vengeance after the Parkland killings, area Jews have marched and rallied in large protests.

Students have been hit hard and wonder if they could be the next victims in what they see as a national crisis.

Some 1,300 teens from Montgomery County on Feb. 21 marched to the U.S. Capitol and the White House demanding that lawmakers stop

See **SHOOTING**, page 15

NEWS

MINORITY

from page 1

He showed photos of him and his fellow soldiers riding horses draped in Israeli flags through their village.

“We feel that we are citizens of the State of Israel and we have equal rights,” Kabiya said. “And it is our duty to protect our country.”

He said the group tries to take its message directly to anti-Israel campus groups, sometimes drawing protest, though there was nothing of the sort last week at George Mason. And even in a friendly setting, Elkhoury said, many students just don’t know about the diversity in the Israeli military.

“I see a lot of wrong images about minorities in Israel, saying that we’re



Mohammad Kabiya, an Israeli Bedouin who served in the IDF, speaks at George Mason University.

Photo by Jared Foretek

In general, Arab citizens of Israel are exempted from mandatory military service. The exception are Druze and Circassian men. The IDF does not release exact numbers for the number of Bedouin and other Muslim and Christian

living under apartheid, saying that discrimination and racism is built into the system, and it’s wrong,” he said. “As an Israeli, it really hurts me to see that and I want to change that. So we’re trying to expose as many students, as many activists no matter what their views toward Israel to these stories.”

Graisi spoke of his time after the military at the University of Haifa, where he said many students were openly critical of Israel.

“These students say anything they want,” Graisi said. “Many say things that are anti-Israel and nobody restricts them.”

But the reservists also said they’re not trying to paint an overly rosy picture of the Jewish state, particularly in terms of race and ethnicity. Graisi said he faced racism in Israel. But for minorities to combat prejudice, they must embrace their Israeli identity, not try to disown it.

“Israel is not perfect,” Elkhoury said. “But if we want to change something, to begin with, we need to be an integral part of the society.” n

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“We feel that we are citizens of the State of Israel and we have equal rights. And it is our duty to protect our country.”

—Mohammad Kabiya

volunteers in the army, according to the Jerusalem Post.

Reservists on Duty was formed in 2015 to combat the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement cropping, said its founder, Jonathan Nizar Elkhoury, a Christian who fled his native Lebanon with the Israeli withdrawal in 2000 and now has Israeli citizenship.

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MILLENNIALS

from page 1

he attends text study sessions around the city. He is, in terms of his level of Jewish engagement, somewhat exceptional.

But in another regard he's not unlike most Washington-area Jews between the ages of 22 to 39 without children (83 percent of them, according to a recently-published Brandeis University demographic study of the region's Jewish population): He isn't a member at a synagogue. That and other findings from the study, funded by The Morningstar Foundation and conducted in partnership with the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, paint a picture of the changing Jewish life in the region — one in which younger Jews are eschewing the traditional brick and mortar institutions that have defined Jewish life for previous generations.

The study does not find that younger Jews aren't engaged, as the academics at Brandeis' Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies define engagement. According to the report, those aged 18-39 register higher levels of engagement than the 40-49 age bracket, mostly falling into the "medium levels of engagement." Eighty-one percent of young adults without children say they attended services at least once in the past year, and 78 percent said services felt very or somewhat meaningful. But still, they're typically staying out of the pews.

"What we do is sort of DIY Judaism," Neirman says. "A lot of folks just don't necessarily see the benefit of becoming a member of a synagogue. A lot of the things we do are more culturally Jewish, particularly around the holidays."

On a recent weekend, that meant gathering friends and acquaintances at Neirman's house for a Shabbat bagel brunch and hamantashen baking the next day, in advance of Purim. At the brunch, attendees mingled and ate. The Facebook invitation said "Come after Shul (or sleeping in)."

It was a purely social gathering, but it was sponsored by Moishe House Without Walls, an initiative to extend the organization's support for smaller gatherings beyond its own locations. As a volunteer host, Neirman gets a maximum of \$150 per event to pay for food. According to Molly Cran, the mid-Atlantic regional manager for Moishe House, 86 Without Walls hosts held 414 programs in 2017. The one thing visitors have to do is sign in with their name and email address, and some attendees even demur at that.



Millennials make hamantashen in Petworth: Jews from the age of 22 to 39 make up 35 percent of the region's Jewish population.

Photo by Jared Foretek

Neirman insists that it's only for record-keeping purposes, but according to Janet Krasner Aronson, one of the Brandeis study's authors, that hesitation is representative of the way millennials don't want to feel like they're being slowly roped into something with an ulterior motive.

"If they know that what you really want is for them to join something, then there's an agenda that's really off putting," Aronson said. "Programming is most effective when it serves the needs of young adults from their perspective, as opposed to serving the community's agenda in terms of joining something, marrying Jews and making Jewish babies."

That pressure, or sense of agenda, is something 27-year-old Mahala Linden says she knows well. She always felt like the synagogues and Jewish institutions she interacted with in her hometown of Chicago wanted something from her, and often what they wanted was for her to get paired off with a Jewish man.

"I was ready to renounce the whole thing if another person told me about a great way to meet Jewish guys," Linden says. "Raising a Jewish family is something that I might do, but that was never what I connected to in Judaism. I've always considered myself a spiritual person, and instead I was getting some condescending attempt to reach the youth."

What she's found since moving to Washington about nine months ago has been much different, she says. Between low-pressure happy hours, Jewish political activism and Shabbat dinners with other young people, she

feels like the Washington community has something to offer everyone, or at least avenues to create whatever kind of Jewish engagement someone is seeking.

Linden has started to pave her own lane, building an unofficial Jewish women's club with a few friends. They meet about every other week to discuss a book by a Jewish author, eat, sing and just hang out. For now, she finds the group's small size and low-key nature sufficiently fulfilling. And if she eventually wants more, she knows there are plenty of options for people her age. Options like Gather DC, the non-denominational organization that hosts everything from coffee chats to happy hours and text study.

Rabbi Aaron Potek, who's served as Gather DC's community rabbi since 2015, said the group makes sure to meet young people wherever they are, even making a point to note that Jews and "Jew-curious" folks are welcome, alike.

"We aren't judging someone where they're at. We're understanding what they need and not imposing what we think they need," Potek said. "It means being sensitive to language we use that might be alienating or assumptions we might make, like that every Jew knows Yiddish words or went to summer camp."

Aronson points out that millennial Jews are as diverse as any group, and some surely do seek more structured, institutional Jewish life. Jews from the age of 22 to 39 make up 35 percent of the region's Jewish population; 32 percent of Jews between 18 and 29 identify as

Reform, 19 percent as Conservative and 6 percent as Orthodox. Thirty-nine percent don't identify with any denomination.

Of course, whether the millennial generation returns to institutional life is a question on many people's minds. Neirman is aware that the funding that makes it possible for him to host hamantashen baking or Shabbat dinners through OneTable, a nonprofit for millennial-hosted meals, will require a replenishing class of patrons. Somebody, he says, will eventually need to take ownership of the institutional life.

"Part of me wonders whether all of the money that the large groups are spending to subsidize these things, from different national and local foundations, is going to run out at some point," Neirman says. "Is that going to run out at some point? Is the current system sustainable and something that future generations can benefit from?"

Aronson says the jury's still out on whether millennials will return to the synagogue as they grow older. The percentage of synagogue members is only slightly higher for Jews between 22 and 39 with children, at 20 percent.

And as millennials of all religious and ethnic backgrounds marry and start families later, that gap between a Jewish upbringing and child-rearing grows.

"If somebody ducked out of synagogue life at 13 or 14 and maybe isn't having children until 35, that's a very long span of their life that they've been out of the synagogue," Aronson says. "If, in that time, they've found alternatives that are meaningful, they might be satisfied. Of course, many will return. But how many is unknown. And those decisions are based partly on the actions of the synagogues."

Ultimately, Aronson views the way millennials are seeking out Jewish life and community on their own terms to be an opportunity for synagogues. And with so much on offer for millennial Jews to chart their own path, there's a better chance their religious identity will be further formalized down the line.

"Young people are clearly interested in the content, they're interested in the experience. The fact that people are seeking other ways to participate is really a sign of interest," she says. "It's a starting point for Jewish engagement. What are people interested in, and then does the community provide opportunities? My guess is that if these non-synagogue opportunities were not available, it's not that people would go ahead and join synagogues, it would be that they just wouldn't go." ⁿ

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SHOOTING

from page 1

accepting funds from the National Rifle Association and pass gun control legislation, according to Bethesda Magazine.

“The fact was, this was the 18th school shooting [this year] and we’re not even to March yet,” said Philip Berkowitz, a senior at Albert Einstein High School in Kensington, who attended the march.

Berkowitz said lawmakers in the United States should look to European countries and Australia, which place more restrictions on the type of firearms citizens may buy and have more rigorous application processes.

He said he doesn’t think a blanket assault weapons ban like Australia’s is necessary, but that more thorough background checks should be conducted, including at private sales such as gun shows.

“People need to understand that we’re not going to take their guns away,” he said. “They just need to do more rigorous controls. They shouldn’t just have them because they bought it at a local gun show.”

Berkowitz had planned to attend an assembly Monday night at Montgomery Blair High School in Silver Spring with student survivors from the Florida high school. The event was organized by Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-Md.) and Ted Deutch (D-Fla.).

The assembly was closed to the press, but Raskin told reporters after that it was “the most inspiring and uplifting couple hours” he had spent in a long time. He credited the survivors of the shooting with starting a social movement among teens across the United States.

“They took a hopeless situation, and they provided hope,” he said.

A day after the march in Washington, students at Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Rockville had planned to stage a walkout.

Through social media and a shared Google document, Ilan Cohen, 17, and Nate Miller, 15, discussed plans with other students.

But Ilan said he and several other students were called into a meeting on Feb. 21 with school staff where they were told they were not allowed to engage in political protest.

Nate said the next day there was a sign in front of the school forbidding a walkout, as well as an announcement on the loudspeaker informing students



Teenagers from the Washington area stage a “lie-in” in front of the White House on Feb. 19. Five days before, 17 died in a shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla.

that demonstrating during the school day would be an unexcused absence and “there would be consequences.” The penalty: a 1 percent grade reduction for each class missed.

Marc Lindner, principal of the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School

“We do support our students participating in social action of that type,” he said.

Lindner said plans are in the works to hold a memorial service for the 17 victims of the shooting. He said he is sympathetic to the level of civic

Photo courtesy of Philip Berkowitz

that has changed since Margulis was growing up.

“When I was a child my parents didn’t walk us to the bus stop,” Margulis said.

“Now every single elementary school parent walks them. I know why I’m

Students have been hit hard and wonder if they could be the next victims in what they see as a national crisis.

High School said the school did not allow the walkout because it was political, and because the school is legally responsible if a student is harmed off campus during the school day.

He said the said if students wish to stage a political protest outside of school, the absence requires a parent’s note of approval.

engagement that the Florida tragedy has sparked.

“When students are directly impacted by this, and they have friends or classmates who are killed, it makes sense that they would want to do something about it, so this is a positive,” he said.

But it is symptomatic of a world

walking, because every day I think to myself, Is this the last time I’m going to see my child? I know that’s crazy, but that’s why we walk our children to the bus stop.” n

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