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 blame Palestinian leadership for the conflict. "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, 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

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 three 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 friends’ 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

Millennials charting their own course

By Jared Foretek
Staff Writer

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
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 of 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.

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 every month 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 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 as 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.”

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