On Shabbat, Jews march for gun reform

ALYSSA SCHMITT | STAFF REPORTER
aschmitt@cjn.org | @AlyssaSchmittCJN

Among the thousands who congregated March 24 at Public Square in downtown Cleveland, a group of about 100 B’nai Jeshurun Congregation members could be spotted throughout by their kipahs as well as the Jewish proverbs and Hebrew lettering written on signs. Their message: lawmakers should take action on gun reform.

The March For Our Lives in Cleveland was one of close to 800 marches that happened across the country with the main march in Washington, D.C., led by student survivors of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Fla., where 17 students and faculty were shot to death by a former student using an AR-15-style semi-automatic rifle.

Before protestors began marching, Cuyahoga County Executive Armond Budish, Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson, student organizers of the march, activists and a mother of a student who witnessed the Parkland shooting spoke during a rally. As they spoke, their voices echoed through the streets – as did the crowd’s cheers and applause.

UNCONVENTIONAL SHABBAT

Because the march fell on a Saturday, Rabbi Hal Rudin-Luria of B’nai Jeshurun Congregation in Pepper Pike had an “unconventional Shabbat.”

Fertility clinic crisis brings to light complexities of Jewish birth

AMANDA KOEHN | STAFF REPORTER
akoehn@cjn.org | @AmandaKoehnCJN

When Niki Schaefer learned she couldn’t conceive children naturally about 10 years ago, she knew fertility treatments were her next best bet. The Moreland Hills resident had always wanted to experience pregnancy, thus she went through several cycles of treatments to conceive her two children, Noah, 8, and Lane, 6.

Schaefer’s children are biologically hers and her husband Brian’s, but some who were pursuing a similar story for their family may no longer have that opportunity. A storage tank malfunction discovered March 4 at University Hospitals Ahuja Medical Center fertility clinic in Beachwood compromised the viability of an estimated 4,000 eggs and embryos.
while still not defying Shabbat law. He drove to Cleveland the night of March 23, had a Shabbat dinner and led an abridged service at the Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, at the intersection of Euclid Avenue and East 22nd Street in Cleveland. The next day, attendees marched with Rudin-Luria to Public Square.

“The rabbis say that if there is a national crisis, that gives us the right to sort of break the bounds of Shabbat, to push away this idea of a restful Idea of Shabbat, a Shabbat of peace, when we need to raise our voices communally to join together as a nation to say that something is wrong with our world,” Rudin-Luria said.

The service was part of a partnership between the congregation and cathedral formed by Rabbi Stephen Weiss and Bishop Mark Hollingsworth Jr. of the Episcopal Diocese of Ohio. Weiss felt gun violence was an urgent issue that needed to be addressed. Having a morning service at the cathedral was a way to provide his congregants a way to observe Shabbat while still participating in the march.

“It certainly is an expression of how serious this issue is to me that I did this,” Weiss said. “There are lots of marches and protests on Shabbat that we do not participate in ... but this issue is of such urgency that I felt compelled that we had to find a way to be a part of this, to include our voices, to support our children.”

Weiss was unable to attend the march because he had a bat mitzvah planned for the same morning. Although his presence was missed during the march, his sermon focused on the march and why he believes there is a need for gun reform legislation.

“The Torah says, ‘Don’t stand idly by the blood of your neighbor; When you see somebody’s life at risk, we are obligated to save that life,’” Weiss said. “To ignore that and not stop that violates our commandments.”

When Rudin-Luria arrived at the cathedral in the morning, he wasn’t sure who would be making the journey to Cleveland to join him, but he was touched by the turnout.

“I’m very moved. I did not know who would join me,” he said. “I set up about 40 chairs and we were overflowing and needed to bring in more chairs. I was very moved, and the prayers we shared together were very powerful.”

Praying can be a form of protest, Rudin-Luria said, referring to the civil rights movement in the 1960s when Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marched alongside Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. After Heschel marched in Selma, Ala., he said he was praying with his legs, which Rudin-Luria felt he was also doing during the March For Our Lives.

**STUDENT PERSPECTIVE**

Jonah Ross, 18, a senior at Shaker Heights High School and member of B’nai Jeshurun Congregation, is tired of the political inaction that follows each school shooting. He hopes his involvement in this march will show lawmakers that people want gun reform legislation.

“Way too many people have died from gun violence in the country,” he said. “It’s shooting after shooting and nothing gets done. Now that people are getting more involved, hopefully that will help cause change.”

While Ross hasn’t been affected by gun violence personally, he thinks the rate at which shootings occur in the country has made people indifferent to mass shootings.

“Because of how often (shootings) happen, we’ve become numb to it,” he said. “When I see it, I’m sad, but because it happens so much, it’s just another shooting. That’s not how it should be, because that means that it’s happening way too much and way too many people are getting killed.”

Erica Kahn, 18, a senior at Hathaway Brown School in Shaker Heights and a member of B’nai Jeshurun Congregation, went to protest for all the students who have died in school shootings. She said she wants to go to school and educate herself instead of having to take time from classes to prepare for a shooter coming into her school. Before the march began, Kahn registered to vote in hopes of making a change.

“I think (today) definitely aligns with Jewish morals,” she said. “We just want peace.”

**VETERAN MARCHERS**

For many participating in the march, this was not the first time they took to the streets to demand change. National Council of Jewish Women/Cleveland member Dr. Johanna Goldfarb of Pepper Pike participated in the Women’s March in 2018 in Chicago, the Women’s March in 2017 in Washington, D.C. and The March for Science in spring 2017 in Cleveland. She also protested the Vietnam War while studying at John Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore.

Goldfarb, a professor emerita of pediatrics at Case Western Reserve Cleveland Clinic Lerner College of Medicine in Cleveland, said this march was similar to the others she’s done in that people are frustrated with the way the country is acting. However, she said it also felt different from other marches.

“It does feel different, and I’m not sure if it’s because I’m older, but I have a sense that things are out of control in Washington,” said Goldfarb, who is a member of Park Synagogue in Pepper Pike and Cleveland Heights. “To realize that the (National Rifle Association) has such control over so many people … This is so important to so many of our Congress people, that they can’t stand up when something is so obviously wrong.”

Laura Kuntz of Shaker Heights, a member of Anshe Chesed Fairmount Temple in Beachwood, has been marching since she was a child because her mother was politically active and would often take Kuntz with her to marches. While she stood next to like-minded people, as she had done in other marches, she’s never seen a march that fixated on young people.

“It was really focused on the youth. It was started and organized by students and led by students, and that was so palpable when you were there that we were there to support the students,” said Kuntz, the incoming vice president of advocacy of NCJW/Cleveland.

Kuntz said she and her circle of friends have been talking more about gun control issues since the march. She’s also become more aware of the safety precautions students have to take while being in school, like knowing where to go in the case of a school lockdown.

As a Jew, Kuntz sees all life as sacred and that it’s her duty to help repair the world, which she believes she can do by continuing the gun control conversation until change is made.

“I’m commanded to repair the world as a Jew and if you save one life, it’s as if you’re saving the whole world,” Kuntz said. “If we can get guns off the street, we’re saving lives so it’s as if we’re saving the world.”