AIPAC 2018

Bipartisan is name of the game

By WJW Staff

Vice President Mike Pence told a friendly audience at the AIPAC Policy Conference here on Monday that he was bringing greetings “from the most pro-Israel president in the history of the United States.”

Pence, speaking to 18,000 supporters of the pro-Israel lobby, sought to back up that claim. He insisted that the Trump administration would end the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement, which AIPAC spent much of its political capital opposing, if Congress can’t fix what it sees as flaws in the deal’s enforcement language.

He said that as President Donald Trump had kept his promise to move the American embassy to Jerusalem, so he would on the nuclear deal.

“Unless this deal is fixed in the coming months, the United States of America will withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal immediately,” he said. “I have a solemn promise to Israel and the wider world: The United States of America will never allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon.”

The annual conference, held in the Walter E. Washington Convention Center here, basked in Trump’s decision to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in May — a promise he made as a presidential candidate at this conference two years ago. Inside the main ballroom, illuminated by blue light, the prime minister of the Jewish state championed Israeli innovation and the Jewish state’s improved diplomatic standing.

The final speaker at AIPAC’s 2018 Policy Conference, Netanyahu said Israeli innovation “revolutionizes all the industries and creates new industries,” which he then credited with helping to strengthen Israel’s military, economic and diplomatic relations with other countries.

“Because we have this tremendous capacity for security and intelligence and because we have this tremendous capacity for civilian technology — for making the lives of civilians safer, more productive — more countries are coming,” he told attendees at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center.

Netanyahu pledged to counteract the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement that encourages countries to divest from Israeli companies and partners.

“Remember people talked about Israel’s isolation? Pretty soon the countries that don’t have relations with Israel will find it difficult to make money,” he said.

Jewish life hit or miss for 40-somethings

By Dan Schere
Political Reporter
Fourth in a series

Laura Wallace was the ultimate Jewish multitasker on a Wednesday afternoon as she picked up her 8-year-old daughter, Naomi, from an art class at the Bender Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington in Rockville. Wallace, 42, managed to navigate the carpool lane, keep her 11-year-old son, Avi, quiet and answer interview questions on her cell phone.

From left, Ariel Levine, Brad Brooks-Rubin, Dan Magder, Ned Lazarus, Josh Segal and Nahanni Rous attend a parent trivia night at Milton Gottesman Jewish Day School of the Nation's Capital. Jewish involvement in Greater Washington is hit or miss for those in their 40s, a new study finds.

Photo by Miranda Chadwick

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“The running joke is that all of the work that I do is out of my car taking my kids from one activity to another,” she said. “It takes a lot of patience and a lot of humor, but we find a way to make it work.”

Wallace, the Montgomery County community organizer with the social action organization Jews United for Justice (JUFJ), is heavily invested in the Jewish community. In addition to her work, she and her family attend B’nai Israel Congregation in Rockville and her children go to Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School. But Jewish life, especially for Generation Xers like Wallace, is not always a priority for those without the time and the incentive, a new demographic study published by Brandeis University’s Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies finds.

The study, funded by the Morningstar Foundation and conducted in partnership with the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, found that Washington-area Jews between the ages of 40 and 49 — not the millennials that most people regard as at the fringes of Jewish life — have the lowest levels of engagement among the five different age groups surveyed, meaning that they are less likely to be involved in a synagogue or Jewish organization, read Jewish news or observe holidays and rituals at home.

Wallace said the demands of work and parenting tend to pull most people her age in so many directions that being involved in the Jewish community is not always priority No. 1. For parents, being Jewishly active means making a conscious choice.

“People decide to make the time,” explained Wallace. “The deepest relationship is with your kids. Whether through the home or organized Judaism, that is something people are willing to make a priority.”

And yet, the continuity factor — Jewish children are more likely to retain their identity if their parents emphasized it — tugs at a generation far more likely than their younger peers to be raising children. That was the case for Washington resident Edna Friedberg, whose father was a Holocaust survivor and stressed the importance of passing Jewish traditions on to future generations. For Friedberg, 45, that means sending her 13- and 9-year-old sons to Camp Ramah in New England during the summer, visiting relatives in Israel every two years and attending community events at Adas Israel Congregation, where she is a member. Both of her sons have also attended Milton Gottesman Jewish Day School of the Nation’s Capital.

“I just want to feel like they own their Jewishness,” she said.

Friedberg said she knows several parents her age who don’t send their kids to a Jewish day school or join a synagogue because the financial cost outweighs the need to maintain Jewish identity. For those who are on the fence about raising their kids Jewish, such as intermarried couples, $24,000 a year on day school tuition — the upper reaches of private schooling costs — is just too much.

But Friedberg said that for her, Jewish identity is also necessary for fitting in socially.

“I’ve lived in Washington for over 20 years,” she said. “Getting connected with the Jewish community is how I’ve created community. I don’t have any relatives in the area … and so I think it’s a priority for me not just identity-wise but in terms of connection.”

There was no doubt about 44-year-old Aaron Brickman’s passion for Judaism on Purim when he dressed as the Persian king Ahasuerus at a reading of the megillah at B’nai Israel Congregation in Rockville. Brickman’s children attend JDS, and his family regularly attends Shabbat services. But without those institutions, he said, staying involved Jewishly becomes difficult.

“It’s not a hard decision for us because our center of gravity is here,” he said. “There’s home, there’s work, and then where else are you spending a lot of your time? Thankfully we live in a place where there’s a lot of opportunity to be Jewish.”

Many who attended the Purim service were 40 and up, and most were with children. But 49-year old Rachel Becker came with an older female friend who she met through Israeli folk dancing class. Becker, who is single, has lived in Rockville her entire life and attends B’nai Israel, but said she doesn’t fit in. She’s too old for most singles groups, which are geared for 20- and 30-somethings, and too young to join the over-60 groups.

“I feel engaged in the community, but sometimes it’s split off in different segments,” she explained. “I don’t fit in. Either people are married and they have kids or they’re older and their kids have moved out. There’s nothing in the middle.”

Becker said she wishes there were more Jewish cultural activities geared toward people her age, including a trip to Israel similar to Birthright that was exclusively for 40-somethings.

And there lies the crux of the problem.

The disparity in Jewish involvement between age groups is partly explained by the fact that many in Generation X have children, and have limited time due to the demands of parenthood. But it is also because, unlike those in their 20s and 30s, Gen Xers have fewer Jewish connections during the middle-age years.

Brandeis researcher Janet Krasner Aronson, one of the study’s four authors, said children of intermarried parents began to receive formal Jewish education at greater rates starting in the 1980s and 1990s — around the time today’s millennials (those ages 22 to 39) were born. But before then, she said, there was far less outreach to intermarried families by Jewish institutions. Aronson thinks that programs such as Birthright have had a significant impact on millennials in a way that hasn’t been seen among 40-something Jews.

“The issue is that American Jews who are currently in their 40s were born when the Jewish community had recognized the dramatic increase in intermarriage, but had not yet formulated a response,” Aronson wrote in an email. “Many of them were the children of intermarried parents at the time that the community was largely accepting of interfaith couples.

“There is clear evidence that those who were born in the ‘80s and later — half of whom had intermarried parents — had far more exposure to Jewish education and experience than those born in the ’70s,” she said.

Jews United for Justice may not be Birthright, but a fair number of Gen Xers are involved in the organization, Wallace noted. JUFJ staffers, she said, make an effort to meet people in their homes and in coffee shops at their convenience to discuss issues that are important to them. She added that some of the organization’s advocacy work, such as campaigns focused on police reform and raising the minimum wage, will attract an older demographic.

“I think it’s about their life experience and what they’re seeing in their neighborhoods,” she explained. “Most comes out of that.”

If there is one thing she has learned as a community organizer, she said, it is that parents don’t mind taking off work early to get their kids and make the drive to Annapolis for lobbying nights.

“When there is a cause or a project or a program that people feel connected to, then they are willing to make time.”

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