

Elana Kahn
JCRC Director's Report
Annual meeting 2019

It's been a painful year, marked by extremism, polarization, vitriol, and the general scourge of meanness. Who would have thought that, in these times, white supremacists would walk into synagogues in America to kill Jews?

Who would have thought that in Wisconsin, we would see a group of high school students with their arms raised in a Nazi salute? Or that a UWM student would stand boldly in that school's central plaza, beside a group of Jewish students celebrating Israel Independence Day, holding a large sign with a swastika on it, and then blame Jews for all society's woes? Or that a Milwaukee religious leader would blame Jews for slavery and racial inequity writ large?

We've worked on all these issues and more. For us, this year has been crisis after crisis, increasing the need for our swift reaction but shrinking our capacity to build the alliances and run the programs that make our community safer and healthier for Jews and all community members.

The other day, my brother asked how I can keep doing this work, how I stay hopeful and continue to believe that we're making a difference.

I have three answers:

First of all, we have no choice. We must be steadfast.

Secondly, big change starts with people, by stretching open hearts and minds. Policy is made by people, human beings that set agendas. Person by person, heart by heart, mind by mind. That's how change happens.

And third, even in the midst of darkness, there are points of light so powerful that they illuminate our path. I'll share three such light sources from the year:

1. After the Pittsburgh synagogue attacks, the response from neighbors, friends, allies, community leaders, and elected officials was stunning. I received a flood of emails, text messages, and phone calls expressing support and asking how to help. And then, in the crush of crisis response, I

managed to send only three quick emails inviting people to our community gathering. That night, with 1800 people packed into Congregation Beth Israel Ner Tamid, Rev. David Simmons of the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee asked faith leader to come to the bima and stand with him as he spoke. Hundreds of people streamed forward, surrounding him as he said to our grieving and worried community:

“Too many times in history, the Jewish people have been alone when subjected to oppression, persecution, and genocide. My Jewish neighbors — beloved and dignified siblings of the creator who made us all — you are not alone tonight.”

I looked around the sanctuary to see if others were feeling what I was feeling, and indeed the relief of those words by a man in a collar surrounded by Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and my fellow Jews, was stunning, cathartic, immeasurable. In our very particular moment of looking antisemitism right into the face, they showed up.

2. Months later, after a white supremacist in New Zealand went on a murderous xenophobic rampage in mosques, we here in Milwaukee reached out to our Muslim neighbors to ask what we could do. With their permission and with the leadership of Tom Heinen from the Interfaith Conference, a few of us went to the Islamic Society to greet people as they finished their Friday prayers.

We stood outside the prayer hall with signs that read, “Your Jewish Family Stands With You.” As people filed out of the hall and saw us, they stopped to shake our hands, hug some of us, take photos and selfies. They were moved. There were tears.

For me, I fought back my own tears, overwhelmed by the simple act of showing up with our bodies and hearts, wanting to form a human ring around our Muslim brothers and sisters who were, at that moment, vulnerable and grieving, as we had been. It was perhaps the high point of my JCRC work to express so clearly, “We refuse to be enemies. Hate is hate is hate, and we must stretch open our hearts and stretch out our arms, suffocating hate with love.”

Our fate is indeed intertwined. After the 1958 synagogue bombing in Atlanta, the editor of the Atlanta Constitution wrote: “When the wolves of hate are loosed on one people, then no one is safe.”

3. Some would say that tragedy is easy; at this point we know what to do. But this year has also shown us that we’ve made very important strides toward normalcy, trust building, and culture-changing friendship. In early May, our Muslim-Jewish Partnership held a Mimouna-Ramadan program with the Federation’s Israel Center and Congregation Shalom. We were going to fill the space between our holidays of Passover and Ramadan with warmth, food, and friendship.

We had planned to ask people to move tables to ensure that we have mixed tables, but as Laura Emir prepared to open the program, she looked around and saw that all the tables were already mixed, with Muslims and Jews naturally choosing to sit with each other.

Then, after we ended the program, people didn’t leave. They stayed so long that it was time for the Muslims to pray. So they went to the other side of Congregation Shalom’s social hall and removed their shoes. The young muezzin picked up the microphone and sang his call to prayer. Right there.

Spontaneous Muslim prayer, on a loudspeaker, in a Milwaukee synagogue. Those of us in the other side of the social hall fell silent. It was a sacred moment. Prayer is prayer is prayer, and it occurred to me that this is what we’re praying for, the godliness to be brothers and sisters, feeling safe and seen and respected.

These are the stories we need to lift up and tell, and echo out into the world. Not just the stories of fear, but also of magnificent human solidarity and hard-won trust. Jews believe in the power of the word; indeed the Ten Commandments are directly translated as the Ten Utterances, so important are words.

As we continue to build relationships, stand up for the dignity of Jews and all people, let us also tell the stories of our great successes, nurturing all the many world-changing points of light, to illuminate the world.

The pioneering Milwaukeean, Golda Meir, had yet another answer for my brother: “Pessimism is a luxury that a Jew can never allow himself.”

About the word “we”: We do this work as a team, and I am privileged to work with remarkable, bright women. Thank you to Andrea Bernstein, who runs Hours Against Hate. And to Allison Hayden, my partner in all things and without whom nothing would get done. And to my incredible colleagues at the Milwaukee Jewish Federation, whose professionalism, collegiality, and support make this work so much easier.

And of course Ann Jacobs, JCRC Chair. There’s not a gift large enough to express my appreciation for your partnership and leadership. But as we embark on our third year together, fending off pessimism, I hope this image of hipster Goldie can act as a reminder of what’s needed of us — toughness, perseverance, courage, and humor.

[Ann comes up, gets gift, and goes back to her seat.]

Last year, we hosted Yair Rosenberg, who talked about how he uses social media to fight online trolls. He showed us how he uses his platform for good. We decided to hold onto the theme of “Use your power for good” because it captures the essence of community relations right now: We each have power. The trick is to figure out what the power is and how we can use it for good.

For several years, I have watched the extraordinary growth of Women Wage Peace, a grassroots movement of tens of thousands of Israeli women. I’ve been impressed by their diversity and the discipline of their mission. We’ve invited two powerful and influential leaders from Women Wage Peace, Nadia Hamdan and Roni Yavin, to talk with us about their lives, the movement, and their vision.

Let me tell you a bit about them.

Nadia has been the district chairperson of the women’s organization Naamat in Central Galilee since 1994. She initiates and leads programs and projects promoting the public and political status of women. In addition, she is involved in various organizations whose goal is to strengthen the role of Druze women both within the Druze community and throughout Israeli society.

Roni is the former executive director of Elul, the first pluralistic beit midrash (house of learning) in Jerusalem. She led the culture and education branch of Israel's National Library. She is a longtime educator and is currently working on a Ph.D. in Jewish thought from Ben Gurion University.

Rob Golub, editor of the Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle, will lead the discussion.

But first, to give us a deeper understanding of Women Wage Peace, let's watch a clip of the song, "Prayer of the Mothers," that came from the 2016 March of Hope.