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Community interfaith program tackles tough post-Orlando issues

by [Masha Shollar, Special to The Chronicle](#)

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With the aftermath of the mass shooting at Orlando, Fla.'s Pulse nightclub still being assessed, for many the June 12 attack could be framed in the contexts of three contentious contemporary political issues: how society as a whole treats the LGBT community, the debate over the Second Amendment and legislation to restrict the rights of gun owners and the negative perception of Islam and

Muslims in the media.

But at an interfaith program held June 23 at the Jewish Community Center in Squirrel Hill, the speakers — encompassing religious leaders, LGBT community members and gun control activists — all condemned the politicization of an event they said should instead give people space to mourn the senseless loss of life. Nevertheless, they still addressed policies they said could be implemented to prevent further attacks.

The event was organized simply because “it’s the right thing to do, to stand together,” said Josh Sayles, director of the Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh.

An interfaith gathering had been previously held for the Orlando victims, but as it took place on Shavuot, Sayles and others felt it wasn’t fair to ask Jewish people who wished to be involved to choose between celebrating the holiday and showing support for the LGBT community. So another program was organized, co-sponsored by the Federation, the JCC and Bet Tikvah, a local queer-centric congregation.

The main topic of the evening was the discrimination faced by the LGBT community at large, but speakers did tackle gun control and Islamophobia. Rob Conroy, the director of organizing for Ceasefire PA, said that the lack of background checks of gun purchasers “keeps me awake at night, actually.”

The topic, always brought to the forefront of conversation after a mass shooting, was fitting for the day as well. Only a few hours before, Sen. Susan Collins’ (R-Maine) gun-control bill, which would have banned people on the federal no-fly terrorist watch list from purchasing guns and which had bipartisan support, survived a test vote but failed to secure final approval. House Democrats launched a 24-hour sit-in to attempt to force a vote, with House Republicans declaring a recess until July 5.

Conroy exhorted those present in Squirrel Hill to “take a stand and make sure you continue” pushing for gun legislation, “because it’s important.” Other speakers likewise emphasized the need for what they called common-sense gun laws. Jordan Ball, the regional representative for Sen. Bob Casey (D-Pa.), pointed out

that support of the Second Amendment and the push for better gun legislation needn't be mutually exclusive.

"We have 892 hate groups currently operating in America," said Ball, adding that a member of one of those groups, or one who has committed a hate crime, is still legally allowed to purchase a firearm.

Support for restrictive legislation came from the religious sector too: Bishop David A. Zubik of the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh issued a statement on June 24 in which he urged lawmakers "to make it far more difficult for criminals, terrorists and those with dangerously impaired moral reasoning to make their point with a gun."

For her part, Bet Tikvah co-founder Judy Meiksin shined a spotlight on Islamophobia at the Thursday evening event. Although Orlando shooter Omar Mateen reportedly pledged allegiance to the so-called Islamic State during the attack, Meiksin said that terrorists should be "identified for their actions and not for the group they profess to represent." Rabbi Ron Symons, senior director of Jewish life at the JCC, likewise invoked the creed of local legend Mister (Fred) Rogers, urging people to reach out to those in their lives who may be of another race, religion or sexual orientation and ask them, "Would you be my neighbor?"

Wasi Mohamed, executive director of the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh, said that while the Islamic community of Pittsburgh appreciated the support and respect being shown to them, he wanted those present to make sure that the focus remained on the LGBT community and the victims. He condemned those who would "politicize the issue."

"We can't forget that there's real people involved," he said. "We're also hurt by this tragedy."

Sayles noted that despite the strides made by the LGBT community to secure equality, its members continue to face discrimination.

"Right here in Pennsylvania, the LGBT community is not protected under our workplace discrimination laws," he said. "In this state in 2016, you can still be fired from your job simply because you're gay."

Meiksin, a lesbian, said that in the days after the Orlando shooting, she found herself wondering, if the shooter had not invoked the name of Islam, would anyone have cared? She invoked another incident at a gay nightclub, a 1988 Valentine's Day raid by police on the Traveler's Club in Pittsburgh. Though she wasn't there at the time, she frequented the spot, telling the audience it was her "favorite place to go."

When the police raided, Meiksin said, they beat up many of those present, even throwing some patrons from the second floor down to the first and calling those present "f__ing queers." A few days after the raid, Meiksin recalled, she walked past a female police officer in the street and found herself thinking, "She can beat me up if she wants to. She can beat me up if she knows I'm gay." The raid received a day or two of local coverage.

Meiksin said that she worried the reaction to Orlando would be no different. But as she drove home from vacation with her partner, she saw flags on every

building they passed at half-staff. As Meiksin described the sight, she choked up and said, “I’m experiencing a community coming together to end violence.”

The Rev. Liddy Barlow, executive minister of Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania, said that though each church approaches the LGBT community differently, “all of the churches utterly reject hatred and violence.” The goal should be to work to “end stereotypes, bullying and hatred; to love and love and always to love until no more words are needed, until all that’s left is love.”

In order to implement practical support for the LGBT community, Rabbi Sharyn Henry of Rodef Shalom Congregation provided action steps for those present to take. Whatever they were doing, “it is likely not enough” to meet the needs of the LGBT community, she said. This is not the time for subtlety or poeticism. It’s time to be direct and to say, “I am a friend of the LGBT community.”

Masha Shollar can be reached at mashas@thejewishchronicle.net.

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