

New Mexico Jewish Link
November 2018 Executive Director's Corner

by Zach Benjamin

The city of Jerusalem was awash in the peace of the waning moments of Shabbat when my cell phone began to buzz. Twilight cast long shadows on the golden stone of the buildings and sidewalks, and the streets were quiet but for the gleeful exclamations of children playing soccer and Israelis of all stripes engaged in spirited conversation. The Jerusalem light rail service had not yet resumed for the week, and so women, men, children, and their pets roamed freely up and down Jaffa Street. I had taken the weekend in Jerusalem to unwind after a productive but frenetic week at the Jewish Federations of North America's General Assembly in Tel Aviv and subsequent meetings with Federation's partner communities in Israel.

As I sat down to dinner at one of the city's many street-side cafés, I pulled my phone from my pocket and realized immediately that Shabbat's peace would end prematurely that night. It took me a moment to absorb the gravity of what was unfolding 5,000 miles to my west, at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Synagogue. I allowed myself five minutes to compose my thoughts, and then immediately began coordinating our federation's response to what we would later learn was the deadliest act of anti-Semitism in the history of the United States of America.

30 hours later, I was back in New Mexico, where I was deeply grateful not only for how our community coalesced in a time of unprecedented need, but also for the solidarity demonstrated by New Mexicans of all faiths and political persuasions against anti-Semitism and hate in all forms.

While congregations across New Mexico, along with the Holocaust and Intolerance Museum, provided spiritual and communal healing, Federation exercised its role as a convener to begin the difficult community conversation on securing our Jewish population and institutions. Within hours of the attack, Federation was in touch with clergy, Jewish agency leadership, and law enforcement to begin organizing public forums in Albuquerque and Santa Fe to educate the community on the security infrastructure and protocols already in place, as well as to begin discussing how those protocols might need to evolve.

Days later, the first such forum took place in Albuquerque, where a panel was assembled consisting of leadership from the city's three largest congregations, the JCC, Federation, as well as the Albuquerque Police Department, FBI, and U.S. Attorney's Office.

It was important for a number of reasons that the community gather for this purpose. Perhaps most critically, those in attendance learned about the close communication and collaboration that exists between the various Jewish institutions. Every two-to-three months, the presidents, clergy, and executive management of Jewish organizations across New Mexico meet to share information, identify areas of potential collaboration, and generally stay abreast of each other's activities and needs. This includes security and crisis response protocols, which were the subject of the November meeting, held the afternoon following the Albuquerque community conversation on security.

Participants in the forum also faced difficult realities regarding our community and our discourse. As a professional representing an organization that serves the entire Jewish community, it has long been apparent to me that no archetype exists for the Jewish New Mexican. We are, perhaps, more reflective

of the Jewish people's diversity than any other Jewish community in the United States. That diversity is not only ethnic and religious, but it is also ideological.

The Albuquerque conversation on security at moments reflected the tinderbox of emotion and political division that currently defines our national discourse. While much of the discussion was productive, and indeed the ideas it yielded will be helpful in defining how our Jewish community approaches security and crisis response going forward, the conversation was also troubling. I saw Jews pointing their fingers and raising their voices against their fellow Jews. It was a scene of barely civil disagreement that was, to a certain extent, quintessentially Jewish—and thus not unexpected—but also disheartening.

In the days following the Pittsburgh massacre, *The Atlantic's* Franklin Foer tweeted, "Any strategy for enhancing the security of American Jewry should involve shunning Trump's Jewish enablers...Their money should be refused, their presence in synagogues not welcome."

While it is natural to want to levy blame when a crisis befalls our global Jewish community, the finger should never, under any circumstances, be pointed at our fellow Jews. Our tendency to want to push our own out of our already tiny tent is tragic in its own right. The phenomenon is exacerbated by social media and the ability of almost all of us to air emotional, hastily conceived reactions to that which occurs in our world. Indeed, it was important for those who attended the community conversation on security to see that a variety of viewpoints does exist, and perhaps to realize that while disagreement is healthy, every Jew belongs under our tent in challenging times.

Rabbi Nolan Lebovitz of Los Angeles's Adat Shalom synagogue, in his sermon delivered at last week's Solidarity Shabbat, offered an eloquent alternative to Foer's irresponsible, destructive rhetoric. "To stand against anti-Semitism," Lebovitz notes, "means that each of us needs to look inside and not choose partisanship over peoplehood, but rather use our partisanship to protect our joint bond of peoplehood. *Kol Yisrael Aravim Ze La'Zeh*—All Jews are responsible for one another. That is the spirit of our people."

Critical thinking, questioning, and disagreement are part of our Jewish DNA. These tendencies have contributed to our success and longevity as a people, but they also occasionally threaten to tear us asunder at times when we are instead most in need of convergence. Historically, low-grade conflict among us has served as one of the engines that ultimately drives us forward. We live in constant balance between peace and conflict, reflected poetically by the quiescence of Shabbat in Jerusalem, which existed in stark contrast to the horrors occurring simultaneously in Pittsburgh. Let us never allow the diversity that strengthens us, nor the tension upon which we so often thrive, to become excuses for abandoning each other or our responsibilities to the welfare of Jewish peoplehood.