

'Hate Has No Place'

Diverse panel will consider how to overcome bias — and have real hope

By **JOANNE PALMER**

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Rabbi Eli Cohen, right, the executive director of the Crown Heights Community Center, talks with a census volunteer at the #OneCrownHeights festival in Brooklyn on September 15, 2019. (Ben Sales)

We don't usually picture Homeland Security and Kumbaya as showing up in the same picture.

Homeland Security would be a black-and-white image of grim-faced dark-suited professionals going about deadly tasks with humorless intensity. Kumbaya would be all multicolored sparkles, with rainbows and unicorns.

But real life isn't either/or. It's complicated, and if we're lucky it's both/and.

The Kaplen JCC on the Palisades in Tenafly will host what its presenter, Bergen Indivisible for Democracy, is calling "a communitywide forum" called "Hate Has No Place" on Thursdays. (See box for details.) At that forum, representatives from the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities will join with the head of the state's Homeland Security and Preparedness office to talk about hate — yes, they're all against it, but there's far more to say than that — to offer practical solutions, and beyond that, to offer glimmers of actual hope, based on real-life experience.

The panelists — Teaneck's mayor, Mohammed Hameeduddin; Pastor Gil Monroe of Brooklyn, the director and founder of that borough's Faith-Based and Clergy Initiatives; the Jewish Federation of Northern New Jersey's chief planning officer, Lisa Harris Glass; and New Jersey's Homeland Security director, Jared Maples — will join the moderator, Evan Bernstein, the regional director of the New York/New Jersey ADL.

"The opposite of hate is unity," Ms. Glass said. "The tactics of unity are to show up, and to speak out. That's why forums like this one are so important."

Mr. Hameeduddin will talk about “the spike in hate crimes” — a spike the ADL documents — “and about how rhetoric is inflaming it,” he said. He also will talk about how different kinds of hate — anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim sentiment, racism, fear and loathing of the LGBT community “all intersect,” he said. “The same people who don’t like Jews don’t like Muslims.”

Mr. Hameeduddin is a realist and an optimist; he’s a member of the Shalom Hartman Institute’s Muslim Leadership Initiative, and as a civic leader in Teaneck he’s comfortable with the local Jewish community, as it is with him.

At the panel, he said, “I hope to touch on anti-Semitism in the Muslim world, and the reverse, anti-Muslim feeling in the Jewish world,” he said. “This is something that we have to discuss. I don’t have a solution for it, but we can’t deny that a lot of it is coming out, and that we have to find safe places to tackle this necessary conversation.”

It’s really hard, he acknowledged; because of the tensions between Israelis and Palestinians, “the moment you start talking about that, it just goes totally off the rails.”

But we can no longer afford that derailment, he said; “We have to figure out how to talk about it.”



Mohammed Hameeduddin, left, Gil Monrose, Lisa Harris Glass, Jared Maples

There is much that the Muslim community can learn from the Jewish community, Mr. Hameeduddin said. “We should not forget history. It is important for people to understand where the Jewish community came from. We can learn from that history about how to be integrated into the American dream.”

Jews are particularly vulnerable, he added. “When hate starts, the Jewish community always is the canary in the coal mine. And the Jewish and African-American communities go hand-in-hand with that, and then it just sort of trickles down from there.”

Still, he has hope. “There are a lot of good things happening that people don’t see,” he said. He talked about Bergen County Freeholder Tracy Zur’s We The People Foundation, which brings children from a wide range of backgrounds together, to do public service projects together and to talk to each other as people. “That’s how it starts,” he said. “You get people to get to know each other. To break bread together.

“It takes a lot of effort and organization to get to know each other.” But for him, in Teaneck, it can work. “It’s like my kids, when there is a knock on the door on Shabbes, kids wanting to play with my kids. And my kids know that on Shabbes when they play we turn off the TV.

“That kind of awareness doesn’t happen when you meet at a synagogue.” That’s more formal. More stilted. “But it happens when you sit in someone’s sukkah. And it’s the same thing on Ramadan.”

Beyond hate, there is friendship, Mr. Hameeduddin said. There can be genuine friendship, and that always is worth pursuing.

Pastor Monrose will talk about the work he does with the Caribbean- and African-American communities in Crown Heights, and with the Jewish community there as well. “I feel very good about it, because we really have put a lot of work into collaboration and community building over the last few years,” he said. “So although there has been a spike in hate crimes, we believe that we have worked very hard to connect our different communities to work together as one.”

On a Sunday in mid-September, the One Crown Heights Neighborhood Festival “brought together the entire community,” Pastor Monroe said. “We had young Muslim children playing soccer with Jewish children, and with immigrants from the Caribbean community playing with African Americans. It was an opportunity for us to look at the diversity, at the beautiful mosaic that we are.”

Crown Heights is an extraordinarily diverse community; its residents range from chasidic Jews through immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean to African Americans whose families came up from the south to, now, “young white millennials, who are leaving Manhattan in droves and coming to Crown Heights,” Pastor Monroe said. “And we see that as a strength. Gentrification is an issue in terms of the socioeconomic dynamic, and it comes with its challenges, but I think that we are poised to deal with all of this.” It will be good for the neighborhood he said.

So, it sounds like he has hope. Is that accurate? “Yes, I have hope!” he said.

“First of all, I am a faith leader, and our spiritual outlook always is about hope. Even in the darkest moments, you can never give up on hope, because if you do that you are giving up on all humanity. So I am always hopeful, because I am alive.

“And when we come together, when we are at the table together, we share the joys as well as the dark parts, the sorrows. So I am very hopeful that we will continue to march on.

“I think that when we come together to unify and tackle problems, we are in a good place, even though there are some bad characters.

“The world we live in is a very dangerous place. I am not downplaying that. But on a community level, we are unified.”

Mr. Maples heads the state Homeland Security office. “The office in New Jersey fills a unique role in the intelligence and law enforcement community,” he said. “In a lot of other states, there is not necessarily a one-stop shop for all the things that could happen, but we are that one stop. That means that every suspicious activity report in the state, for example, funnels through my office. That includes everything that goes to the FBI, and includes everything down to the local level.

“The local community is on the front lines; if anything seems off, if someone is probing something or doing something that feels not right, we can coordinate the investigation and do it in partnership with the local and state police and the FBI.

“We have seen such a great response from the ‘If you see something say something’ campaign, because we have had such a great response from the community.

“We have had a great success at stopping attacks before they became something when someone could get hurt. We have a lot more to go — but we have a great coordinated program in New Jersey.”

Every state develops its own Homeland Security office in the way that makes most sense for local sensibilities, politics, and concerns, Mr. Maples said. Some are just advisory offices, but New Jersey’s is a full agency, “and it is the second biggest in the United States”; only New York’s is bigger. As its head, he is a member of Governor Phil Murphy’s cabinet and reports directly to him. Most of his staff are state employees, he added.

Mr. Maples plans to talk to the crowd at the JCC about “the interfaith advisory council,” he said. “It was first started under Governor Christie, with about 200 members, give or take. We have focused on trying to expand our membership across all the faiths. The Jewish faith is well represented. We have about 3,000 members now. We meet quarterly, and we get several hundred folks at the meetings.

“We push out intelligence products; when something happens, we get them on the phone and tell them as much as we can.”

He also plans to talk about how, “when issues arise in the community, whether it is around cultural sensitivities or an incident, there is an opportunity to have a blunt conversation about it — and to solve it. It can be an opportunity for me to speak to a bishop or an imam or a rabbi, and engage directly with them.

“And then the third thing is to have representatives of these faiths get together. They are all facing the same problems, and there can be a coordinated effort to handle them. They can engage across faiths, and also across the state. Someone is facing a challenge in Parsippany, and someone else is facing the same challenge in Camden. They can talk about it.”

He also plans to talk about the grants his office gives out. Between the federal and state programs, “we push out almost \$10 million a year,” Mr. Maples said; again, New Jersey is second only to New York in the amount of both federal and state funds it disperses for security. “The lion’s share of it is federal,” he said, but it goes through his office.

Why is the Homeland Security office so involved in interfaith work? Doesn’t it sound sort of airy? “If somebody is an extremist, it gives us an opportunity to have a conversation about it on the front end,” Mr. Maples said. “It becomes a community engagement model, where there is give and take on both sides.” It is far better to engage extremists and talk them down from that before something happens than afterward; that is a very real, very serious, and very active challenge.”

And like the other panelists, Mr. Maples has hope that it can work.

Lori Sackler of Tenafly heads Bergen Indivisible. “Our goal is to work hand-in-hand with other community organizations to protect, preserve and advance our shared values around civil liberties, social justice, voter rights, and other important issues,” Ms. Sackler said. “With examples of hate growing on a daily basis, we, as a group, are proud to be featuring an open and diverse forum of this kind with such esteemed leaders and prominent organizations in our community. We hope to provide people with valuable information and the tools they need to respond in a positive and constructive manner.

“We thank the JCC for hosting and co-sponsoring this event and are most grateful to our incredible panelists and all the cosponsors who stepped up with their generous vision and support.”

Who: A panel of local and regional leaders representing many faith groups

What: Speak at a communitywide forum, “Hate Has No Place”

Where: At the Kaplen JCC on the Palisades, 411 East Clinton Ave., Tenafly

When: On Tuesday, October 29, at 7:30 p.m.

How much: Free

For more information: jccotp.org

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