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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT / PERSONAL GROWTH

Israel trip and fellowship redefine JCC officer's passion for community

As a Jewish professional working in philanthropy, 'I talk about community and the impact of a gift ... I understand it now on a higher level'

By **ADAM REINHERZ**

June 21, 2024, 11:15 am



Fara Marcus is participating in an 18-month fellowship with the JCCA. (Photo courtesy of Fara Marcus)

A fellowship and visit to Israel transformed Fara Marcus' understanding of community and Judaism.

Armed with insight from the Martin Pear Israel Fellowship, Marcus, the chief development and marketing officer of the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh, said she is still learning and determining how to implement best the life lessons she gained on her trip.

Alongside 10 North American colleagues, Marcus began an 18-month Israel education program on Oct. 1.

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Administered by the JCC Association of North America, the fellowship introduces participants — Jewish and non-Jewish JCC professionals — to Israel's "past, present and future."

Though organizers intended to ease the cohort into a complex topic over 18 months, that plan changed when, six days after the fellowship began, Hamas invaded Israel. Two days later, on Oct. 9, cohort members took to Zoom for their first meeting.

"Obviously, there was a lot of uncertainty," Marcus said.

Concerns were quickly allayed as educators and program administrators not only addressed questions but immediately modified the curriculum.

Instead of spending 18 months instructing fellows about Israel's history, teachers realized there needed to be a "crash course on why the war is going on," Marcus said, exploring "what's happening right now," while preparing participants for an immersive 11-day visit to the Jewish state.

Marcus returned from the "life-changing" trip weeks ago.

"I think that as we can see in the world, Israel is not only underappreciated but misunderstood," she said. "Israel is a nation of love and strength, and it's a promise of community and a promise of people who watch out for each other."

Her beliefs, she said, were reinforced by visits with Jews, Arabs and Christians.

Regardless of faith, "people care for each other," Marcus said. "They care for the person who's walking next to them when they might be on the street in Tel Aviv, and they care as well about Israel."

While at war Israel is in deep crisis and hurt, she said, "At the end of the day people are there for each other. They have to survive, and they have to rely on themselves to survive, literally."



Fara Marcus, left, learns about inclusion and community during a dinner in Israel. (Photo courtesy of Fara Marcus)

After returning to Pittsburgh, Marcus shared her thoughts during a talk with members of the JCC's board, through an email to JCC staff and stakeholders and during brief remarks at a [Bring Them Home vigil](#) on the corner of Darlington Road and Murray Avenue.

Her learning, she said, is far from complete and she's excited to see where it leads.

Cohort members are required to implement a project that brings Israel back to their JCC and community in a "purposeful and meaningful way," Marcus said. "I'm not sure what I'll do yet, but I think our community is already making change since the start of the war."

Marcus pointed to a [December program at the JCC](#) when four Israeli visitors publicly lit a Chanukah candle and recounted the horrors of Oct. 7.

Six months after their visit, Marcus remains in touch with several of the travelers through WhatsApp. Along with checking in on each other, the group wishes each

other Shabbat shalom every Friday. On an off night in Israel, Marcus went to dinner with one of the parties — Hila Fakliro, an Israeli who, during her visit to Pittsburgh, described the terror of being a bartender at the Re'im music festival.

Sitting together in a Tel Aviv restaurant, “felt like all worlds colliding,” Marcus said.

As a Jewish professional working in philanthropy, “I talk about community and the impact of a gift,” she said. “I understand it now on a higher level.”

Before last month, Marcus had never traveled to Israel. She “passed up” opportunities in her teens and 20s, and her earlier connections to Judaism weren't particularly substantive, she said.

“I grew up in a Reform family. We went to the High Holidays and I got bat mitzvahed, but being Jewish was always just kind of in my side pocket,” she said. “It wasn't until I met my wonderful husband that I started to really explore my Jewish identity and what it meant to truly be Jewish. That just continued when we had children. Where I really started my Jewish journey is when I became a Jewish professional at the JCC, and that coincided with my children being of age to attend the ECDC here and then go on to Community Day.”

Though Jewishly engaged personally and professionally, a void existed, Marcus said.

“I kind of felt like an outsider,” she continued. “I work in a JCC where most of my colleagues, or in the Jewish community, have experienced Israel by this point in their life.”



Fara Marcus places her hand on the Western Wall during her first visit to Israel. (Photo courtesy of Fara Marcus)

Studying about Israel, and experiencing it firsthand, didn't only alter Marcus' relationship to the Jewish state, but to her colleagues and neighbors at home.

She credits the fellowship's origins.

Named in honor of Martin Pear, a former CEO at Valley of the Sun JCC in Scottsdale, Arizona, Pear was “[one of the field's most beloved leaders](#),” according to JCCA. “He believed strongly that all Jewish professionals should anchor their practice in a passionate commitment to Israel.”

After Pear died, his daughter and son-in-law funded the fellowship, Marcus said.

“When I thought about this it struck me because this is my career,” she continued. “Every day I work in philanthropy and talk about the impact of a gift, but this time I wasn't the solicitor, I wasn't the donor, I was the recipient. And it really reinforced for me my purpose in our community, as the chief development officer for the JCC, that just one gift, one thoughtfully created gift, literally impacted and changed my life.”

Jason Kunzman, the JCC's president and CEO, said he is "beyond thrilled that Fara had the opportunity to experience Israel for the first time through a program of the JCC Association. The trip's powerful impact on both her professional approach and her Jewish identity is already evident."

Months remain until Marcus concludes her fellowship. The Israel-based portion is now complete, but she isn't thinking about finality.

"I don't call it a trip," she said. "It's an educational journey." **PJC**

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ISRAEL AT WAR / BELIEVING WOMEN

Local organizations unite for powerful screening of 'Screams Before Silence'

Hamas' premeditated use of sexual violence on Oct. 7 is well-documented, but there are still those who say it didn't happen. This film puts any doubts to rest.

By **TOBY TABACHNICK**

June 23, 2024, 2:56 pm



Sheryl Sandberg at a memorial at the site of the Nova Music Festival (Still from film)

The evidence that Hamas used sexual violence as a tool of war on Oct. 7 is overwhelming and incontrovertible. Reading written reports of the eyewitness testimony of that violence is harrowing, but hearing multiple witnesses recount exactly what they saw that day is much more profound.

Sheryl Sandberg, former chief operating officer of Meta and founder of [LeanIn.org](https://leanin.org), made the documentary “[Screams Before Silence](#)” for that very reason, and to counter the denial or justification of those atrocities by anti-Israel activists and antisemites.

Following a showing of the film to a bipartisan coalition of lawmakers at the U.S. Capitol last month, Sandberg told JTA: “Some pretty mainstream people are either ignoring or worse denying this happened. So this aspect, I think, gets to the heart of what people need to believe to understand what happened and what this kind of terror really is.”

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This video is age-restricted and only available on

YouTube. [Learn more](#)

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The film is available on YouTube, but several organizational partners — the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh, the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh, StandWithUs, the Jewish Women’s Foundation, the National Council of Jewish Women and Classrooms Without Borders — held a screening at the JCC in Squirrel Hill last week so that the community could bear witness together.

While efforts were made to invite a broad coalition of Pittsburghers, the majority of the audience was comprised of members of the Jewish community. Several local politicians were present including City Controller Rachael Heisler; Pittsburgh City Councilwomen Erika Strassburger and Barb Warwick; Allegheny County Controller Corey O’Connor; Allegheny County Councilmen Sam DeMarco III and Paul Klein; and Zeke Rediker, Mayor Ed Gainey’s executive advisor on legal policy.

Representatives from Pittsburgh Action Against Rape and the 10.27 Healing Partnership were also in attendance.

Hamas’ premeditated use of sexual violence on Oct. 7 is well-documented, but there are still those who say it didn’t happen, especially on social media platforms which “have largely allowed Hamas apologists, Israel critics and others to spread and bolster the false narrative that accounts of sexual assaults, gang rape and other atrocities are either made up or wildly inflated,” The Times of Israel reported earlier this month.

That denial motivated the organizational partners to screen the film in Pittsburgh.

“It was really important for us to partner with other Jewish organizations to bring this film in for the community,” Laura Cherner, the director of the Federation’s Community Relations Council, told the Chronicle.

The organizations, she said, have “been unified in this moment around a number of goals, and two of those I see as making sure that we tell the story of what really happened on Oct. 7 and creating a society that does not allow nor tolerate something so horrific to ever happen again. This film is one step of that bearing witness, and bearing witness we hope will translate into a commitment to action.”

The film was screened in Pittsburgh on June 20, just one day after the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence Against Women In Conflict, and days after the antisemitically motivated gang rape of a 12-year-old Jewish girl in France.

In the documentary, Sandberg interviews attendees of the Nova Music Festival — where Hamas murdered more than 360 people and abducted dozens more — residents of the Hamas-ravaged Kibbutz Kfar Aza, former hostages and first responders, all recounting evidence of the sexual brutality that occurred that day in various locations.

While no graphic images are shown out of respect for the victims and their families, the details conveyed in the interviews are horrifying and heartbreaking. The testimony includes that of a captured Hamas terrorist who admits to raping an Israeli woman during the attack.

One former hostage recounts facing terrorists at the music festival and calculating whether it would be better to be kidnapped, raped or shot. “What’s worse?” she wondered. “What’s better?”

Many women were sexually abused, then murdered, their bodies mutilated. Nails and other objects were found shoved into the female organs of deceased victims. Some were shot so many times that their faces were obliterated.

Witnesses told of the women’s screams they heard during the raid — piercing prolonged screaming while being sexually assaulted by terrorists. Then gunshots. Then silence.

Denial of the violence “has caused a massive spike in danger to Jews around the world,” Julie Paris, Mid-Atlantic regional director of StandWithUs, said before the

screening.

“I think that showing films like this plays a critical role in making sure that we do believe all women — including Israeli women — and that we bear witness to what took place on that day and what continues to take place for women who are currently being held and have been held for over 250 days inside of Gaza.

“We believe that women who remain captive are at risk of sexual crimes,” Paris added, “and so we want them to know we believe them. We want to stand up for them. We want to bear witness, and make sure to honor the memories of those who did not survive.”

Laurie Gottlieb, co-chair of the Jewish Women’s Foundation, stressed the imperative of getting the film out to a wider audience.

“We seem to live in a world where folks can see a circle and insist it is a square,” Gottlieb said. She suggested that universities might show the film “to their students in class, so it’s not optional.”

“If it can end up touching some of those uninformed pro-Hamas supporters, perhaps this stark and disturbing reality staring them in the face will change the dialogue,” Gottlieb added. “It is critically important to continue to let the world know we will not be silent or be passive bystanders.” **PJC**

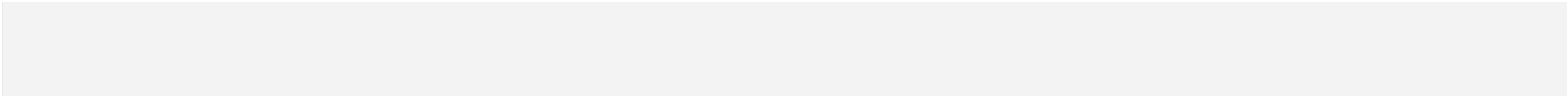
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TRANSPORTATION / WHEELS STOP GOING ROUND AND ROUND

Sunsetting of Elder Express highlights transportation needs for older adults

'Things change over time — the demographic changed, needs change — and we need to pivot with it'

By **ADAM REINHERZ**

June 2, 2024, 8:54 am



Elder Express vehicle comes to a stop. (Photo courtesy of AgeWell Pittsburgh)

Sheryl Stolzenberg is frustrated by her commute. She used to travel between The New Riverview and Squirrel Hill Jewish Community Center twice a week via Elder Express. Now, Stolzenberg is stuck.

“They told us that not enough people were taking it and that’s why they are reducing it,” she said.

Ever since moving into Riverview almost four years ago Stolzenberg used Elder Express, a transportation service — operated by [AgeWell Pittsburgh](#) and ACCESS — that serves older adults living in the 15217 zip code. Van rides start and end at Riverview. Stops occur at the Squirrel Hill Health Center, JFCS Squirrel Hill Food Pantry, grocery stores, senior living centers and other nearby locations.

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Stolzenberg rode the van on Mondays and Tuesdays to the JCC.

“Whenever I got on, there was someone getting on from another retirement community,” she said.

AgeWell representatives said [Elder Express](#) was a useful resource for older adults to reach stores, social engagements and community-based educational programs.

Nonetheless, notification was sent two months ago that “due to declining

ridership” Elder Express’ final day of regular service would be April 5 and that the new Friday-only service would be limited to four runs, with the last run beginning at 1 p.m.

As part of the changes, Murray Towers, Imperial House and Beacon Place were dropped from the route. In order to reach those locations and other sites, passengers were instructed to contact ACCESS, a [shared-ride public service](#).

Operated in Allegheny County since 1979, ACCESS relies on federal and state funding to deliver affordable transportation.

ACCESS’ public-private partnership facilitates about 5,000 trips each week for older riders, disabled individuals and others, according to representatives.

“It’s a good service, but it has limits,” Stolzenberg said.

The Squirrel Hill resident previously used ACCESS to reach healthcare facilities.

If her appointment was at 2 p.m. Stolzenberg said she’d call several days prior and ask to be picked up at 1 p.m.

Though the trek was no more than a couple miles from her apartment, drivers often needed extra time to help passengers enter and exit the vehicle, Stolzenberg said.

“It wasn’t so difficult going on ACCESS but going back could be terrifying,” she continued. “A doctor’s office isn’t open 24 hours. If the vehicle was late you could sit on a sidewalk for an hour.”

A [national driver shortage](#) made the service even “less reliable,” Stolzenberg added.

Along with food insecurity and housing, transportation is one of the major issues affecting older adults nationwide, according to Sharon Feinman, division director AgeWell at the JCC.

[Transportation barriers](#) prevented 2.3 million older adults from participating in “social activities, visiting with family or friends and attending religious services,”

The Journal of the American Geriatrics Society reported. Additionally, of the nearly 3 million older adults in the U.S. who rely on public transportation, more than 600,000 told researchers that their [need for transport was due to a medical appointment](#).

Feinman is aware of the challenges and said that AgeWell — a collaboration between the Jewish Association on Aging, the JCC and JFCS — is exploring various options.



Former JCC staffer Alan Mallinger delivers lunches to homebound older adults via Elder Express. Photo courtesy of Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh

For more than 21 years, ACCESS and [AgeWell](#) partnered on Elder Express. The pandemic “prompted a hiatus,” but the JCC and ACCESS responded by using the service to deliver [J Cafe meals](#) to those who were homebound. Since its September 2021 relaunch, ridership has trailed pre-pandemic usage by 40%, with rates continuing to decline.

The service averages only “10 rides per day, with some days being as low as 2,”

Feinman said.

“It’s well below the minimum requirement of at least 25 rides a day for sustainability.”

Although Elder Express still operates on Fridays — due to a higher usage rate — the subsidized service will sunset at the end of this month.

Feinman and other AgeWell representatives said they’re disappointed by the decision but [reality necessitates change](#).

“We’ve been trying for the past two years to increase ridership through marketing and speaking with people to find out what their needs are,” Feinman said. “People say they want the service but then the ridership isn’t enough to keep it going. It was successful earlier, but things change over time — the demographic changed, needs change — and [we need to pivot with it](#).”

Though subsidized, Elder Express isn’t free for passengers. In order to ride, a personal account with ACCESS must be established before [loading an electronic purse with funds](#). Each fare, which costs \$1.75, is then deducted from the passenger’s account. New rides cannot be scheduled unless there’s enough money in an account.

The cheaper option is riding a bus.

Older adults, ages 65 and up, can take any [public transit in Pennsylvania for free](#) as long as the person applies for and receives a Senior ConnectCard.

Apart from the bus or ACCESS, other options exist.

[AgeWell Rides](#) is a volunteer-based transportation system for people ages 60 and up who do not drive and need to get to medical appointments, supermarkets, volunteer sites or other social settings. More information is available at 412-422-0400.

There’s also [A to B](#), a digital tool that recommends transportation options for Allegheny County residents. After answering a series of questions regarding age,

ability, insurance and trip logistics, individuals are presented with personalized options for transport.

There are multiple ways to get around the area, but the loss of Elder Express still stings, Stolzenberg said.

Before moving to Pittsburgh, the Squirrel Hill resident worked as a city and county planner in central Pennsylvania and South Florida.

“I got a chance to see how public transportation was handled in a lot of different places, and I never saw anything like Elder Express anywhere I’d been,” she said.

“Unfortunately with ridership dropping since the pandemic, it’s difficult to keep the service running the way that it has been,” Feinman said.

That doesn’t negate AgeWell’s commitment to helping older adults easily navigate the area.

“You can contact us directly and we will work with you,” Feinman said. “We are here to support.” **PJC**

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STUDY AND NOSH / FEDERATION READIES FOR ONE OF ITS MOST POPULAR EVENTS

Community readies for Torah, cheesecake and coffee at Tikkun Leil Shavuot

“We’re doing one of the most fundamental things that Jews do together, which is to strengthen our identity and return to our primary source texts,”

By **DAVID RULLO**

June 3, 2024, 2:50 pm



Rabbi Danny Schiff knows not to tinker too much with a good thing.

Case in point: the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh’s annual Tikkun Leil Shavuot celebration, which takes place on June 11 beginning at 10 p.m.

Each year, the community gathers at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh in Squirrel Hill to learn from a bevy of teachers spanning the spectrum of denominations and leadership roles.

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“My
criteria
for who
teaches
is not the

title in front of their name, but can do they do a really good job and bring Torah to the community,” said Schiff, the Gefsky scholar for the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh, who organizes the event.

This year’s instructors include stalwarts like Rabbi Levi Langer and Danielle Kranjec as well as some new additions — the Chronicle’s Adam Reinherz will lead a session along with Rabbi Sharyn Henry of Rodef Shalom Congregation titled “Judaism is About Love: A Conversation About Rabbi Shai Held’s New Idea About Judaism.”

There are two changes this year. The first is slight: There will be an additional session offered during the 11 p.m. hour and one fewer at midnight. The second

change is more significant.

More Orthodox women will lead sessions, which Schiff said will enhance the program.

When it was pointed out to him that there are Orthodox women in the community “who are outstanding teachers,” and that Orthodox women previously had not been included as instructors in the program, Schiff was determined to rectify that omission, he said.

A wide range of topics will be presented. Classes include: “The Role of Liturgical Poetry on Shavuot,” “The Afterlife,” “From Adam to Ruth: How it All Connects” and “Revelation, Torah and Resilience on Campus.”

Shavuot is one of the festivals that the Torah commands Jews to celebrate. The practice of studying Jewish texts erev Shavuot can be traced back to at least the 16th century.

There is no clear explanation of why cheesecake and other treats featuring dairy products, including blintzes, are consumed on the holiday, but many trace it back to the Torah and its description of Israel as a land “flowing with milk and honey.”

Some consider the holiday as the proper time to introduce children to Torah study. In Eastern Europe, there was a tradition of giving children between the ages of 3 and 5 honey so they would associate the study of Torah with sweetness.

Tikkun Leil Shavuot has become one of the Federation’s most popular events, enjoyed by hundreds who give up a few hours of sleep to study with other Jewish community members from across the city.

“If It’s not the largest Federation event of the year, then it’s in the top two,” Schiff said. “It’s always a competition — is Yom Ha’atzmaut bigger than Tikkun Leil Shavuot or the other way around?”

The program, he said, is popular both with attendees and teachers. So popular, in fact, that Schiff is unable to accommodate all those who wish to teach.

“If we simply allowed everybody to teach that wanted to teach, we might have 40 sessions or more, which would mean five or 10 people in each session, which wouldn’t be very satisfying,” he explained. “So, we limit the number of sessions.”

Like everything else since Oct. 7, this year’s celebration will occur beneath the shadow of Israel’s war with the terrorist group Hamas and the plight of the hostages still in Gaza.

Schiff said the evening offers the opportunity to find solidarity and comfort in the presence of others in the Jewish community.

“We’re doing one of the most fundamental things that Jews do together, which is to strengthen our identity and return to our primary source texts,” he said.

More information about Tikkun Leil Shavuot, including a list of sessions and instructors, can be found at jewishpgh.org/occasion/tikkun. **PJC**

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