ARTICLES

In Pittsburgh’s Wake, Curators at Jewish Museums Consider the Importance of Their Institutions

The rise in global anti-Semitism has prompted renewed reflection on the roles of Jewish cultural institutions.

The day of my official induction as a volunteer in the education department of London’s Jewish Museum, I and the other trainees attended an orientation session that culminated in a walk-through of the museum’s “invacuation” policy: in the event of an active shooter, we were instructed on how best to hide the schoolchildren, how to barricade the auditorium doors, and even what to do if the incident caught us during a bathroom break.

Less than two weeks before, a gunman who later told a SWAT team officer that
he wanted “all Jews to die” had opened fire in Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life synagogue, killing 11. The incident — the deadliest single act of anti-Semitic violence ever committed on US soil — came amid reports that anti-Semitism-fueled hate crimes jumped 37 percent in 2017, according to statistics provided by the FBI. (Other media outlets, meanwhile, have discussed how the widespread underreporting of hate crimes may mask the real numbers.)

For leaders at Jewish museums and cultural centers, the rise in global anti-Semitism has prompted renewed reflection upon the importance of the institutions at which they work. When I first reached out to Melissa Hiller, director of the American Jewish Museum (AJM) in Pittsburgh, to discuss these questions, she said that my message had reached her at a time when such issues “absolutely consume me.” Located in Pittsburgh’s Jewish Community Center, the AJM hosts a range of temporary exhibitions that use art to engage with larger social themes.

“Artists have an essential role in contributing to the global choir of change,” Hiller says. “Art is very often the root system of how we find common ground, build empathy, and connect value to people, our neighbors, who are different from us.” After both the Tree of Life shooting — which occurred just a few blocks from the AJM — and this summer’s killing of Antwon Rose, an unarmed black teenager who was fatally shot by police in East Pittsburgh, Hiller says she feels “a sense of urgency and of doubling down.”

In the immediate aftermath of the Pittsburgh shooting, Jewish museums across the United States have played an important role in helping the nation process the events. In San Francisco, community members gathered outside the Contemporary Jewish Museum (CJM) for a candlelight vigil. Heidi Rabben, senior curator at the CJM, posits that showcasing historic examples of interfaith coexistence can prompt reflections on how to create a more tolerant society in the present. The CJM’s current special exhibition, Veiled Meanings: Fashioning Jewish Dress, from the Collection of The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, examines cross-cultural sartorial influences between Christians, Muslims, and Jews through the centuries and across the globe. “Our unique mandate is to make the Jewish cultural experience relevant to a twenty-first-century audience,” Rabben says. “That means we are thinking about how Jewish culture, history, art, and ideas relate to all culture today.”

Curatorial projects aren’t the only means by which Jewish cultural institutions
can foster cross-community dialogues. Josh Perelman, chief curator and director of exhibitions and interpretation at Philadelphia’s National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH), foregrounds the importance of his museum’s education initiatives. “The more we can educate about history, the role Jews have played in the shaping of this country and what this country has made possible, and help participants understand the connections between past and present, the more we can mitigate the roots of bigotry, which is often simply a lack of information and exposure,” Perelman says.

At the core of the museum’s public programming are narratives of immigration, adaptation, identity, and service. According to Perelman, these are not unique to the American Jewish experience but represent themes relevant to visitors of all backgrounds. And while education has always been central to NMAJH’s mission, Perelman says that, since Pittsburgh, he and his colleagues have felt their efforts imbued “with renewed purpose.”

Last month, NMAJH partnered with the Board of Rabbis of Greater Philadelphia to remember the victims of the Tree of Life shooting and mark the end of the thirty-day mourning period known as shloshim. The museum has also programmed upcoming talks aimed at addressing the topic of rising anti-Semitism and created a designated reflection space in its galleries. Just a few days after the shooting, Ivy Barsky, CEO and director of NMAJH, published an open letter echoing the words of George Washington’s 1790 missive to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, RI, in which he wrote that “our Government gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.” Washington’s original letter is on display in the museum itself.

Asked about the particular importance of Jewish museums today, Darsie Alexander, chief curator at the Jewish Museum in New York, points to the role
of such institutions in modulating the rhythm of daily life. “Some cultural institutions today are about debate and others are about deep breathing,” she says. “Both are necessary in today’s climate — maintaining the dialogue and staying calm.” Whether they slow us down by providing a space for contemplation or speed us up by challenging preconceived ideas, Jewish museums can constructively alter the tempo of our lives and our thoughts, particularly at moments of difficulty.

“Truthfully, the conditions that create anti-Semitism and racism are so insidious that I can’t presume to conjecture that museums can reverse the rise of anti-Semitism,” says Hiller. Still, she affirms the power of creative people to change mindsets — as well as the necessity of broad-based collaborative efforts towards that end. It’s a sentiment Rabben echoes, citing the support Pittsburgh’s Muslim community has shown to their Jewish peers since the shooting: “Jewish museums, identity- and culturally-based institutions of all kinds, and — I would argue — all public institutions need to support each other’s right to exist,” she says. “We need to show up for one another when one or several of us are being targeted.”

When the Proud Boys, a white supremacist group, staged a rally just a short distance from the NMAJH in Philadelphia last month, their demonstration was dwarfed by the counter-protest that mobilized against it. Projected on the museum’s façade was the same Washington quotation used by Barsky: “Our Government gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.”