Anti-Semitism in Women’s March complicates matters for local Jews

Jewish progressives here caught between standing with local allies and walking away from hate at national level.

By TOBY TABACHNICK
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The allegations of anti-Semitism against national Women’s March leaders Linda Sarsour, Tamika Mallory and Carmen Perez have hit such a fever pitch in recent months that the organization’s co-founder, Teresa Shook, called on the women to resign (they have not), while many local marches have either disaffiliated or distanced themselves from the national group.

The Women’s March on Washington—Pittsburgh has kept intact its affiliation with the national organization, however, creating a fraught situation for many progressive Jews here still reeling from the Oct. 27 anti-Semitic massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue building.

“It’s complicated and incredibly painful for all of us,” said Tammy Hepps, a member of Bend the Arc: Pittsburgh, a Jewish social action group that has collaborated with the local Women’s March, including on a protest against President Donald Trump’s visit to Pittsburgh days after the shooting at Tree of Life.

“Some members of our group are marching, and some of us would not regardless,” said Hepps. “Within Bend the Arc there is a range of responses. I’m on the spectrum of people in the group who are struggling with this in different ways.”

The national Women’s March, as well as the Women’s March in Pittsburgh, are both scheduled to be held on Jan. 19.
The first Women's March was on Jan. 21, 2017, the day after Trump's inauguration. Its “intersectional platform” promoted the rights of a roster of marginalized communities that were perceived to be targeted by Trump's election rhetoric.

Notably, Jews were absent from that list. Nonetheless, many Jewish women readily embraced the cause, and several Jewish organizations came on board to formally partner with the Women's March, including the National Council of Jewish Women, the Jewish Women's Foundation of New York and Keshet, a group which works for LGBTQ equality in Jewish life.

Now, in the wake of the charges of anti-Semitism against its leaders, the national Women's March is left with only three Jewish groups willing to partner: the fledgling Bend the Arc, established in 2016; Jewish Voice for Peace, which promotes the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel; and the New York-based Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, another group that is outspoken in its criticism of Israel.

**Anti-Semitism at the top**

Many of the accusations of anti-Semitism against Mallory, Sarsour and Perez are not in dispute.

Mallory is tied to Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam, which has been designated as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Farrakhan's loathing of Jews and the LGBTQ community is well documented. In 1984, he described Hitler as “a very great man.” At a rally last February in Chicago, Farrakhan told his audience that the “powerful Jews are my enemy,” and that the “Satanic” Jews are “responsible for all of this filthy and degenerate behavior that Hollywood is putting out turning men into women and women into men.”

Mallory was in attendance during Farrakhan’s Chicago rally, at which he gave her a shout-out. Afterward, she posted an Instagram photo of Farrakhan with his arm draped around her shoulder. The caption: “Thank God this man is still alive and doing well. He is definitely the GOAT (greatest of all time).”

When Mallory was criticized for her failure to condemn Farrakhan’s anti-Semitic statements, she tweeted: “If your leader does not have the same enemies as Jesus, they may not be THE leader! Study the Bible and you will find the similarities.”

In October 2018, Farrakhan referred to Jews as “termites” during a speech in Detroit. (Citing the nexus between Farrakhan and Mallory, the Southern Poverty Law Center backed out as a cosponsor of this year’s Women’s March.)

On Monday, Mallory remained steadfast in her refusal to condemn Farrakhan, or his anti-Semitic statements, during an interview on “The View.”

As early as 15, Mallory — who was born in 1980 to activists who helped found the Rev. Al Sharpton’s National Action Network — had been exposed to anti-Semitic rhetoric. In 1995, when Mallory was working for NAN, Sharpton came under fire for calling a Jewish landlord in Harlem a “white interloper,” which preceded a murderous attack on that man’s store. Sharpton also was criticized for stoking the attacks against Jews during the Crown Heights riots in 1991.

In a December 2018 investigative piece, Tablet magazine reported that both Mallory and Perez used anti-Semitic rhetoric and intentionally excluded Jews from leadership positions in the days the Women’s March was being formed. Mallory and Perez deny the claims, although others at those early meetings have verified them. Tablet also reported suspected financial improprieties among the Women’s March leadership.

Mallory and Sarsour also have used extreme anti-Israel rhetoric, going beyond mere criticism of Israel’s government. Mallory has called the establishment of Israel a “human rights crime.” Last May, she tweeted praise for the “bravery” of Hamas terrorists for using human shields.

In 2012, Sarsour, a vocal proponent of the BDS movement against Israel, tweeted that “nothing is creepier than Zionism.” In a 2017 interview in The Nation, Sarsour opined that one cannot be a Zionist and also be aligned with the feminist movement. In a speech at the Islamic Society of North America convention in Houston in September 2018, Sarsour warned American Muslims against “humanizing” Israelis. Just two months ago, she accused progressive Jews who support Israel of dual loyalty.
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Mayor Bill Peduto addresses the crowd in Market Square at the Women’s March in 2018. File photo

In November 2018, the Women’s March issued an apology for being too slow in committing to fighting anti-Semitism. It still has not condemned Farrakhan.

That apology was not good enough for several local Women’s Marches. On Dec. 13, the leader of the Women’s March in Washington state wrote that her chapter was disaffiliating with the national movement.

“Because of the events happening at the national level and their refusal to acknowledge and apologize for their anti-Semitic stance, we have decided to dissolve our Women’s March on Washington State organization in order to separate from the national message that is being sent, both from a social justice standpoint and a financial standpoint,” the leader wrote.

Other local marches that have severed ties to the national group or canceled their marches include New Orleans, Chicago, Rhode Island, Florida and Cincinnati.

The Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington issued a statement noting that it does not endorse events that are held on Shabbat, as the Women’s March will be this year. Nonetheless, that statement continued, even if the March were not held on Shabbat, the JCRC would neither endorse it nor encourage Jewish women to attend.

“The anti-Semitism demonstrated by the leaders of the Women’s March Inc. is reprehensible and deserving of universal condemnation,” the statement read.

Pittsburgh’s march

The Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh is not endorsing the Women’s March in Pittsburgh, according to Josh Sayles, director of Pittsburgh’s CRC.

The actions of the national leaders of the Women’s March “speak louder than words,” he said.

Pittsburgh’s CRC does not endorse events on Shabbat, Sayles noted, but added that “even if it were not on Shabbat, because of the ties to the national movement, we would not endorse it.”

Pittsburgh’s CRC attempted to meet with local Women’s March leader Tracy Baton to express the concerns of the Jewish community before the March, but was “unable to connect,” Sayles said.

Baton, however, has been in close communication with Bend the Arc: Pittsburgh, with whom she has worked to draft a statement condemning anti-Semitism.

“Countering anti-Semitism was always part of my fundamental vision of what it means to fight hate in this world,” said Baton, adding that she was taught from a young age by her activist mother “that fighting hate and standing against white supremacy meant standing with Jews.”

Baton said she did not know enough about the allegations of anti-Semitism against the national Women’s March leaders to determine their veracity, but took national Bend the Arc’s lead in deciding to maintain affiliation with the national movement.

“I feel like I can’t know enough at this distance,” Baton said. “My national allies like Bend the Arc national support them and their work. Other national Jewish organizations support them in their work. I presume they know better than I can possibly know.

“What else would I go with? Anything else is making decisions based on internet firestorms and drama. If I know nothing in this time, it is possible to weave a web of lies.”

The Women's March Pittsburgh receives no funding from the national Women's March organization.

For now, Baton is not inclined to condemn those at the top of the national Women's March.

“Do I think Tamika Mallory and Linda Sarsour should step down? I don’t think that’s my decision to make,” Baton said. “I think the allies that stand with them locally and nationally have a much better vision of their work and what they do. And so for right now I will stand with those allies.”

The local Women’s March cemented its ties with Bend the Arc: Pittsburgh in the aftermath of the Tree of Life shooting when a member of Bend the Arc: Pittsburgh reached out to Baton for help in planning the rally protesting Trump’s visit. Baton provided a small stage and the sound system, and served as consultant on the rally, she said. She also spoke at the event.

That cooperation made an impression on Sara Stock Mayo, a member of Bend the Arc: Pittsburgh who will continue to support the Women’s March in Pittsburgh and will speak at that event on Jan. 19.

Mayo sees the importance of “building coalitions across communities to be agents of change,” she said. “After our community in Squirrel Hill was attacked, the Women’s March and other progressive organizations that are allies showed up for us. They sang with us, they brought us equipment, they supported and uplifted us. They prayed with their feet with us. If we are to tackle any of the deeply divisive issues we face in Pittsburgh, we must do it together.”

Building relationships with local leaders of the Women’s March is paramount in developing allies, according to several members of Bend the Arc, despite the issues at the national level.

“The local march has not chosen to disaffiliate from the national march the way some have in other cities,” acknowledged Hepps. “But the challenge in all of this is that locally, our groups have worked together effectively, and locally we have had effective dialogue where we believe in each other and we believe in each other’s best intentions.”

Cantor Michele Gray-Schaffer, spiritual leader of Congregation B’nai Abraham in Butler, has participated in the Women’s March in Pittsburgh for the last two years, and said that despite the accusations of anti-Semitism at the national level, she will probably march again this year.

“I’m not as excited for it, but I probably still will go,” she said. “It’s putting a very big damper on my wanting to participate. This anti-Semitism, especially in the light of Tree of Life, really concerns me, but there are a lot of other issues there. I think it’s still really important that we get out there and march.”

Rabbi Jeremy Markiz, director of Derekh & Youth Tefillah at Congregation Beth Shalom, joined the Women’s March in Pittsburgh last year, but had not yet decided if he would be participating in this year’s event because of “logistical reasons.”

But the issues the Women’s March represents resonate for him.

“I feel strongly about feminism, and about men and women being equal, and for women to flex their political power,” he said. “These are the reasons I supported the Women’s March in the first place.

“I don’t know enough about the local march, but my belief is that they are against prejudice of all kinds,” he continued. “For me, it’s fundamentally about feminism, and women’s voices and queer voices, and LGBTQ voices. That’s the primary value to me about it. While I think it does matter what the national organization is doing, I’m looking locally.”

Aligning with 'bigots'

For other Jewish Pittsburghers, the anti-Semitism at the national level is a deal-breaker.

Ilia Murtazashvili, a University of Pittsburgh associate professor in the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, has not marched in the past. Still, he was “hoping for an opportunity for an inclusive march that would be
welcoming to all groups, including Jews of all identities,” he said.

“The Women’s March, unfortunately, is not inclusive. Its leaders expressed anti-Semitic views and the ‘apology’ was ambiguous.

“The fact that leadership expressed such hateful views and remains in power is an example of the continued acceptability of anti-Semitism in American culture,” continued Murtazashvili, a Squirrel Hill resident and member of Beth Shalom. “The tragedy of Tree of Life raises the stakes of taking a stand against anti-Semitism. Local groups were more than willing to protest Trump’s visit even though many Jews and community members were still mourning. Yet the local chapter of the Women’s March is willing to march even though other chapters have cancelled marches in solidarity with Jews.”

The taint of anti-Semitism at the national level puts the Women’s March beyond the pale, according to Jewish historian Deborah Lipstadt of Emory University, author of the soon-to-be released book “Anti-Semitism: Here and Now.”

“I recognize the importance of the issues that the Women’s March is representing, but when people who stand by someone who calls me and my people termites, I can’t march with them,” she said. “I would not march with someone even if I agreed with 98 percent of what they stood for if they used the ’N’ word, for example. How can I march with people who have to be educated and cajoled to say that Louis Farrakhan doesn’t align with their views?

“There’s a point of no return,” Lipstadt continued. “There’s a point of self-respect. Does someone have to be educated to not stand by an anti-Semite, using the word ‘termite’ when so many were exterminated in the Holocaust? Calling us termite is the wrong thing to say, and there is a decided lack of self-worth and self-respect of the people marching with them.”

But, as a historian, Lipstadt has a different role than do the activists working for social change on the ground, according to Hepps.

“Deborah Lipstadt is an academic who is studying a present-day phenomenon; she’s not a person who is trying to repair it,” Hepps said. “There is a really huge difference.”

It is important for Jews to dialogue with those whose thinking they may be able to influence in a positive way, Hepps explained. “People like Tamika Mallory and Linda Sarsour — and you can believe it or not — they are saying that they want to do right by all marginalized communities.

“If that’s the starting point, somebody needs to be in dialogue with them to help them to understand when they get it right, and when they are not,” added Hepps. “When they are building the tent they want to build, and when they are missing the mark of what they profess as being their goals. If no one is in dialogue, if all there is vilification, guess what? You only widen the rupture.”

Zioness, a group formed for Jews and Zionists feeling “pushed out” of progressive spaces, will not be marching with the national Women’s March in Washington, according to Amanda Berman, president of Zioness.

“I don’t think American Jewish women want to be part of a movement endorsed by bigots or with bigots leading the charge,” she said.

Zioness has 23 local chapters, but so far, no presence in Pittsburgh. The group, though, has had “conversations” with some local leaders.

Berman acknowledged the seeming incongruity of a local march maintaining its ties to a national organization marred by anti-Semitism, especially when it receives no financial support from that national organization.

“Why are any of these groups still formally aligning with bigots when they are not getting anything in return? That’s hurtful to our community,” she said. “And it’s unfortunate if they are getting encouragement from Jewish groups. We all have to be accountable.”

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Toby Tabachnick can be reached at ttabachnick@pittsburghjewishchronicle.org.

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