

Pittsburgh's Jewish day schools recommit to security as Israeli war rages

— LOCAL —

By Adam Reinherz | Senior Staff Writer

War in Israel is prompting swift educational responses in Pittsburgh. Since Hamas' Oct. 7 heinous attack on Israel, local Jewish day schools have redoubled efforts to ensure students, staff and families are safe and secure.

Community Day School educators recognized that with nearly 48 hours elapsing between Saturday's attack and Monday's start of school, students would have varying levels of knowledge about the situation in Israel, Ilana Ksilinsky, CDS' director of marketing and communications, said.

Administrators met the evening of Oct. 8 to "plan what Monday would look like," she said.

The biggest priority is "supporting staff and students and families, while also being cognizant that everything going on is age-appropriate," she continued. "Our thought is that it's best for the children to be in their routine as much as possible but also give them space during the day to talk about current events if they want."

Following students' arrival Monday morning, several "brief words were said about the situation" during designated prayer time. After services, students and staff sang "Hatikvah."

"Usually we do not recite it during *tefillah* (prayer), but we felt the need during this time to do so," Ksilinsky added.

The Jewish day school representative credited Duquesne University's Kara E. McGoe, a professor at the university's school of education, as well as JFCS' Director of Clinical Services Stefanie Small, with providing on-site mental health resources to staff, students and families.

The school also has contacted alumni "who are either in Israel or whose children are in Israel," Ksilinsky said.

For many parents, she continued, security remains the primary concern.

"In these moments, specifically when we see antisemitism globally, we are concerned about antisemitism at home," Ksilinsky said. "We have made sure to reassure parents that there's no credible threats and that we are taking security extremely carefully, as we always do."

Hillel Academy of Pittsburgh officials had a similar reaction.

"First and foremost, when tragedy struck, the safety and security of our students was our No. 1 priority," Hillel Academy's Principal Rabbi Sam Weinberg said.

Before Monday's start of school, Hillel Academy administrators consulted with mental health professionals "both locally and abroad to make sure our response was trauma-informed," he said. "At the same time, we wanted our students to be able to express grief

and mourn in whatever way they felt."

A Monday morning *tehillim* rally for students in grades one through 12 provided a collective space to address the war through familiar behavior, he explained.

"Prayer has always been a response of the Jewish people," he said.

Weinberg credited Tair Gelerenter and Ayelet Setbon — Israeli teenage emissaries — with mobilizing student responses.

"Over the years we've had many *shlichim*, *bat sherut* and students who are now lone soldiers. We've been checking in on them because that's what family does," he said.

Weinberg said the 75-year-old school has long touted its ties between students, staff and alumni.

"This moment only reinforces our belief that Hillel Academy is a family," he said.

Rabbi Yossi Rosenblum, Yeshiva Schools of Pittsburgh's head of school, said that before restarting classes Tuesday morning — Yeshiva was off Monday, Oct. 9, as part of Sukkot break — administrators and members of the security team met with Shawn Brokos, Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh's director of community security.

Additional security protocols were established "out of an abundance of care," he said. "We want to make sure that we are being vigilant."

Dr. Yisroel King, a behavioral intervention

specialist, spoke to Yeshiva's parents and teachers about mental health-related concerns.

Each conversation conveyed that "our assumption is that we are in this for the long haul, and that this is not going to be a couple-days event," Rosenblum said. "Most importantly, we talked about the Jewish, Torah, spiritual response to events like this."

Three days after the Yom Kippur War began in 1973, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, stressed the need to stay positive, and said, "Happiness breaks all boundaries," according to Chabad.org.

Rosenblum said the commitment to positivity is because "wars are psychological and the enemy is trying to kill us not only physically, but demoralize us."

Yeshiva is doing its part to hearten constituents. Along with encouraging families to attend the Federation's Oct. 8 gathering at the Jewish Community Center in Squirrel Hill, Yeshiva staff urged people to increase their performance of "Torah, *tefillah* and *tzedaka*," Rosenblum said. "We believe that what we do here affects the outcome there."

What occurred, and is occurring in Israel, is serious, "but we must keep the spirits going," he said. "We must dispel darkness through light, and try to stay positive." **PJC**

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