



**COLLEGE
COMMONS**

KATHRYN FLEISHER: YOUNG ADULTS AGAINST GUN VIOLENCE

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Jack H. Skirball Campus in Los Angeles and your host. You're listening to a special episode recorded at the URJ Biennial in December of 2019.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast, where we'll have the opportunity to talk with Kathryn Fleisher. Who is a student at the University of Pittsburgh and the Founding Executive Director of Not My Generation, which is a nonprofit, dedicated to localized, intersectional gun violence prevention organizing among young adults. Kathryn is a former NFTY North American President and current Religious Action Center Commission on Social Action member. She also previously served on the Executive Planning Committee of the Women of Reform Judaism's inaugural Social Justice Conference. Kathryn, thank you for joining us on the podcast.

Kathryn Fleisher: Thanks so much for having me.

JH: So I wanna give you the opportunity to kick off the conversation by telling us about Not My Generation.

KF: Not My Generation is an organization that was formed after the Tree of Life shooting in October of 2018. Being a student at Pitt, the shooting was extremely close to home, both emotionally and literally. And in the wake of the shooting, we saw how the Pittsburgh community responded to the tragedy by coming together across lines of difference. In particular, I was really inspired by the way that the Muslim community showed up for the Jewish community in the wake of the tragedy. Essentially overnight, the community raised a quarter of a million dollars to pay for funeral costs and medical costs of the victims of the shooting. And I saw the real power in coalitional work, but I also saw how after the Shiva period ended and after all the news crew started going home, how that coalition ideology kind of started fading.

KF: And I think that it's the most important thing we can do to prevent gun violence and to prevent hate crimes and to prevent white supremacy from making its way into our spaces, is to be in coalition with others across lines of difference, particularly in the gun violence prevention space. And so I formed Not My Generation with the intent of

ensuring that there are young diverse voices in every space where gun violence prevention organizing is taking place. We also know that people who are on the ground can speak to the needs and desires of their communities best, and so we're focused on localized work and empowering local young diverse leaders to do that work in their communities.

JH: Give us just an example of some of the work that you do on the ground.

KF: Recently, about a month ago, we hosted our first national summit of young adults against gun violence, so we brought about 125 young adult organizers to Washington DC from about 30 different states to do this work and to be in coalition with one another to do learning about different types of gun violence and the different opportunities we have to address it. And then we also, most importantly, worked on year-long strategy plans, so the intent is that those who came to the summit formed a strategy plan with others from their area, which they then took home and are working to implement. And so right now, we're working on building local coalitions in a bunch of different cities. We have a decent showing in Denver, in Atlanta, in Oakland, in California, in Chicago, where we are right now, just a lot of different cities across the country where gun violence looks a lot in different ways, and where young people are at the forefront, and we're working with them as they try to bring in the actors who are involved with gun violence prevention in their community, and ensure that they're showing up and representing the needs of young people, of people of color, of LGBTQ folks.

JH: So this is organizing, lobbying, showing up at protests.

KF: Yeah, all those pieces.

JH: All the above.

KF: Yeah. One of the biggest things that we've focused on is understanding that change can happen in a lot of different ways, so it doesn't just have to be legislative, it doesn't just have to be around protests, but it can also be around corporate levers, and working with businesses, whether it be around gun manufacturer liability, gun distributor liability, whether it be about using market forces and our powers as consumers to push those who invest in gun companies to pressure them to create smarter gun technology, whatever it might be. There's also community-based approaches that we're really a fan of, in particular, violence intervention programs, which basically attempt to interrupt the cycle of violence, particularly in communities that experience everyday violence, so also some of our work is around those non-legislative, a little bit more non-traditional approaches.

JH: As you look at the landscape of the communities that are most invested in dealing with gun violence, what would you say are the strongest, most promising opportunities for achieving your agenda or at least advancing it?

KF: I think that's a great question. I think that there are quite a few different spaces and depending on who you ask, people would probably give you very different answers. Personally, I've been seeing a lot of movement on extreme risk protection orders,

ERPOs or otherwise known as "red flag" laws, which essentially empower those who live with an individual or a member of law enforcement to petition a court to take firearms away from somebody temporarily, who is potentially harmful to themselves or to others. And that's really compelling, not only because it could prevent potential hate crimes. If we see someone who's active in online spaces, like the Tree of Life shooter was. He was a known anti-Semite and he was still able to purchase weapons, keep those weapons and carry out his plan so if we're able to step in when we know someone is potentially targeting other groups of people, we can save lives that way.

KF: Also, we know that one in six instances of gun violence are suicide and so extreme risk protection orders allow for taking guns away from people who may be looking to harm themselves. And so having the extreme risk protection orders might really mitigate the amount of suicide by firearm, that we see in the US today.

JH: So that is a pretty powerful tool, I can see say if it gets implemented. These are municipal ordinances or state legislation?

KF: It depends on on where it is. There's some at the national level, some at the state and some at the local level. We do see that local level laws regarding gun violence often are not implemented. Most states have what's called preemption laws, where essentially the state can overrule...

JH: With the sovereignty of the state trumps the ordinances.

KF: Yeah, absolutely. Yes.

JH: So it does beg the question if we talk about opportunities and advancement of your agenda, what are some of the persistent, or newest, and most challenging problems that you face or hindrances?

KF: For me, I think that the biggest issue that we're facing is apathy. I think that people are really discouraged by the amount of violence, and the scope of the problem they see around them. I think a lot of people feel numb because there's been more mass shootings than days in the year this year, and the years previously.

JH: Mass being defined as?

KF: Four or more people being shot, either injured or killed. And so we know that gun violence is such an issue that I think some people in order to cope or in order to go about their daily lives just kind of either accept it, or block it out, or whatever it might be. In my own personal experience, of course, we're going up against folks who are on the other side and who are really advocating for widespread gun ownership, and open carrying, and pieces like that, that's challenging, but I would say way more often than we encounter those folks. We encounter people who either don't care, or don't see the scope of the problem, or don't have the emotional capacity to kind of take it on and feel responsibility for it since it's just such a pervasive and heartbreaking issue.

JH: Are you avoiding referring to the NRA?

KF: Not really avoiding it. One of the things that we talk a lot about is the fact that the NRA is funded by gun manufacturers, and their CEOs, and folks deeply related to them. So the NRA has really become a mouthpiece for the gun manufacturers, much less how it used to be, which was gun owners.

JH: Owners. So you're not avoiding it. You're deciding that it's not actually a the problem insofar as it's a consequence of a deeper problem and you want to tackle that problem.

KF: Correct. And the fact that gun manufacturers have so much power and money that they can do essentially whatever they want, via the NRA in terms of policy and swaying lawmakers and swaying other people in power.

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JH: Before we return to the podcast, we want to let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at collegecommons.huc.edu. For in depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called; Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click sign up at collegecommons.huc.edu. Oh, and one more thing, help us out and rate us on iTunes, but whatever you do, do not give us five stars, unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

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JH: For those of us not involved in the issue of gun violence on a daily basis, the news has been seemingly indicating that Americans, by and large, and some apparently significant majorities, favor gun restrictions when they're offered an example of a specific possible type of restriction. But as a totality they resist any kind of gun control writ large. Is that accurate and does it affect your work?

KF: I think that that perception is accurate. I don't know that the reality of it is accurate, but either way it of course affects our work, any type of community organizing is based on, changing hearts and changing minds. And so if people feel a certain way, regardless of the reason, it's something that we're concerned about and it's impactful to our work. What you're referencing I think in particular around universal background checks, we've heard the numbers, anywhere between 85 and 92% of the American public supports universal background checks which includes gun owners, includes folks who vote to the right or anywhere else. Clearly, that's a the vast majority of Americans. I don't know if there's...

JH: If those polls are accurate, yeah.

KF: Right. I don't know if there's anything else that Americans agree upon to that extent. And so, there's something else at play there. There's money and in politics that certainly is impacting our work and is impacting our perception of the reality that clearly differs

from how people actually feel. We also see that some people are just resistant to language, hence why we tend to use the language gun violence prevention, instead of gun control. Gun control often sets people off, makes them feel like they all have to be on the offensive.

JH: Sure, it's classic verbiage that people will react to yeah.

KF: Right, yeah. So we see that there are definitely ways to kind of deconstruct the whole for guns against guns have really complicate that notion, because I think the more we complicate it, the more we find specific pieces that we can reach common ground on.

JH: Or alternatively, you are complicating it, and you don't want it to be simple because it's in the complications that you can pick out pieces where you can make progress.

KF: Exactly, and also framing the issue in terms of other issues that are less divisive. So for instance, child welfare is a pretty non-divisive issue. Almost everyone agrees children should be safe and taken care of, but when we look at that in the space of gun violence prevention, we might look at child access prevention laws, which creates depending on the law, typically something regarding liability for gun owners so parents who leave their guns that are either unlocked, or loaded, or both and their child finds them, and either just accesses them or uses them, or whatnot, that that parent is liable for that. Laws like that theoretically will keep children safe from using their parents' guns to commit crimes, or hurt themselves, or anything.

JH: Somehow lower the risk, yeah.

KF: Yeah.

JH: It seems to me that issues around gun ownership are litigated in the public sphere regarding policy. I just wanna pause to acknowledge that I recognize it, it's not just about policy for you, and I get that, but I just wanna pick up on the policy element of it that I find it to be a triggering politicizing approach to talk about policy when someone invokes foreign country policies as either models to avoid or models to emulate. I think that both sides have an interesting relationship to drawing inspiration from other countries that can be actually pretty emotional just in and of itself, regardless of the fact that it's about an emotional issue in the first place. Have you found that? Do you engage with argument that is based on other countries' legislation or not to avoid it? Is it really not so relevant anyway?

KF: It's definitely relevant. I don't know to what point it can be relied upon as a point to debate, because at some point we're just debating other countries' policies and I don't know where that's getting us, because at the end of the day, our culture is different, our community is different, on and on and on. But certainly we can look to aggregate data, I think on the global stage to help us see how we measure up. The fact that the United States has more gun violence than the next 26 developed countries combined, should be an indicator that we're doing something drastically wrong. Or the fact that in other countries, there are the other factors at play that some folks here think contribute to our

gun crisis, like violent video games, difficult or abusive childhoods, bullying, pieces like that exist everywhere around the world, essentially, but they don't have the gun crisis that we have. And so I think that we can look to that type of aggregate data to see and point out specifically what things are and aren't working in comparison to the rest of the world.

JH: I'd like to close with a forward-looking question, just about your mindset. How are you feeling with respect to our middle-term future, let's say five years out, so six, seven years max, in terms of your optimism or your pessimism, in terms of where you think the general movement is?

KF: I'm optimistic. I think that we have to be optimistic. There's so much to fear and be scared and grieving over, that it's really easy to get stuck in that, but that's not going to help anybody, that's not going to save lives, that's not going to honor the legacy of the people who've already been lost. And I see that the movement, the Gun Violence Prevention Movement is continually growing, continually expanding. I think we're reaching a point where there's really a widespread understanding of the importance of addressing gun violence from an intersectional perspective, really, an emphasis on ensuring that survivors and victims are at the forefront of the movement and leading it, that we're doing trauma-informed work.

KF: I think that overall, the movement is maturing, and growing, and expanding. And I see more and more young and diverse leaders come into the space, which is deeply inspirational to me, particularly when I have the opportunity to learn from and work with them. I think that we are getting to a point where there's gonna be a tipping point. America is going to have to come to terms with the fact that we don't know if we value children more than we value guns, and someone's gonna have to choose. And I have enough optimism to think that when we really come down to that and when we're really able to phrase the question in that way, without the influence of as much money in politics as there is now, or as much divisiveness and politicization, that people are going to say that kids and lives matter more than guns and the right to bear arms.

JH: Well, thank you for your work and thank for taking the time to share it with us. It's inspirational in and of itself.

KF: Thank you so much.

JH: You've been listening to the College Commons Podcast, produced and edited by Jennifer Howd, and brought to you by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. For this URJ Biennial Series, special thanks to Mark Pelavin, the URJ Chief Program Officer and Biennial Director, and Liz Grumbacher, Director of North American Events. We hope you've enjoyed this episode, and please, join us again at collegecommons.huc.edu.

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