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Community News & Features

Meet Tamar Manasseh: Black Rabbinical Student and Mom Leads Movement to Fight Gun Violence in Chicago

By David Finkel, Austin Jewish Film Festival director



Tamar Manasseh leads a communal seder on the corner of 75th Street and South Stewart Avenue.
Credit: Red Shield Pictures

The Austin Jewish Film Festival presents the 89-minute documentary “They Ain’t Ready for Me,” available free August 5-7, thanks to the generosity of co-presenters Congregation Agudas Achim, Congregation Beth Israel, Congregation Shir Ami, Shalom Austin and Temple Beth Shalom.

In 2015, a young mother was shot and killed trying to break up a fight on the corner of 75th Street and South Stewart Avenue in the Englewood section of Chicago. For student rabbi Tamar Manasseh, this was one senseless killing too many. So she took the situation into her own hands by doing something simple yet revolutionary – she sat down on the corner and has not left. That simple act stopped street corner shootings and led to her founding the nonprofit MASK - Mothers/Men Against Senseless Killings.

Manasseh spoke to AJFF Director David Finkel in advance of the upcoming movie screening and exclusive Q&A session

August 9.

Finkel: What takeaways do you hope viewers can use to make changes in their community?

Manasseh: I think the main message of the film is that everyone can do something. Something literally as simple as sitting on a corner. It’s nothing special! We ordered some pizza and sat on the corner. And that stops people from dying. Completely stops it. Why is that so hard for everybody? I mean, am I the only person who can do that? No, I don’t think so. Everyone can do something. I hope that the film inspires people to help improve their own neighborhoods, their own communities, their own corners, in their own ways. With the cuisine of their choice, of course!

Finkel: Has the creation and growth of MASK been organic, or have you followed a particular vision/strategy for its development?

Manasseh: When I started MASK I had no idea that It would take off the way it did—no one did. People never expected us to come back even for a second day, but we did and the day after that, and the one after that. We kept showing up until everyone understood that we were now part of the neighborhood. The vision, though, has remained the same since day one: we need to keep these kids from dying. We’re now about to open a school on the block.

Finkel: Many modern movements such as Me Too and Black Lives Matter are more loosely organized groups, and as such, bring a variety of people with diverse interests together. Both of these movements have been criticized for having some elements that have been deemed anti-Semitic. What should Jews do who want to support the main focus of these causes?

Manasseh: We don’t have the luxury of being hyper-sensitive to slights and perceived insults between groups who need to be one another’s ally. When we do this, we play right into Trump’s tiny hands. The stakes are enormous now. The last thing we need is to snipe at each other while our real enemy picks us apart one by one.

Finkel: In August 2018, you wrote an opinion piece for the New York Times that talked about the conflict between the Chicago police and the local community. In that article, you said “It is time to allocate resources to help our communities thrive once again.” This sounds similar to the demands of “Defund the Police.” Do you support that call, and what does this phrase mean to you?

Manasseh: I think it’s time to re-imagine policing, especially in black communities. One thing that our work with MASK proves is how effective community policing can be. If enough people get involved in their own neighborhoods, and if it’s incentivized, a lot of people would do it. Adding more cops to an already over-policed area isn’t the answer to our problems. We | Continued on **Page 39**

Manasseh from Page 32 | need to allocate resources to education, job programs and food security; if that means there are fewer resources to give to the police department, then so be it.

Finkel: There are documentaries about the “Golden Age” of Black/Jewish cooperation when Abraham Joshua Heschel marched with Martin Luther King. During that time, Jews and Blacks seemed to cooperate closely and had many common goals. Today, unfortunately it seems like there is much too much antagonism between these communities. As a member of both, do you think there are things that can be done to get us all working together again?

Manasseh: You know, Martin Luther King Jr. was killed over 50 years ago and Rabbi Heschel died in the 1970s; if that’s the only example of Black/Jewish cooperation that we can come up with, then we’re all in trouble. Blacks and Jews need to remember that we both started from the bottom of American society; white Jews may have been able to climb the ladder in America, but institutional racism has prevented too many African Americans from achieving their true potential as well. Today, in the age of Trump and Black Lives Matter, we’d better realize quickly that we have a common enemy and that we need to put aside our differences and focus on the larger struggle. If we really want to repair this relationship, Black Jews should be that bridge.

Finkel: Tell us your views on Black Hebrew Israelites, of whom ADL has said: “Some, but not all (Black Hebrew



I think it’s time to stop labeling people’s Judaism. I’m not a “Black Jew,” I’m not a “Jew of color.” I’m a Jew. Full stop. The Black Hebrew Israelites are who they are, I’m who I am.

Tamar Manasseh

Israelites), are outspoken anti-Semites and racists. It should be emphasized that the extremist and anti-Semitic sects of Black Hebrew Israelites are unrelated to the thousands of Black Jews and other Jews of color in the U.S., who are genuine members of the Jewish faith.” Have you run into situations where you have been mistaken for a member of an anti-Semitic group?

Manasseh: I think it’s time to stop labeling people’s Judaism. I’m not a “Black Jew,” I’m not a “Jew of color.” I’m a Jew. Full stop. The Black Hebrew Israelites are who they are, I’m who I am. Anyone who questions my Judaism had better get ready for me to question theirs.

On Sunday, August 9, community members can ask their own questions at the live Q&A with Tamar Manasseh. ■

Full details and registration at www.AustinJFF.org/TARFM.

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