

The Boston Globe

Metro

Rabbi says bias forum took a bad turn

By Ellen Ishkanian

| GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

April 20, 2016

The senior rabbi at one of Newton's largest synagogues in a sermon on Saturday urged the community to learn from the painful events of a recent citywide meeting on prejudice that was disrupted by activists.

Rabbi Wesley R. Gardenswartz, of Temple Emanuel, said he was "saddened and embarrassed" when he read about and watched a video of the April 7 meeting at City Hall called by Mayor Setti Warren to talk about making Newton a more welcoming place for all people.

"In the course of the evening, an African American woman was trying to share her son's experience of racism," Gardenswartz said. "While she is speaking her truth, to our great shame, several Jewish activists talked over her, disrupted her, heckled her, claiming that the purpose of the meeting was to talk about anti-Semitism, not racism."

The meeting was organized after two incidents of anti-Semitic graffiti were discovered at a Newton middle school, but the gathering was not conceived of as a forum to discuss only those incidents. However, a group of activists thought it should have focused solely on anti-Semitism.

"Not hearing an African American woman's story of racism because we only have bandwidth to talk about anti-Semitism was a very bad moment for the Jewish community of Newton," said a text of Gardenswartz's sermon. "When I heard about it, and read the press coverage, and saw the clip, I was saddened, and embarrassed, as a rabbi in Newton, as a Jew, and as a human being."

Gardenswartz said he called both Warren and schools Superintendent David Fleishman and apologized "for conduct that is unworthy of us and inconsistent with our own ideals." Gardenswartz said he also tried to find out the identity of the African American woman so that he could apologize to her, as well.

Temple Emanuel is a Conservative congregation with more than 1,200 families, representing a diversity of Jews from Newton and surrounding communities, according to its website.

Charles Jacobs, a leader of the activists who protested at the forum, called Gardenswartz's sermon "a sad reflection on the failure of Jewish leadership."

"He has no firsthand knowledge of what happened in the meeting," Jacobs, founder of Americans for Peace and Tolerance, said Tuesday in an e-mail to the Globe. "He is unfairly demonizing Jewish activists who are concerned about an unresponsive mayor who refuses to deal with anti-Semitism except as part of some generic discrimination."

Anti-Semitic graffiti has been found scrawled on bathroom walls at two of Newton's schools, with the first two incidents at Day Middle School coming to light months after their discovery.

In addition, racist questions were submitted via an anonymous online site as the Black Leadership Club prepared for Black Culture Day at Newton North High School, and Warren said that after speaking with students he learned of other incidents of prejudice happening in the city.

The group disrupting the April 7 meeting also questioned the curriculum used in Newton's public schools, alleging anti-Israel bias similar to complaints school officials addressed several years ago.

"The rabbi has no knowledge of what is being taught in the schools," Jacobs said.

Gardenswartz said this is an issue on which people disagree, but in his 19 years at Temple Emanuel he has never heard students in the city's public schools or their parents say there is a problem.

Gardenswartz said he doesn't consider the curriculum question to be a real issue, but that what happened at the meeting is.

"When a person or a community has a really bad moment, when we are not faithful to our own highest ideals, it is important not to ignore what happened, but to learn from what happened," he said.

The rabbi asked his congregation to consider how their own pain affects their ability to see that of others.

If you are mourning a death of a loved one, he asked, can you feel someone else suffering a similar loss? You have a health crisis; can you also listen to a friend who is going through similar pain?

Gardenswartz said the "good news" that came from the meeting was that while some adults may have behaved badly, Jewish teens were able to see their own pain as well as that of others.

He quoted Josh Sims Speyer, a student who spoke at the meeting: "When we say one type of hate speech is worse than another, we build walls in our community."

"We all need to bring two eyes to see the pain of somebody else. That is a core Jewish value," Gardenswartz told his congregation. "In the future may the phrase 'Jewish activists' refer to Jews who are active in bringing this Jewish value into the world."

Ellen Ishkanian can be reached at eishkanian@gmail.com.