

SHORESH

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Congregation Etz Chayim
Community News
JANUARY 2025
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**No Matter Who You Are
Inclusivity at Congregation
Etz Chayim**

**Fighting Antisemitism in
Medicine**



Rising Up

People taking action to support Israel and fight antisemitism

Protecting Learners from Antisemitism



Sabrina Bokser

All kids should be safe and should feel appreciated and valued at school.

A bit of happenstance led Sabrina Bokser to JEFA. She had signed an online campaign related to antisemitism which had been co-sponsored by JEFA, the Jewish Educators and Families Association of Canada. “I probably sign all of them,” says Sabrina. “That campaign was related to anti-Palestinian racism policies in schools. I had no idea what JEFA was, but I signed that campaign and then I started receiving emails from JEFA,” she says.

JEFA is a movement of Jewish educators, students, and their families dedicated to empowering, advocating, educating, and collaborating in the combat against antisemitism in education. JEFA aims to create supportive and inclusive learning environments within elementary, middle, and high schools as well as faculties of education and early childhood education centres.

“It advocates for the right of every kid to learn in a safe environment without distinction between any kids. All kids should be safe and should feel appreciated and valued at school,” says Sabrina, whose affiliation with JEFA is on a personal level and unrelated to her role as president of the board of Congregation Etz Chayim. The association is also invested in promoting greater understanding of Jewish identity and building solidarity with communities that support peace and security for the Jewish People.

Following an online session JEFA offered last year about DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) policies, there was a request for volunteers, and Sabrina signed up. She agreed to help contact local parents, teachers, and others who might need JEFA resources, such as a template letter to principals or superintendents for parents to report hate-motivated incidents, request the status of an investigation into an incident, or request that the school take immediate action to prevent future similar incidents. “It’s to raise awareness, to provide the resources to those who need it so they can protect themselves and the kids and be successful in their jobs,” she states.

Sabrina says some people and groups advocating for others’ rights are also anti-Israel, citing an example in which school children in another province were taken to a rally for Indigenous rights, last September, but where anti-Israel messages were also being displayed.

“There were many people that weren’t advocating for Indigenous rights. They were advocating for others’ rights and many of those were extremely anti-Israel,” she says. According to the Canadian Jewish News, following the march, videos posted on social media showed students chanting “From Turtle Island to Palestine, occupation is a crime” (<https://thecjn.ca/news/tdsb-grassy-narrows/>). Others were given stickers saying “Zionism kills,” says Sabrina. JEFA wants the school board involved to be held accountable.

“It’s a very tough issue and JEFA has been supporting and gathering reports from parents and teachers, Jewish and non-Jewish, who were horrified about what was going on,” Sabrina says. And while cities in other provinces have experienced greater degrees of antisemitism than Winnipeg has, “we are trying to be proactive because unfortunately, everything that starts in Toronto doesn’t end there; after some period, things move to other places,” she states. “It started last year at the U of M and it will come back. We have to be prepared for that. If this is coming, I want to help this organization.” She hopes one of the organization’s founders will come to Winnipeg at some point to share details about what JEFA does.

Awareness is a particularly important objective for JEFA because many people are unacquainted with this new organization. Schools or parents must request JEFA resources to receive them.

“We are trying to raise awareness and make those connections so people know this organization exists, and they can access their support.”

JEFA formed in 2023 following October 7. It is a Canada-based organization which hopes to forge partnerships with similar, international organizations in the future.



Photo by Grauesel ([photo license](#))

“JEFA was born out of necessity because they were seeing this huge growth in antisemitism,” Sabrina says. “Anti-Zionism and antisemitism is so instilled and the dehumanization of the Jewish People as ‘colonizers,’ as ‘oppressors’ as ‘baby killers,’” she says. “It’s the reality that we are living in and when JEFA explained what’s going on, with examples, I couldn’t believe it. That’s why I said, ok, I need to help you.”

“These are very sensitive topics,” continues Sabrina. Many Jewish people are horrified with what we are seeing.” JEFA aims to change that and is working to create positive and welcoming educational environments and communities where everyone is empowered to contribute. ■

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JPAM is sort of the eyes and ears for the Jewish community of healthcare professionals; what's going on in academia, specifically in the health sciences faculty.

Fighting Antisemitism in Medicine

Formation of the Jewish Physicians Association of Manitoba

A compilation of outcomes following October 7, 2023 led Jewish physicians in Manitoba to band together to help combat antisemitism in the medical field locally. Jewish doctors had begun noticing heightened antisemitism within the medical community. Then, in May 2024, the valedictorian of the University of Manitoba medical school expressed personal political opinions about the Israel-Hamas war in his valedictory address, inciting the crowd to “stand in solidarity” with Palestine and challenge “settler colonialism.” Compounding the outrage over the speech was the forced resignation of the president-elect of the Professional Association of Residents and Interns of Manitoba (PARIM), who had spoken out against the valedictorian’s actions.

Jewish Physicians Association of Manitoba (JPAM) emerged last spring as an advocacy group to support local Jewish doctors facing increasing antisemitism, to educate the public about this growing societal problem, and to actively fight discrimination against Jewish people within the medical field. An inaugural meeting of doctors interested in the association’s formation was held at Congregation Etz Chayim late last May. The group incorporated, elected an executive board, and JPAM was established. Since October 7, similar Jewish physicians associations have organized across Canada.

“Many Jewish physicians were grieving and felt a need for connection and support,” says Laura Chisick, a general internist and vice president of JPAM. “After the events of October 7, people didn’t feel supported by the medical community and the university. People were experiencing antisemitism, many for the first time. We needed to come together as a community of medical individuals so people would know they’re not alone.”



Grant Goldberg



Laura Chisick

Grant Goldberg hasn’t experienced antisemitism directly in his medical practice. But he knows colleagues who signed a healthcare workers’ letter circulated just after the war began and which was very demonizing to Israel. “Demonizing Israel, in my eyes, is antisemitic,” says Grant, a family physician who is on the governance board of JPAM.

Not every criticism of Israel is antisemitic, he clarifies. “It’s the singling out of Israel. It’s the disproportionate focus the world has on Israel. In my opinion, that’s antisemitic. You might disagree with certain aspects of government policy; that’s not antisemitism. But when you start accusing Israel of things that aren’t based on fact and are just misinformation, that’s a different story.”

Grant says a key value of JPAM is supporting Israel’s right to exist. “That’s an important piece. It’s not just Jewish; Israel’s included,” he states, adding that JPAM adheres to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA)’s definition of antisemitism.

Advocacy, Education, and Support

Laura says JPAM’s primary objectives are advocacy and education. “Many people don’t understand the history of Jewish people in medicine in Manitoba. There was a time when Jewish people weren’t allowed into the medical school,” says the Etz Chayim member.

The association aims to educate the public that the Jewish People is a minority group which has experienced racism for many centuries. “A lot of people don’t know that. And they don’t know what antisemitism is and they don’t know that Israel, at one point, was the only place that let Jews in. I don’t think people think of Jewish people as being a minority or a group that needs special attention.”

JPAM also seeks to facilitate increased community connection for local Jewish doctors. “I felt very alone after October 7,” says Laura, mentioning that she emailed several medical colleagues shortly after: “I am filled with so much sadness, it’s hard to express and heartbreaking to watch. Is there anything we can do as physicians to express our solidarity with Israel and our hope for peace?”

The email went viral, Laura says. “Within two days, the email chain had 200 people on it, and everyone felt the same. These were new feelings for many of us. JPAM allowed us to come together,” she states.

JPAM could also advocate for Jewish medical students, help them to feel safe in their environment within the Faculty of Medicine, Grant says. “If they’re feeling vulnerable, to allow them a supportive safety net.” JPAM can also petition accountability from the University of Manitoba, “advocate for education about antisemitism in the medical school system and put pressure on the university to fight antisemitism,” says the Etz Chayim member.

“I think JPAM is sort of the eyes and ears for the Jewish community of healthcare professionals; what’s going on in academia, specifically in the health sciences faculty,” says Grant.

Last November, the Rady Faculty of Health Sciences hosted a series of learning sessions about antisemitism with Dr. Catherine Chatterley, founding director of the Canadian Institute for the Study of Antisemitism. And at time of writing, JPAM was planning a “Grand Rounds” on antisemitism for January. Grand Rounds are continuing education opportunities for medical professionals, designed to enhance knowledge within their chosen field.

As a very young association, there are exciting opportunities for JPAM to grow. Its formation is an important step in supporting Jewish physicians facing increasing antisemitism in the medical field. “If we don’t do anything about it, it’ll just keep happening,” Grant says. “No one else is going to come to our rescue.” ■

Sharing a Love for Israel

Shalom Custom Designs

Val Benevet knew she had to do something after October 7, 2023. What she didn’t know was how uplifting what she chose to do would be.

After October 7, “I had this need of doing something that would connect me more, not just to this community, because we are very involved, but something else, feel even more connected with Israel,” says Val.

A few days later, it would be “casual day” at Gray Academy, where her children go to school—a day to put aside their school uniforms and wear whatever they chose.

Val made t-shirts for her four sons using professional equipment she has at home, and on casual day, each one wore a t-shirt that says, “I stand with Israel.”

“Something started happening because of that,” says Val, whose background is in the fashion industry and marketing. Many people noticed the shirts, asked about them, and asked Val to make one for them, too.

“And I did, of course. And then I thought, this is something that I want to do. I want to make t-shirts and other items of clothing for people to wear and to show their pride for Israel, for Judaism. So that’s how it started,” she says.

“It” is Shalom Custom Designs, a clothing brand and online shop, born of Val’s desire “to feel connected with the land of Israel and Jews everywhere, especially after October 7.”

“My only goal is to promote love for Israel and Judaism,” says Val. “It’s not about the money, it’s not about selling. It’s about having an outlet to help people show off their pride.”

Creating Something Meaningful

While overall response to the line has been very positive, for a time, social media also became an unfortunate outlet for backlash against Val’s efforts. “The first few months after October 7, I got many hate messages and very rude comments that I’d never gotten in my life before. That was quite horrible,” says the Congregation Etz Chayim member.

“But what’s been incredibly moving is the overwhelming support I’ve also received from people—especially non-Jews—who have expressed love for Israel and for the message my brand stands for. That positive response has been such a wonderful and uplifting part of this journey,” Val states.

She says starting the business has been a way for her to channel the difficult emotions arising after October 7 and its aftermath, into something positive and meaningful. “Sometimes, you need to create with your hands to process your feelings, and that’s been a big part of why I’m so passionate about this brand. It’s not just about the product; it’s about creating something meaningful out of difficult



Val Benevet

My only goal is to promote love for Israel and Judaism.



emotions and building a community around that message.”

Eventually, Val says, the hate messages stopped. “You learn how to navigate those, whether to report them online, block them, make a report for hate messages or profanity. I’ve done that—I don’t know if it helped social media filter those kinds of messages or they actually stopped.”

Championing Israel and Jews

Val says Shalom Custom Designs quickly became a powerful way for her to advocate for Israel and Jews everywhere. “Through the social media channels for this small business I started connecting with people around the world feeling the same way. And I used them as a way to express my love for Judaism and frustration at all the misinformation. Now I’m heavily involved in fighting social media misinformation.”

Val is happy about the positive feedback the line has generated. “People love it. And I absolutely love that I go to events at the school and at the Asper campus and I see so many people wearing the t-shirts I’ve been making. It feels really, really nice.” She notes that favourable feedback has come from customers across Canada and the US, who have found her through social media.

Clothing options in the line include t-shirts, long-sleeve crewnecks, and hoodies for adults and children, and baby onesies, each with an expression like “Am Yisrael Chai,” or “I Stand With Israel.” Holiday-gear shirts have sayings like “Latkes, *sufganiyot* & *gelt*” or “apple honey shofar repeat.” Accessories include *Magen David* earrings or bracelet; home-décor items include a glass catch-all tray or ceramic heart-shaped bowl, each inscribed with “Shalom.” Val hopes to add travel mugs and coffee cups to the line.

With purchase of some of the products, Val makes a donation to Israel. She explains that not all Shalom

Custom Designs items have a donation attached to the purchase because she has not officially established a collaborative relationship with an organization for raising money. “My goal is just awareness,” Val says. She directs any money raised from the sale of products to the Jewish Federation’s Israel emergency fund.

Val does all the design for Shalom Custom Designs including clothing and other products and branding and marketing materials like hangtags, stickers, and packaging. “It has been a very stressful time for everyone, and I find that doing something with my hands and putting it out there helps me. So that’s why I do this. I can offer a t-shirt that says something about Israel or Judaism to allow other people to show their pride. That’s my only goal. Sharing that and allowing people to do the same.” ■

Hope is Anchored in a Cosmic Plan

Hope can be slippery, evasive. As Jews, we inherit a history weighed down with battles against adversaries who are intent on our annihilation. Our past is riddled with devastating conflicts and disastrous attempts to extinguish our Jewish light. From Hadrian, the second-century Roman Emperor, to Haman of the Persian Empire and antagonist of the Jews in the Book of Esther, to modern day oppressors like Hitler, Hezbollah, and Hamas, the list of enemies of the Jewish people is staggering. And we have only touched on the letter H.

So, we mourn, yet we endure; we rebuild, and we carry on. But it can be challenging, particularly when the conflict is current, to keep the fires of hope alight. We become worn down with grief. We may forget to see the glass as half full. We might start to wonder if the pendulum doesn’t always return to devastation.

“That is one way to see it,” acknowledges Rabbi Kliel Rose. But “the nature of Judaism is to live with joy and optimism. I do not want to minimize the grieving from October 7 that people are still going through. At the same time, I think we can look to our Jewish teachings and traditions, the wisdom of the Torah, to provide inspiration. They can function as metaphors for how we can rededicate ourselves and our communities. They also help to reconfigure how we’re going to exist beyond the awful tragedy. I cannot change the pendulum. But I can, as an individual and on a communal level, impact the way my life is lived beyond the moments of trauma and tragedy.”

If we can focus our sight beyond the tragedy, we catch a glimpse of the glass as half full, where both hope and reality lie. “If you look—compare and contrast—most of our life is lived in the positive,” says Rabbi Kliel. “The balance tilts toward more days of joy than days of sadness.”

He reminds us to focus our hope and our faith in G-d, even in times of war, and even when battles are won. “There’s a danger in highlighting human victory and suggesting that human agency is responsible, especially since we know some human beings have the tendency, when in power, to misuse it. G-d is what enabled the miracle to happen. Any victory, any human success, is anchored in a cosmic plan.”

Trusting that a cosmic plan guides us and our lives as Jews might feel inconceivable when we consider horrors like the Holocaust and October 7. “We don’t see the Holocaust as a failure of G-d so much as a human ability and free choice to pursue evil,” says Rabbi Kliel. “Martin Buber, the Jewish existentialist, talked about the ‘eclipse of G-d,’ that sometimes, we don’t see the presence of G-d. Instead, what we see manifesting is people taking on a sense of entitlement to rule, and to treat others in a way that is counter to the notion that everyone is made in the image of the divine. I don’t think, when it comes to the Holocaust, there was a cosmic plan. I think we who are endowed with free choice, human beings, failed miserably by allowing evil to permeate, and the world didn’t act quickly enough.”



Rabbi Kliel Rose

When we stand together as Jews and maintain our faith in G-d and Divine Intent, we face our enemies with strength. “Now, more than ever, we need each other, we need some unity,” he says. “Unity isn’t absolute agreement with one another. But in the most general way, there have to be points where we come to find solace in being with one another.”

This is why he believes coming together at synagogue is so beneficial, for Jews. “It’s not free of political polarization,” Rabbi Kliel says, “but it’s a space where all Jews can be together in moments of prayer, reflection, celebration.”

We will always be pulled in varying directions, as Jews, and as people. By learning to dialogue openly about our differences, we take a step closer to peace. “If we only speak to people in our echo chambers, I don’t know that we ever get to a place of growth. I understand well that it’s not so easy to bring those varying opinions and create spaces for them. But in the aspirational sense, that’s where I believe we need to get to.”

“I am hopeful that growth and peace can be realized, even if it takes a lot longer than I ever imagined it would,” says Rabbi Kliel. We can anchor hope in the belief of a cosmic plan. ■

The balance tilts toward more days of joy than days of sadness.

Photo: Prof. Mortel (photo license)



No Matter Who You Are

Inclusivity at Congregation Etz Chayim

Inclusivity is a value Congregation Etz Chayim takes very seriously. “Everyone is welcome at the Torah; everyone is welcome in the sanctuary. We embrace everybody one hundred percent,” says Cantor Tracy Kasner.

Inclusion is the act of welcoming, valuing, and respecting everyone, no matter who they are or where they come from. Inclusion is warmhearted and focuses on celebrating diversity, equity, and fairness, such that everyone has equal opportunity. The outcome of inclusion is inclusivity.

Interfaith Inclusion

Diversity takes many forms. Difference in religious belief is one that comes up frequently for a 21st-century synagogue.

“It’s important for families to know that for interfaith parents of a child who’s going to celebrate at the synagogue marking any occasion, both parents, Jewish and not-Jewish, and their families, are included in the celebration,” she says. Etz Chayim members Stephanie Faintuch and Michael Bertie had been wondering about this as they considered the *simchat bat* (baby naming ceremony) they wanted to host at Etz Chayim for their daughter, Emelia Lynne (born July 20, 2024). The couple is interfaith—Stephanie is Jewish and Michael is Catholic—and they wanted to know how Michael could participate in a meaningful way.

“My first question was, is Michael allowed on the *bimah*? And what involvement can he have?”

Cantor Tracy is familiar with these questions. “I’ve been asked, several times, what the choreography would look like. What they’re really asking is, where are they allowed to stand, which breaks my heart,” she says. “I try to be very clear with families about that.” She quickly reassured the new parents.

“Her answer was, he can be on the *bimah*, he can hold the baby, and he can do whatever he needs to do with her. If she cried, he could walk her around,” says Stephanie.

Michael says he felt very much a part of Emelia’s celebration. “I was physically up there with them,” he says. “I didn’t feel alienated from my family, sitting in the corner somewhere. I was there and part of it.” So, while Stephanie performed an *Aliyah*, Michael stood holding Emelia right beside her.

The family had several honoured guests at the August 3 ceremony, including both Stephanie’s and Michael’s extended Winnipeg families and their joint friends. Several guests were



Stephanie Faintuch and Michael Bertie with Emelia (and their dog, Shayna Punim)

not-Jewish and unfamiliar with Jewish customs and rituals. These guests were not left out in the cold, either.

“The synagogue really helped with it being inclusive,” says Michael. “It’s not just my family that was there, it’s our friends, too, that aren’t Jewish and don’t know much about Jewish ceremonies. Cantor Tracy did a very good job of explaining everything.” For example, Tracy says she explained what an *Aliyah* is, and how the word means we go up.

Not Your Traditional Jewish Family

Like Stephanie and Michael, Marc Schaeffer doesn’t have a “typical” Jewish family. But they have been embraced by Congregation Etz Chayim with warm inclusivity since becoming members of the *shul* in 2020.

“In more ways than one, our family doesn’t meet the ‘cookie-cutter’ sort-of definition of a Jewish family,” says Marc. “My wife, Kae, is Japanese and maybe ‘Jewish adjacent’* but not Jewish.” As well, Marc had a Reform Jewish upbringing. “I’ve come to Conservative Judaism later in life.”

“These are elements of the diversity within our household. The inclusivity is in Etz Chayim’s ability and capacity and desire and openness to accept that diversity into *their* family,” Marc says. “They accepted us from a different tradition into the community.”

The family became members about a year before Marc and Kae’s eldest child, Hannah, reached Bat Mitzvah age. Because of Hannah’s patrilineal Jewish identity, she first had to convert to Judaism through a *mikvah* ceremony.



L-R: Alex, Marc, Hannah, and Kae Schaeffer

“It was done so beautifully, so tastefully. No one was made to feel poorly, no one was made to feel less-than,” Marc continues. “It was just a beautiful formality, and it was dealt with very sensitively. The transition to the synagogue and this first big event were very positive for us.”

For Hannah’s Bat Mitzvah (May 2021, during the height of Covid), Kae was invited to stand on the *bimah* with her family, open the ark, and prepare the Torah. “She felt very much part of the service and the experience. It just felt seamless,” Marc says.

He thinks that sometimes, “people can make others feel poorly, even if they do, on the surface, include. But Kae felt really included and respected and cared for. That’s powerful.”

For the November 2022 Bar Mitzvah of Marc and Kae’s second child, Alex (who had also converted to Judaism through a *mikvah* ceremony), Kae was again invited to the *bimah*. This time, she presented Alex with his *Tallit* and stayed for some prayers.

Honours for Non-Jews

Cantor Tracy says there are many opportunities for non-Jewish family members and other honoured guests to participate in a Jewish *simcha*. “There are honours that we make available for family members that aren’t Jewish. You have to be Jewish to have an *Aliyah* at the Torah or to hold the Torah, but the prayers that we do in English, for example, ‘The Prayer for Peace,’ ‘The Prayer for Israel,’

*Jewish adjacent refers to a non-Jew who has a connection to Judaism or Jewish cultural life. “To me, it means someone that’s living with a Jewish person and living that lifestyle,” Marc says.



Cantor Tracy Kasner

That makes us
feel included,
that they value
our involvement
in synagogue.



Photo: icon0.com (photo license)

could all be said by a non-Jewish person. We don't exclude anyone; we include them in everything we do at the Torah with the child."

Honours for non-Jewish guests at a baby naming ceremony hosted at the synagogue are similar to those for B'nai Mitzvah, Tracy says. "We sometimes add other prayers, like "The Prayer for Ukraine," that could be relevant that day. We've never run out of prayers" for potential participants.

At a Jewish wedding, the heart of the ceremony is the *Sheva Brachot* (seven blessings), recited under the *chuppah* (wedding canopy). "Someone who isn't Jewish can read one of the seven blessings," says Tracy. "I've given them to people of all faiths." She adds that the *brachot* are usually recited in Hebrew first by the cantor or rabbi, so the English translations can be delivered by guests.

At a Jewish funeral, all prayers are recited by the cantor or rabbi, but anyone can give a eulogy. "Lots of non-Jews speak on behalf of their loved one at their funeral," says Tracy.

The USCJ (United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism) has an "Interfaith Inclusion Guide" among various resources related to interfaith inclusion posted on its website, which offers ritual lifecycle event participation guidelines for member synagogues and their congregations. Included in this guide are details about rituals and prayers Jews are invited to do, and those which Jews and non-Jews alike may perform. The USCJ site also has multiple articles, podcasts, webinars, and blog posts related to interfaith inclusion.

LGBTQ2IA+ Inclusion

Embracing diversity and committing to inclusion takes numerous forms beyond honouring religious difference. Gender diversity is another, and Etz Chayim is just as committed to recognizing all expressions of gender. "We have students of all genders, no matter how they identify, called to the Torah for B'nai Mitzvah," says Tracy.

She says there are contemporary adaptations to traditional Jewish liturgy that are more sensitive to gender diversity and include gender-neutral language. For example, when calling someone up to the Torah, "*na la'amod*," please stand," can be used with "*mibeit*" or "*l'veit*" instead of "ben" or "bat" to denote lineage. So, rather than saying, "son of" or "daughter of," you are saying, "from the house of, from the family of," and then you give the family name," Tracy.

The USCJ also shares various resources related to LGBTQ2IA+ inclusion on its website, including many from Keshet, an organization working to ensure full equality of all LGBTQ2IA+ Jews and their families in Jewish life. For instance, "Cultivating a Culture of Belonging: Guidance for Synagogue Greeters" offers advice and suggestions for how greeters can foster a culture of inclusivity for everyone that enters the synagogue. For example, if a greeter does not know someone's pronouns, they should avoid using he/she pronouns when they are unsure. Rather, they could say, "Sorry if we've met before, my name is Leslie, and my pronouns are she/her;" or, "What are your pronouns? I use she/her."

Other Types of Inclusion

Marc says he's been touched to be included in other ways at Etz Chayim. A few years ago, he was invited to join Etz Chayim's Children and Family Committee, which he later co-chaired (with Sima Feuer) and then chaired independently. Moreover, when he had suggestions to offer, "I felt people actually listened, which was unusual to be honest," Marc says. "I've not experienced that before. I really felt included that way."

One of his ideas had been creation or resurrection of a Jewish youth group, like USY. "I believed strongly that some kind of youth group was necessary," he says, adding that serendipitously, "I proposed an idea that already had allies on the board of directors." Other committee members agreed, and the idea was formally pitched to the board. When it was accepted, Marc became part of the team involved in reviving USY at Congregation Etz Chayim, participating in dialogue with other Jewish youth group leaders and the USCJ, and eventually, interviewing the job candidate for the first USY advisor.

"I was just so impressed that the synagogue put real time and money behind backing our proposal," says Marc.

Even being featured in *Shoresh* (both Marc and Hannah have been interviewed for articles in the past, and Hannah wrote something about her 2021 Bat Mitzvah); "that's another sense of inclusion." So is including his family in Etz Chayim printed publications, like the "Giving" booklet, he says.

"I recognize that the synagogue wants to portray diversity, but it also is a kind of inclusion, that our family is the kind of face they want to portray as members. They don't have to. That also makes us feel included, that they value our involvement in synagogue," Marc says, adding he is pleased when he is invited up to the *bimah*, occasionally, for an *Aliyah*. "In lots of ways, we have felt included in synagogue. Being included is really quite nice." ■

Alive with Activity

Programming Notes

Tuesday and Thursday evenings are bustling with activity and people at Congregation Etz Chayim. From Mitzvah Minds, tallit weaving, U2@Shul, Rikudei Ha'Am (Israeli Folk Dance), and adult B'nai Mitzvah group classes on Tuesdays, to Journeying Into Judaism, group B'nai Mitzvah classes for youth, and USY drop-in on Thursdays, Etz Chayim is a vibrant centre of learning and activity for all ages on these days.

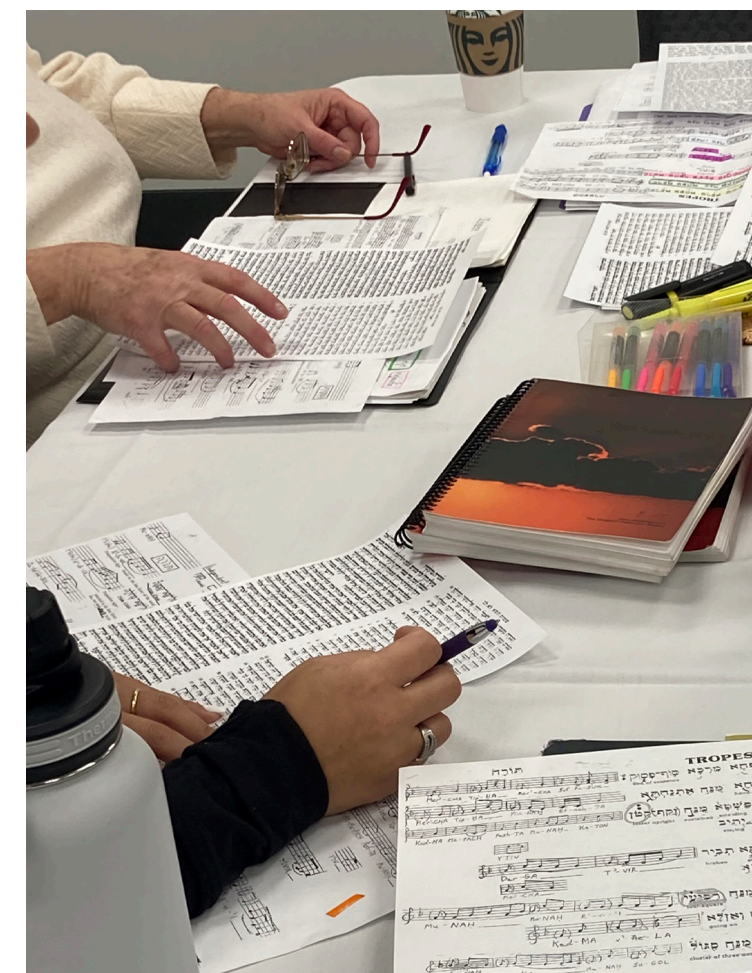
"We have many rooms in the building. Instead of having one program on one day, we decided to use all spaces at once on Tuesdays and Thursdays," says Claudia Griner, program and engagement director for Congregation Etz Chayim. So, while weavers are working with warp and weft threads in the foyer, on Tuesdays, Israeli Folk Dance is taking place in the kiddush hall, adult B'nai Mitzvah students are learning Torah trope in the Chapel, and U2@shul participants are shmoozing in the youth room. This optimizes both space and staff resources, she says.

It also exposes members to other programming options available for themselves or others. "It's a way to see that there are things happening besides the program they decided to participate in. It helps the community at large, seeing that other things besides their own interests are happening here."

Etz Chayim programming isn't limited to Tuesdays and Thursdays. But most weekly programming is on these days, while Monday and Wednesday programs are monthly interest groups: Lunch and Learn on Mondays, and either Torah on Tap (offsite at the Trans Canada Brewing Company) or Torah Beats on Wednesdays. Baby-Mitzvah Minds is a weekly Friday program for the youngest Etz Chayim members.

Along with the favourites, Etz Chayim has some new program options: Torah Beats is a monthly Torah study discussion group for adults 40 and up. U2@shul is an informal drop-in for adult Jews 18-25. "This is a very casual initiative," says Claudia; "it will get shaped as members decide what to plan." She says young members have been happy to come to shul to visit and play games, but they are also encouraged to plan structured programs. "It's up to them what they would like to create. We want to provide a safe space for young adults to enjoy being in the community, get to know more Jewish people," she says.

Thursday afternoon USY drop-in is also new. In addition to monthly USY programming, the drop-in is "a place for kids to hang out and do homework before or after their B'nai Mitzvah lessons," says Claudia. This gives parents some flexibility with drop-off or pick-up times around their child's B'nai Mitzvah lesson. Finally, on the first Shabbat of each month after kiddush is Shabbat Lishmah, a new monthly Torah study group to discuss the parashat of the week with Rabbi Kliel, rounding out your week of synagogue programming. ■



It helps the community at large, seeing that other things besides their own interests are happening here.

Feeding Her Connectedness and Spirituality



Carla Rubenfeld

I like the
solidarity
when we're
all together.

Carla Rubenfeld says *shul* is her happy place.

"I've always had a connection to synagogue, I enjoy it," begins the Congregation Etz Chayim member. "For me, it's a way of life. I enjoy being part of Saturday morning *minyan*; I look forward to it."

"Going to *shul* I'm feeding my connectedness, my spirituality. It's my happy place," Carla says.

The retired teacher doesn't come from a family of synagogue-goers. Growing up, her family went to Ateres Israel (which eventually merged with B'nai Abraham, in 1973) but only for the High Holidays. "It was women upstairs and men downstairs and they would yell if the ladies were talking," she laughs. "I remember going downstairs sometimes and sitting on my grandfather's lap or my father's."

Her connection to Congregation Etz Chayim began in grade 7 when, as a Peretz Shul student, she auditioned for and gained a position in the Rosh Pina junior choir. Carla sang in that choir for Saturday morning B'nai Mitzvah until her late teens; then, she auditioned for and found a place in the Rosh Pina senior choir in her early 20s. That choir sang on Friday nights and Jewish holidays. "I remember singing for *selichot* when it was at midnight," she says.

In junior high, Carla also got involved with USY (United Synagogue Youth) and recalls regularly attending the "*Talis and Tefillin*" program at Rosh Pina Sunday mornings—a service followed by a game of floor hockey.

How It Started

Carla says she didn't attend services regularly until her daughter, Eryn, was approaching Bat Mitzvah age. She brought Eryn to one Shabbat service as part of her Bat Mitzvah preparation but after that, Eryn refused to go back (as 12-year-olds are wont to do). "So, she didn't go, but I've been there ever since," Carla laughs.

Eventually, she got more involved in synagogue services and more regularly. In 2006, Carla participated in a joint adult B'nai Mitzvah with three close friends. They had studied with a larger group of nine women.

"Cantor Tracy taught us the trope and how to *daven shacharit*... and I've never looked back," she says, explaining how there is a pool of members Tracy calls on to lead services, when needed. "That's how I often got to *daven* between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when Tracy was trying to rest her voice," she says. Carla led the Tuesday night *minyan* service until the Covid pandemic, when

services moved online, and she passed that torch to someone more "technically adept."

How It's Going

Today, having acclimatized to Zoom, Carla is a remote *minyanaire* for most evening services, Monday through Friday, as well as Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday mornings, and she still attends Shabbat morning services in person. "I go to every service I can. That's what I feel my part is to give to the *shul*: my time."

She also chants *haftarah* five or six times a year and volunteers every year to do the *haftarah* from her Bat Mitzvah, *Ki Tavo*, unless there is a B'nai Mitzvah already doing it.

Through synagogue, Carla values her connection both to other Jews, and to her heritage. "I like the solidarity when we're all together. I love to celebrate the culture, the holidays," she says. "It's a happy place just being part of something."

First, the Basics

Now in her fourth year of retirement, Carla had a long, happy teaching career. For 28 of her 38 teaching years, she taught at O.V. Jewitt Elementary, predominantly grade 1. Before that, she taught at the old Centennial school and at Elwick Community school. She has also taught grades 2 through 6.

Carla says she had an "old fashioned" teaching philosophy. "I believe kids need phonics and reading skills. My theory was, if a child can't read, write, and add and subtract simple numbers, why am I teaching anything else? They can get all the other stuff once they have their skills, and then they can do anything," she says.

"A lot of creative teachers incorporate their art lessons (into other lessons) and spend a long time on one thing," she continues. "But I focused on skills and making them successful readers," which has positive outcomes later, she believes.

"If they don't have their basic skills, especially in the older grades, the frustration comes out in behaviour, so they're always having negative interactions with teachers," Carla explains. "They're misbehaving because they're not interested, or they're frustrated because they're struggling. If you can catch those mistakes early, then interactions will be positive."

Keeping the Rhythm

Some years, Carla's job required looping, which meant she moved with her grade 1

students to grade 2 the following year. She says she supported this pedagogic practice. "I like the idea of having kids for another year, because the second year, you already know them. You had a little break and then you just pick up where you left off. Especially those kids that struggle, you know what they need and how to get through to them."

She says it can take a teacher two or three months to figure out what will work for a struggling student. With looping, "I think kids come out stronger because you've gotten into that routine, that rhythm. If you lose that rhythm things fall apart," she says. Carla also taught several split grades throughout her career (for example, a grade 1-2 split class), which can make a teacher's work more demanding "because even in one grade you have many levels of ability, and that is a challenge in itself," she says.

Loved and Learned

While Carla says she didn't like the politics of teaching, like when changes to reporting were implemented, she adored her work, and she misses the people and the kids.

"It was so much a part of my life for 38 years," she begins. "I loved my job. I loved watching the lightbulb go on. Sometimes, it goes on right away when you're teaching something. And sometimes, the ones that don't get it yet, they're not ready, when they finally say, 'Oh! there's nothing better than seeing that.'"

Carla says she learned some things herself, from teaching. "It teaches you patience. In a class of up to 30 kids, there's always two that test your patience," she smiles. That said, she learned not to judge a book (or kid) by its cover. "Kids often have bad days. You don't really know what's going on behind (the behaviour). It takes a while to know what the situation is, so don't be quick to judge that they're just acting out; there's usually more to it," she believes.

Carla recalls a time when her students had to enlighten their teacher. "One of my first years teaching, I had a grade 3-4 split. I was writing something on the board I wanted them to copy. It was taking forever, and I said, 'Guys, what's taking so long?!'"

"We don't know how to read (cursive) writing," one of her younger students had explained. "I'd done all my training in grades 4, 5 or 6, so I was handwriting. I was *going* to be teaching handwriting (to the grade 3s), apparently," she laughs.

Now that she's retired, Carla enjoys volunteering at her former workplace. "I'm happy to listen to kids read, do some testing, whatever," says Carla, who also plays mahjong and does crossword puzzles to keep her mind active. She was guest reader for "I love to read week" last year, and she helped with vision screening another year.

Family and Other Joys

Carla has two children and two grandchildren. Her daughter, Eryn, is a fertility specialist who now lives and works in Vancouver. Eryn has two children of her own with husband Dario (who works remotely for Magellan Aerospace and recently defended and received his PhD in Aerospace): George is 6 and Rose nearly 3. "They're delightful, they never cease to amaze me," she says of her grandchildren.

"It's the best club in the world, being a grandparent." Carla's son, David, is a massage therapist with his own Winnipeg clinic, as well as a flight attendant with West Jet and a part-time travel agent.

Carla has travelled extensively thanks to a year of family globetrotting in 1997, when her kids were young. She and then-husband Perry took a year off work and the family travelled first to 12 countries in Europe. After returning home for a few weeks, they voyaged through the South Pacific to Hawaii, Fiji, New Zealand, and Australia. Following another short stopover at home, the family visited Israel for three weeks.

An animal lover, Carla has "a whole school of cats—I rescued a litter from under my deck 16 years ago." And she inherited a dog from her son.

It's primarily on account of the dog that remote synagogue services work best for her, now. "I don't mind driving the distance," says Carla, a North Ender. "South end people came to Rosh Pina for 60 years. But I have a dog who, especially in the morning, if I'm up, he'll want his walk. So, I have to time things when I go on Saturday; it's tricky. It's like having kids!" she laughs. But when she *davens* remotely, she can be outside, if necessary, with the dog.

As for her felines, they are often featured in the *minyan* services Carla attends remotely. "Everybody's come to know about the cats. Sometimes, when I go outside, it's a break from the cats!" she jokes.

Whether Carla is attending *shul* in person or remotely, inside or outside, the point is, she shows up—often. "I love it. It's a part of me," she says. ■

Synagogue Youth Wanted

USY wants your children and grandchildren. But just for a few hours each month.

United Synagogue Youth (USY) is up and running again with a year of exciting programming planned. In its sophomore year since its revival at Congregation Etz Chayim in 2023, USY is the youth movement of the USCJ (United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism).

Co-advisors Naomi Skladnik and Nomi Feuer have planned most of the USY programming around Jewish holidays. “We have one program planned a month, and we wanted something we think would educate the kids about the holiday and also that they’re doing something celebratory or fun around the holiday,” says Naomi.

A group of sixteen grade-5 through grade-8 students got their hands right into the first event, a November Shabbat program that began with braiding Challah.

“There were kids from different schools and a lot of them didn’t know each other at first,” says Nomi. Challah braiding proved to be a great icebreaker activity for the young folk. “It was very nice to see the kids interacting with each other,” she says.

Next, the group attended the Kabbalat Shabbat service; Rabbi Kliel conversed with them about the Torah portion of the week, related to Noah’s ark. Then, there was a Shabbat dinner—pizza and the Challah they had braided earlier.

Nomi says a few kids in that group were Israelis who are learning to speak English. “We were able to communicate with them because we know Hebrew, and they seemed to be having a really nice time,” she says.

The co-advisors have also organized an ongoing *tikkun olam* (repair of the world) project. “We have a plan for each program to have kids bring in either canned food or wool socks,” Naomi says. At the end of the USY year, there will be a program for putting together donation baskets with the collected goods.

Naomi says she has a bit of an inside track for USY program planning; her brother, Natan, was the USY advisor last year. “He’d run a program, come home, and say, ‘this went well, this didn’t go well,’ so I kind of knew, more or less, some things that went well or didn’t,” she says, adding she has also worked as a camp counsellor at Camp Massad. “I have a lot of experience around planning programs for kids,” she says; Nomi has similar experience from Camp Wasaga Family Camp.

So, let USY have your kids and grandkids once a month, to explore their heritage, celebrate their Jewish identity and their love for Israel, develop new friendships, and find meaning together in Jewish life. ■

It was very nice to see the kids interacting with each other.



L-R: Nomi Feuer, Rabbi Kliel Rose, Naomi Skladnik



ETZ CHAYIM PEOPLE

Member News and Life-Cycle Events

IN MEMORIAM

Selma Albersheim
Barbara Goszer
Howard Kideckel
Cyril Shane

SPECIAL BIRTHDAYS

NOVEMBER

Lloyd Baker, Martin Billinkoff, Mark Cohen, John Hample, Jeffrey Marantz, Ron Rittberg, Lisa Selchen, Sheryl Singer

DECEMBER

Joel Cogan, Michael Conner, Sharon Goldenberg, Janet Simon, Itay Zutra

JANUARY

Michael Bass, Diane Boroditsky, Donna Lazar, Daniel Matzkin, Jacqueline Meyers, Natalie Newman, Betty Sparber

FEBRUARY

Bryan Borzykowski, Louis Colish, Walter Griner, Adam Levene, Steven London, Bill Mahon, Leslie Marks, Henry Wolfe, Bella Wolk

SPECIAL ANNIVERSARIES

NOVEMBER

Carla and Ken Goldstein (55)
Elissa Abrams and Alexander Singer (15)

DECEMBER

Marli and David Lerner (55)
Michelle and Brent Apter (40)
Dawn and Ron Rittberg (40)
Laura and Josh Chisick (15)
Susan Greenberg and Mark Szewczyk (15)

MAZEL TOVS

Donna Lazar and **Martin Billinkoff** on the birth of granddaughter Ivy

Lindsay and **Steven Offman** on the Bat Mitzvah of their daughter Avelyn

Jack Offman on the Bat Mitzvah of his granddaughter Avelyn
Elana Schultz on her new position as Endowment Director at the Jewish Federation

Shayna and **Merrill Shulman** on the birth of grandson Adam Selim

Leslie Singer and **Sheppy Coodin** on the marriage of Leslie’s son Josh Glow to Leah Blankstein

Herb Singer on the marriage of his grandson Josh Glow to Leah Blankstein

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