

Congregation Etz Chayim Community News

FALL 2025

תשרי תשפ"ו | TISHREI 5786

**New Year, New babies,
New programming**

Israel Needed Them

**Torah Study Builds
Community**

SHORESH

שורש

Ktiva Vechatima Tova

A Good Signature in the Book of Life

Fayanne, Avrom, and Carli Charach, and Taylor Lloy

Wishing our family and friends a happy and healthy New Year

Darlene and Jerry Davis and family

Wishing our family and friends a healthy and happy New Year

Ann, Max, and Elie Feierstein

Wishing your families a year of gezunt, health, and wellbeing

Bruce Granove, Morissa Granove, and Laurie McCreery

May the coming year bring good health, strong connections, true peace and safety to everyone

Lil Hirt

Wishing family and friends a healthy and happy New Year

Matthew, Nola, Ezra, Sonia, Caleb, Zev, Yona, Eliran, Galya, and Gilon Lazar

Shana Tova U'Metukah

Jane and Ronald Reider and Tiffany, Lucas, and Lily Baird

Wishing family and friends a healthy and happy New Year

Colette Rubin

Wishing family and friends a healthy and happy New Year

Kim Hirt, Jerry Rubin, Bina, Rachel, and Alex

A sweet and happy New Year to all our family and friends

Sid and Joyce Rosenhek and family

Wishing family and friends a healthy and happy New Year

Marvin and Esther Samphir and family

Wishing family and friends a healthy and happy New Year

Shayna and Merrill Shulman and family

Wishing our family and friends a healthy and happy New Year

Mimi and Earl Singer and family

Wishing family, friends, and congregation a healthy and happy New Year

Avery and Nata Spigelman, children Adam, David, Jenny, and Deborah, and grandchildren Joshua, Connor, and Logan.

Wishing our family and friends a healthy and happy New Year

SHORESH
שורש

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Cover Photo: Baby Mitzvah Minds

ISRAEL NEEDED THEM. SO, THEY WENT

Neither the horrific events of October 7, 2023, nor the tragic war which ensued has stopped diaspora Jews from travelling to Israel in the wake of the atrocities. Jews continue to go, many following unshakable longing to be among their people, ready to help others living in the homeland, however possible. Some travel independently; others join groups—one of a “wave of ‘solidarity missions’” bringing diaspora Jews to Israel, says Maya Rosen in “[The Rise of October 7th Tourism](#).” Three Congregation Etz Chayim members share their stories and reflections from recent travels to Israel. If there’s a common thread from their unique experiences, it is this: Israel needed them. So, they went.

THE PRIVILEGE OF HAVING ISRAEL

When Natan Skladnik began planning his trip to Israel months after October 7th, 2023, some loved ones tried to discourage him from going. “People who love me were saying, ‘What are you doing? Please don’t go, it’s dangerous.’ And I said, ‘I’m going because it’s dangerous. I’m going because they need that kind of help. I wanted to go in this time of need,” says Natan, who emigrated with his parents from Argentina to Winnipeg in 2003, when he was two years old. Also, having just finished his applications to medical school and before the interview phase would begin, it was timely for him to travel, he says.

Natan connected with Maslool, an organization that helps 18- to 30-year-olds custom-design volunteer or internship programs in Israel based on personal interests, goals, and qualifications. Maslool helped him find two volunteer opportunities and a place to live in Tel Aviv.

Save a Child’s Heart

Early in September 2024, Natan travelled to Israel, participating first in Birthright, a 10-day educational group trip for Jews age 18 to 26. After Birthright and time visiting family, Natan began his first volunteer post in Holon with Save a Child’s Heart (SACH). This organization brings children with heart disease to Israel for medical care, from countries where pediatric heart care is limited or nonexistent. A few times each week, Natan was the friendly face and emotional support for children undergoing cardiac

treatment, organizing games and activities for them before and after their procedures. The children’s programming happened either at the group home where the kids were staying with their parents during treatment, or at the hospital for children from intensive care or who were there for a longer stay.

“These kids are in very weird situations and are very out of context,” says Natan. “My number one goal was to give the parents or caregivers a break.” Children—20 to 25 each day—ranged in age from babies to 14 or 15 years old, and most spoke no English. “I would try to talk to the kids, communicate in the way we could communicate,” he says, adding his dramatic arts experience helped bridge the language gap. “I had a lot of role-playing games we could play, that was a lot of my focus.” Some days’ activities were more structured than others, “depending on the vibe of the day. Just making sure no kid was left out, everybody was involved in some way, to have some kind of engagement,” says Natan, who has a history of working with children at Etz Chayim leading USY and during holidays, as well as at Camp Massad and running family programming at McDonald’s.

Natan was one of a few regular male volunteers for SACH. At one point, he says the kids started calling him “papa.” “It threw me back,” he says. “I wasn’t mentally prepared for it, and that was a weird experience for me. It reminded me of the responsibility I had while there, why I was doing what I was doing.”

Natan volunteered at Save a Child’s Heart for about six weeks, returning to volunteer there for a few more days at the end of his trip. “What was really nice was to see a lot of the kids that I grew quite

fond of had gone home.” This knowledge was bittersweet though, “because some kids went home because everything went well, and some went home because it was untreatable,” he says.

Magen David Adom

Natan spent another six weeks volunteering with Magen David Adom (MDA), Israel’s national emergency medical service and blood services organization. In early November, he travelled to Jerusalem for a 10-day training course. At completion, Natan received an identification card recognizing him as a paramedic, “but the Canadian and Israeli standards are different,” he explains. “It does not translate to Canadian paramedic training. I got basic first-aid certification, called basic life-service.”

Following the training, Natan returned to Tel Aviv to volunteer on a basic life-service ambulance four times each week, working a combination of eight-hour day shifts and night shifts. On the ambulance with Natan each shift was a driver and often another paramedic, sometimes two.

“We’d get calls, pick people up, talk to them to figure out what was going on, do treatments there, if possible, help them decide if they wanted to go to the hospital or not,” says Natan, who has a degree in Neuroscience. “It was very fluid as to what we would do, because it’s quite a complex system.” At the end of the call the team returned to the ambulance, recorded what supplies they had used and needed to be restocked at the end of the shift, and waited for the next call. Some days, he says, the team was run off their feet with calls. Other days, they only had two or three calls during an entire eight-hour shift.

Culture Shock

As his trip progressed, Natan began to notice a difference in the way Israelis approached and processed trauma, compared to North Americans. He recalls one ambulance call where the situation wasn’t overly grave, but its backstory felt quite shocking. “We picked up somebody who injured himself surfing. It wasn’t serious, but he broke an ankle. We were taking him to the hospital and his girlfriend came in the ambulance with us. We were just talking, and it came up that she was at Nova when everything went down. She was so nonchalant about it, so comfortable with it, and I was mortified,” says Natan.

“It was such an impactful moment for me to see her just living her life,” he continues. “She was just, ‘yeah, I was there, it was awful, my friends died, and it was tough, but I’m here, we’re OK.’ That whole level of OK-ness with it, that sensitivity around the subject and the way it was approached, it’s quite different to the way a conversation would be approached in North American culture. That was a big culture shock for me, that was high impact,” he says.

Natan was in Israel for the Iranian attack on October 1, 2024, when Iran launched a barrage of ballistic missiles at various targets in Israel. He recalls having a conversation right after the assault, with someone who had sounded surprisingly relaxed. “They’re like, ‘yeah, this is a pretty intense one, but you know what, you get snowstorms, you get snow, we get rockets.’”

Natan says there was a ‘moment’ during the ambulance training that things got very real for him—when they learned “what to do if we get a mass casualty event, where the bulletproof vests are, how to handle being in the ambulance when you have a patient who needs to get to the hospital but there’s a rocket siren going at the same time. That’s training you don’t get here (in Canada). That’s an experience you don’t feel here,” he says.

Personal Development

Natan says he had a lot of opportunity for personal growth while in Israel. “I learned who I am and why I do what I do. I became far more confident in my values and beliefs.” He says that while he had already considered himself an



Natan volunteering at Save a Child’s Heart



Natan volunteering with Magen David Adom

empathetic person, he spent a lot of time further developing his empathy while volunteering at Save a Child’s Heart. “Seeing people in such tough situations yet still being able to connect and laugh and have fun with them. It really reinforced the responsibility of the friend of the caretaker in these tough situations. The kid who just got told, ‘we’re not able to treat what happened with your heart and the past month you’ve been here has been pointless’—I was a person that had to come into the room afterwards to make him smile.” Natan says he spent a lot of time on human connection and on finding ways to communicate that didn’t involve language.

He also developed a keener sense of living in the moment. “It really developed in me, that ‘slowing it down.’ A sense of just taking a breath, being in the moment. I was able to connect with the moment in a situation that needs a problem-solving attitude, where everybody wants this kid to smile. I was able to just mellow myself out to a level that I (could tell myself), ‘you’re ok, you are here to help.’” He says it didn’t really matter what he and the children were doing together. “There was nothing more important than this moment.” Later, he says this skill also supported him working on the ambulance.

Natan also came to a new understanding of his responsibility of *Hasbara*, public diplomacy of Israel. He began to realize the important role he played in these kids’ lives, not only in the moment, but also “moving forward, the relationship they have with Israel.” It was an accountability he took seriously. “The role my time volunteering in Israel had



Natan volunteering at Save a Child’s Heart

to play with all these different people I interacted with who weren’t locals (and) I was the only English-speaking person they may have come in contact with in this tough situation. I had a lot of responsibility with *Hasbara*. It was nice to reflect on how important the work I was doing was, not only in an individual sense, but on a grander scheme, the role I had on Israel as a whole, on *Am Israel*,” he says.

He recalls one ambulance call that came in the wee hours of the night shift. “Somebody who was coming to Israel to play basketball, didn’t speak a lick of Hebrew, was trying to break up a fight between two homeless people, and was injured and had their phone stolen. Didn’t know anybody, didn’t have anybody to

call, didn't have any contacts," Natan says. "We get there; I was the English speaker. It was somebody from the US who's not Jewish, whose connection to Israel is literally just for work. It was beautiful to see the light I was able to bring into this awful experience they were having, just because I said, 'yeah, I speak English,' and by being able to communicate with them."

After some time and contemplation, Natan says he also realized something about his own life. "It helped me recognize the privilege I have of living here, and the privilege it is to have Israel but not to need Israel." He can choose to be in Israel. And he can choose to leave. "Not everybody has that privilege, and Jews historically have not had that privilege," Natan says. And he is conscious of the responsibility inherent in this birthright—that promise to return. ■

Editor's Note: *Natan kept the promise—almost immediately. A few months after he was interviewed for this article, Natan returned to Israel to staff an American Birthright trip, which was ultimately cut short by the June Iranian attack. "It seems my track record with Iran while in Israel isn't the best, lol," he says.*

LOVE FINDS WAYS IN

Rabbi Kliel Rose had two opportunities in 2024 to bring care, support, and relief to people in Israel. Each visit, he also serendipitously shared personal moments with individuals affected by the war that began on October 7, 2023, and made genuine connections with people who had stories they wanted to tell. Their accounts offer fleeting snapshots into some fallout from October 7th. And many of the stories also illustrate how, just as water finds every crack, so too love finds ways in.

Sandwiches Made with Love

In March, Rabbi Kliel travelled to Israel to visit one of his own children studying there for their grade 10 year. But after a week of family time, he says he felt driven to shift his focus to helping people in need. Through an organization called Authentic Israel, he joined a group of volunteers, all people who were there, like himself, to do any job that needed doing.

One day, the group spent time sorting, counting, and folding uniforms at an army base outside Tel Aviv. On this same day, young Israeli soldiers were being called up to the Israeli army. "As we entered the base, we saw a whole line of 18-year-old kids and their parents, and their backpacks and their sleeping bags..." he says. "It was a huge line of people, and we could actually see parents saying goodbye to their children. It was quite emotional."

The team spent another day making sandwiches for soldiers, thanks to a young woman who had arranged to use the kosher kitchen of a Chabad group at Tel Aviv University. Not because, as the woman explained, the army doesn't feed its soldiers, but because "it's very different making a sandwich with love," Kliel says.

On a third day, the group worked at a food pantry whose demand had tripled since October 7th. "I struck up a conversation with a woman in her late 30s, asked how the war had impacted her," says Kliel. The woman hadn't seen



Rabbi Kliel and a Bedouin boy who asked for a selfie.

her husband—called to reserve duty because of the war—in months. They had three small children. "The woman was not in financial distress. However, she was in emotional distress," says Kliel. "Her husband's absence meant she had to find assistance and support. She was very emotional, and she said, 'that's an important message people in the diaspora need to know—this war isn't just impacting people without means, it's affecting everybody.'"

"That was powerful to hear," he says.

Delegation of Responsibility

A couple months later, at the end of May, Rabbi Kliel travelled to Israel again as one of 23 Jewish educators and clergy participating in *Mishlachot Areyvut*, a Delegation of Responsibility. Organized by The Jewish Education Project, an education organization formed to inspire and empower educators to create a vibrant Jewish future, the delegation was one of many similar envoys. For each one, participants travelled to Israel to bear witness to events of October 7th and its aftermath, and meet people living in Israel directly impacted by these events. The delegation also participated in discussions about the future of Jewish education and was introduced to educational frameworks and potential partners in Israel whose work could impact Jewish and Israel education in North America.



Kfar Aza, one of the kibbutzim attacked by Hamas during the October 7 massacre.

Delegates were asked to bring home the conversations about transformative Israel education to their own communities. And Rabbi Kliel says being a part of this delegation brought with it a "sense of responsibility to our brethren in Israel and a sense of accountability for those of us who are educators in North America to come back with reports. Be ambassadors and relay what we saw, how despite the hardship, Israel has managed to move together."

Loving Philosophy

Over the ten-day mission, the group explored various facets of life in Israel and how each one had been impacted since October 7th. They "dug deeper into issues that affect Israeli society, to equip us with understanding of the impact of October 7th in a very holistic way," he says. They had opportunities to meet with numerous people from various walks of life—"those on the right wing, politically, the left wing, centrists; an Arab intellectual involved in Arab rights in Israel; someone very critical of the Netanyahu government who had been a high-ranking general and at one point, part of the Labour Party. We met somebody from a conservative right-wing think-tank who was helping the government.... and a Bedouin man whose cousin was kidnapped and taken hostage on October 7th, and he's been an advocate for his cousin and the other hostages."



Above: Memorial at the site of the Nova Music Festival.

On Har (Mount) Herzl, where Israeli soldiers are buried, the group visited the grave of an Israeli soldier who had been killed early in the conflict. Later that day, they met the soldier's mother. He had been her youngest child, called into reserve duty when Israel moved into Gaza, and killed on the first or second day. Now, his mother was trying to spread awareness of the life philosophy by which her son had lived. "Apparently, he was this very loving person, and he had a whole ideology about how to live his life. She's been trying to spread that

message about who he was and inspire other people," he says.

The group met with a school superintendent in Tel Aviv who was finding place in schools for teens who had evacuated from the North because of the war. "How do you educate these kids? How do you integrate them into a system for kids who live in Tel Aviv?" he asks. "These kids were only there temporarily and living in hotels."

He mentions there was an entire kibbutz staying at the King Herod hotel where his delegation was also staying while in Tel Aviv. "Not only had (the hotel) accommodated all members of this kibbutz, but they turned the basement into a daycare," says Rabbi Kliel.

"It was pretty amazing to see these grassroots efforts, the way Israelis responded with such love and care," he continues. "It was incredible to watch." Not to mention the love, care, and support brought by diaspora Jews worldwide, because Israel needed them. ■

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OBLIGATION TO ISRAEL AND THE PEOPLE THERE

Melanie Richters didn't know how she'd be able help when she decided to go to Israel a few months after October 7th. But she knew she had to do something, and she wanted to be in Israel. "I felt a need to take action that was supportive of Israel following October 7th," Melanie says, "and I needed to be among my people. I guess it sounds a little trite, but that's what it came down to. There was a lot of feeling helpless and this was a concrete action I could take to give myself some feeling of agency."

Melanie participated in a 10-day Jewish Federation mission to Israel in May 2024 (co-sponsored by the Federation, the Jewish National Fund, and Bridges for Peace). During the mission, the group balanced volunteer work with touring focused on bearing-witness to the aftermath of October 7th. They visited Hostages Square, a space in front of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art where rallies and protests have occurred, families of hostages have encamped, and art installations and banners have highlighted the tragedy of the 251 hostages since October 7th, 2023. They visited Be'eri, the kibbutz in southern Israel where the Hamas-led Be'eri massacre occurred. They saw the site of the Nova Festival, the open-air music festival where Hamas murdered hundreds of individuals, wounded many more, and took numerous hostages. And they visited Sderot, the biggest Israeli city that Hamas attacked on October 7th.

The volunteer work the group did was simple, much of it simply picking vegetables, mostly kohlrabi, for a food charity and packing harvested vegetables for a farm. "Picking kohlrabi was this bonding experience and it felt productive, like we were giving back in some meaningful way," Melanie says. "I think a lot of us were trying to process the trauma of what we had experienced in the diaspora, but also the very difficult things we were learning about and witnessing in Israel. So having physical labour that we could all bond around felt really meaningful."



Photos from inside a home in Be'eri that was firebombed by Hamas

The Importance of Listening

Melanie discovered one of the most valuable ways she could contribute while in Israel was simply to listen to people who live there. While visiting friends who had moved there shortly before October 7th, one pal began "pushing me on why I was there," she says. "To him, it sort of seemed like 'trauma-tourism' (visiting locations where death, suffering, or tragedy has occurred). He was saying, 'what do you hope to gain from doing this?'"

Melanie told her friend that people seemed glad they were there; that several individuals had told them their presence felt supportive. "We were trying to do things that felt meaningful, like working the land, to have a productive effect on the experience of Israelis," she says.

"Also, take back (home) what we had experienced," a responsibility she hasn't taken lightly. "It made me feel I had an obligation to bring that back here, to share what I experienced."

The conversation with her friend was a tough one, she says. "But important, because I don't want to be a trauma tourist. If I'm going to do that, I have to take my responsibilities seriously, my obligations to Israel and the people there and what they're going through. Partly, I was just listening; it was important to hear his perspective."

Melanie visited another family friend and their relative, and "the first thing (the friend) did was to go on a massive rant about Netanyahu. Hearing the complexities of the everyday Israeli and how they feel about everything... it's not a simple story," she says. "There are all these (under)currents around the political turmoil that was happening leading up to (October 7th). And what it's meant that in some sense, the community hardest hit by the terrorist attack was the peace activist community. And what that's meant for how Israel's processing its trauma, and the relationship between the hostage families and the government," she says.

"There's a lot going on there and I think sometimes as diaspora Jews we just need to listen a little bit."

Obligation to Do Something

In Be'eri, the group met a man who shared his personal experiences of October 7th. "We were able to go into one of the buildings that had been burnt out, there was melted plastic from the ceiling, and everything was gray. He was telling us his experience of October 7th, and it was chilling and hard." That same day they also toured the Nova Festival site and Sderot, where they met someone from the International Resilience Institute of Sderot.

"That was incredibly impactful," Melanie says. "I'm still not sure how to process that



day, it was a lot. We were hearing the bombs, and we were talking to people who were both the ones experiencing the trauma and the ones trying to support them. To be physically present and see the scars on the land and the buildings, what that day had been like, was very meaningful," she says.

But she cautiously keeps her ego in check, returning to the term trauma-tourism. "You have to be careful that the experience is going to spur you to action, because if not, it's self-absorbed—you're going because it's interesting, somebody's personal trauma you're witnessing. I think there's a way to do it that's meaningful and powerful and beneficial to them, and there's a way that feels self-absorbed—my minor trauma of being in the diaspora and hearing bad news from across the world and then going and seeing it."

She refers again to the man from Be'eri. "This powerful, together guy said that it would take a really significant mental toll on him every time he told his story. For us to go and hear the story and know we're causing him further trauma by being told the story, that gives you a sense of obligation to do something about it," she says.

Embracing Her Zionism

Melanie says she has always been "pro-Israel" but before October 7th, "I never really had 'Zionist' as an identity because it wasn't necessary. Israel was always going to be. The existential crisis of October 7th really brought to me that I had to live

within my identity as a Zionist, because it needed me in a way that it hadn't needed me before," Melanie says.

"That has changed my view of Israel (from) something that by virtue of being a Jew is important, to something that I need to actively do something about. The trip reinforced that and gave me some sense of obligation to do things in a more active way."

She offers some examples, like giving money, and while social media isn't really her jam, "I have posted a little bit more." As well, she says she's tried to engage



A memorial display at hostage square

with friends on Israel-related topics, and "I'm following what's going on in Israel more, so I have a better understanding of the internal politics." She now wears some outward symbols of Judaism on her person (a yellow ribbon on her backpack and a military-style dog tag necklace in support of the hostages) as well as on her office door: "A count of the number of days since October 7th. It's a small piece of paper that I update every morning. I've been a little more upfront about some things," she says.

Melanie encourages others to make the trip to Israel. "There's so much richness there, even with all the trauma. There's a lot of beautiful things, physically beautiful and the passions of the people."

"I get the feeling some people are hesitant to go, these days, and I encourage people to go anyway," she continues. "What Israel needs right now is friends. Israel needs us to step up. One way to do that is to go and experience it. You just need to talk to people." ■

Memorial markers at the Nova Festival site, each one for someone murdered or taken hostage there



Expanding Jewish Identity

United Synagogue Youth (USY) is much more than your kids hanging out with their Jewish friends. It's an opportunity for them to expand their Jewish identity. Co-USY leaders for 2024/2025, Naomi Skladnik and Nomi Feuer paint a picture of how that growth happens through details about last year's USY programming at Congregation Etz Chayim.

Naomi says the best attended USY program was a minigolf Chanukah event that began at The Golf Dome. After mini golf "we walked to Etz Chayim, a two-minute walk, (for) a dreidel contest and *sufganiot* (jam busters) from Gunn's." She says while attendance ranged from 15 to 20 kids for most USY events, attendance at Chanukah was more than 50 kids. "We had to cap it off at a certain point. It was nice to see so many people," she says, "and the kids seemed to really enjoy it."

Naomi reasons why this program was so popular: "People wanted to celebrate for Chanukah and the activities sounded really enticing for kids. It aligned well to their interests," she says.

Nomi points to another USY program that was successful for different reasons: an April *Havdalah* evening at which local USY participants welcomed youth from Toronto's Temple Sinai Congregation to Congregation Etz Chayim. "I think the kids really got to see the value in their Jewish education and in coming together as a community," says Nomi, who will continue as USY leader for the coming year. "And I think they were surprised these kids knew the same rituals they knew." For some of the youth, it may have been the first time they connected with Jews from away. "It was greater than hanging out with kids from Winnipeg. And it was realization that they're part of something greater than just hanging out with their friends," she says.

After introductions, the *Havdalah* program began with discussion about favourite Jewish holidays. "I think when the kids from Winnipeg heard the group from Toronto explaining their love of Jewish rituals—the same rituals they take part in—there was a sense of understanding and shared identity," says Nomi, who is beginning her third year of an honours degree in psychology at University of Winnipeg and plans to do a Masters and eventually a PhD program. She adds that after this exercise,



USY Purim party

both groups felt more comfortable around one another and began further exploring their similarities and differences. "It was a really impactful program!"

Naomi, who is not continuing as USY leader this fall, says the best part of co-leading USY was "seeing all these new faces. A lot of the kids are not from Gray, they're not kids who go to Massad or BB (B'nai Brith) camp; they aren't as involved in the Jewish community. So, it's been really nice to be the source of Judaism for these kids, who normally might not have as much (Jewish) education or involvement in the community," she says. Beginning her third year of an undergraduate degree in education at University of Winnipeg, Naomi plans to complete her teacher certification afterwards and aspires to teach at Gray Academy down the road.

Expand your children's Jewish identity; connect them with youth from the larger Jewish community. Register them for 2025-26 USY programming (<https://www.congregationetzchayim.ca/youth>)! ■



Havdalah with Toronto's Temple Sinai Congregation (Naomi holding candle; Nomi next to her, at centre)

It was realization that they're part of something greater than just hanging out with their friends.



Chanukah minigolf at The Golf Dome

Turning Toward Each Other

Singing in the Round

by Cantor Tracy Kasner

There is a little oasis that we create every Friday afternoon. A group of people sits together in a circle, at Congregation Etz Chayim, and everything changes; the entire feeling in the room transforms, and we sing: singing in the round.

Usually, my eyes are closed for most of our time together, but on one occasion I decided to peek, to see a little of the scene I was feeling. I noticed many congregants who looked deep in the same sense of serenity I was experiencing.

Someone at *shul* told me once they don't come to singing in the round because they "can't sing." I told them that singing in the round has nothing to do with how any one voice sounds; it's about how the sounds together make us feel. Some of us sit in silence listening to the others sing. All very much part of what makes this congregational singing so blessed.

Recently, I read a book called *The Amen Effect* and in it, I learned that the feeling I describe as a blessing may be a phenomenon described by the author, Rabbi Sharon Braus: "We now know that walking together and singing together, seeing and being with each other—all of these things enhance emotional health and deepen our sense of connectedness. They alter the physical and psychological landscape of the group and the people in it."

Singing in the round accomplishes this by turning our vantage point toward each other. We are near the ark and we point toward it when we need to. But mostly we point toward the most important thing in the room: each other.

We hope that as our circle grows and comfort with the melodies expands, more of our congregation will participate and experience the oasis of singing in circles. Come to sit or to sing. Just come: share this special time together as we bring in Shabbat. ■



Singing in the round has nothing to do with how any one voice sounds; it's about how the sounds together make us feel

Continued Connections to Congregation and Community



Linda at Matheson

They're amazing
fathers and
husbands and
I'm very proud
of them and
proud of myself
for raising them.

Linda Waldman's connections with Congregation Etz Chayim long precede her employment here. One of the synagogue's longest-standing employees, she began working for the Rosh Pina in 1997. "When I walked through the synagogue on Matheson, I often felt like the walls talked to me," Linda says. "I've had connection to that building and Etz Chayim since they opened their doors."

Linda grew up on McAdam, very close to Etz Chayim's former home on Matheson. "As a little girl, I watched the building being built," she says. Even so, her ties to the building and congregation run deeper. "My grandfather was one of the founding members of the synagogue," she says. Her entire family were members of Rosh Pina: grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts. Her mother was active in the Women's Sisterhood. And the result was that Linda spent a lot of time inside the synagogue walls. "I went to synagogue all the time," she says. Because they lived so close, by age eight or nine, "sometimes I would go myself, go outside and across the lot," she says, adding, "things were different then." She also attended junior congregation at *shul*, as a girl, noting it, too, was different, then: "We would do an actual service, but we weren't in the main sanctuary, we would go downstairs." Linda celebrated her own Bat Mitzvah at Rosh Pina; and from age 12 through 13, she was attending the Bar or Bat Mitzvah of a friend or classmate there nearly every weekend. "Then, Saturday night, somebody was having a Bar or Bat Mitzvah party at the synagogue."

At 20, Linda got married at Rosh Pina. All three of her children had their B'nai Mitzvah there. And more recently, three grandchildren also had B'nai Mitzvah at Etz Chayim. "The synagogue was a very important part of my life and my social life. That's why I say the walls, when I walked through that synagogue on Matheson, talked to me. I'd think about the Bar and Bat Mitzvah parties and the weddings I went to there. I remember all those things so vividly," she says. "That building has a very special place in my heart and I consider myself very lucky to work here for all these years, and put my two cents into what happens here."

Voice at the Other End

Linda is part of Etz Chayim's administrative team and often the person to answer the phone

when members call looking for information (like where family members are buried in one of the three Jewish cemeteries, or historical marital records). People may also be calling to register for an event, course, or program or to make a donation in someone's name (in which case Linda would also send a donation card from the giver to the recipient or benefactor).

Linda manages the membership database and a calendar for functions and events hosted at Etz Chayim: she books B'nai Mitzvah, weddings, meetings, and other events and is also the go-to person when members are purchasing their high holiday seats.

She says many Etz Chayim members have known her for all 28 years she's worked at the synagogue. And many call asking to speak specifically to her, frequently for more personal reasons. "If they're concerned about something or having health issues," she says, adding, "many phone just to say hello and have somebody to talk to. I love that."

When asked, Linda reasons why people call her specifically: "I have good people skills; I get along with people and I can sympathize with them at difficult times. I'm a good listener," she says.

And she takes this role very seriously. "It's important for our congregants to know we're available to them and we'll help them, whatever time of day." This has become a bit harder because she works fewer hours than she used to. "I'm working part time, now, but I still feel I need to be connected to what's going on. If somebody has a question or needs information, I don't want them to wait for three days. So, I'm connected to my phone even when I'm not working," she says.

Being that go-to contact person for so many members comes with another challenging part. "Because I've established so many friendships over the years with members, when we lose them, that's very difficult. But this is what you deal with when you work in a synagogue, especially one that manages three cemeteries," she says. She's often the first person to receive the call that someone has died and has to be the bearer of bad news to work colleagues and the rest of the community. "That's the most difficult part of this job," she says.

Linda has no plans to retire and says since her work week was reduced to part time, it's easier to continue working. When the



Linda, with one of a series of historical marital record books. Since the 1920s, every marriage at any one of Etz Chayim's three legacy synagogues has been recorded in one of the books.

synagogue moved south, that made it even easier. "So, as long as my health remains and they still want me, I will stay," she says.

Connected to the Jewish Community

Before she began working at Etz Chayim, Linda worked at the YMHA for 20 years; first, in the office, later, as co-youth director. For the latter, she helped run after-school programming for youth as well as Saturday and holiday programming. From 1986 through 1989 Linda was Folklorama coordinator for the Israel pavilion during the summer months. Working with a committee, she managed the budget, volunteers, entertainment, food, passport sales—everything needed for smooth operation of the pavilion. "I learned a lot," she says. "It was the hardest job I ever did."

Having worked at the YMHA for two decades, Linda had already built strong connections within the Jewish community when she started working at the *shul*. "Many of those people I knew from the Y, I've continued to have a relationship with them here at the synagogue. Some of the regulars that used to come (to the Y) at seven in the morning to work out are members here," she says. "Some were five and six years old when I worked there; we're now planning their kids' B'nai Mitzvah."

"That's an incredible thing I've been able to experience," she says.

Having been immersed in synagogue life and Judaism from a very young age and having worked her entire career within the

Jewish community, Linda feels very tied to the community around her. "I've always had this connection to the Jewish community that's very strong," she says.

Her Pride and Joy

Ask Linda what she's most proud of and she doesn't hesitate: "My kids." She has three sons: Jeffrey, a Winnipeg psychiatrist with three children of his own, Danny, a Winnipeg accountant with four children, and Joey (Joe), a Calgary Veterinarian with two children. "They're terrific kids. They've accomplished a lot. They're amazing fathers and husbands and I'm very proud of them and proud of myself for raising them," says Linda.

Her pride was hard earned: growing up, Linda's sons certainly kept her on her toes. "Raising three boys was interesting. It's different than girls; now that I have granddaughters, I see the difference. They were very physical in their relationship with each other and very active, kept me busy all the time. You couldn't sit down and read a book or do arts and crafts. It was a very busy, active life between hockey and football and soccer, all these things we were running to," she says.

Linda is blessed with nine grandchildren, ranging in age from 24 to 12: Josh, Lauren, Samantha, Noah, Matthew, Elizabeth, Anna, Lily, and Saul. And she has a great relationship with each one, just as she does with every son and daughter-in-law. "They're so grown up now and I don't see them the same way I did when they were little, but they'll call and say, 'Grandma,

Dad's going out for dinner tonight or he's going out of town. Can we come for dinner?' I love that they feel they can call me, and we have that kind of relationship." When her grandkids were small, Linda enjoyed sleepovers and time with them at Winnipeg Beach. And with her granddaughters, there were new delights—Linda got to experience activities in which her sons had no interest, growing up.

"The girls loved to go shopping, so that was always fun, and I would buy them whatever they wanted, because my boys were never interested in shopping with me," she laughs. As well, two of her granddaughters are very artistic and as young girls, loved doing arts and crafts with their Grandma, like pottery and Israeli-sand making (layering coloured salt or sugar in a bottle).

Jewish Identity

Linda values her Jewish identity tremendously. "I've always felt it important that I'm Jewish and I've always connected with my Judaism. It's always been important for me to be a member of the synagogue, for my kids to get a Jewish education. And it's always been important for me to support the synagogue, even before I worked here."

While Linda doesn't consider herself a religious Jew, spirituality is quite another thing. "I always feel like there's some greater spirit watching over me. For the most part, I've been pretty lucky in my life. I've dealt with some terrible tragedies and loss, but there's something I prayed to when going through a difficult time. Just my inner prayer," she says.

As well, she says she values the Jewish life ethic she has incorporated into her own life, "to take care of other people when they need, to always be available to help somebody." Indeed, from the microcosm of her family to the macrocosm of her community, Linda has embraced this philosophy. ■



Linda with grandchildren Samantha, Lily, and Saul, daughter-in-law Amy, and AJ the dog.

People of The Book And Our Devotion to Studying Torah



Rabbi Kliel Rose

Jews have been called many things. “People of the book,” or “*Am HaSefer*,” is one moniker we actually embrace, used throughout history by Jews and non-Jews alike to describe our people. It has Arabic origins: *Ahl Al-Kitab* (People of the Book, in Arabic) is mentioned in the Koran to describe not only Jews but also Christians, Zoroastrians (an ancient Persian religion) and the Sabians (a primitive religious sect).

We accept the description as part of our identity because Judaism is a text-centered faith, “inextricably bound to the sacred texts of Judaism,” says Menachem Posner in “[10 Sacred Texts of Judaism](#).” We have a deep and everlasting connection to the Torah, and studying Torah is understood as the most important pursuit within our faith.

“The centrality of the text takes the place of theological consistency,” says Moshe Halbertal in *People of the Book – Canon, Meaning, and Authority*.¹ “Jews have had diverse and sometimes opposing ideas about G-d... These conceptions have little in common and are specifically Jewish only insofar as each is a genuine interpretation of Jewish canonical texts.”

Halbertal says that this universal text—the Torah—establishes the boundaries of the community and makes it cohesive. “The shared text may be a source of conflicting beliefs and practices, but the community recognizes that it alone must be used to justify them all.”

Highest Praise of G-d

All Jews are bound by an obligation to study Torah daily. “Even if your occupation isn’t rabbi or some other Jewish profession, there’s still obligation to make time throughout the day to study Torah,” says Rabbi Kliel Rose.

“The study of Torah, together, is considered the highest praise of G-d,” he continues. “If G-d is Creator of the world

and the Torah, then honouring G-d’s wisdom, the Torah, is a way to pay tribute to G-d.”

The commandment to study Torah is found within it. In Deuteronomy (*Devarim*), when Moses receives the Ten Commandments and Torah from G-d on Mount Sinai, he says, to the children of Israel:

This is the instruction—the laws and rules—that your G-d has commanded [me] to impart to you, to be observed in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you, your children, and your children’s children may revere your G-d and follow, as long as you live, all the divine laws and commandments that I enjoin upon you ... Take to heart these instructions... Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up (Deuteronomy 6:1-6:7).

Not only are we instructed to study Torah daily and teach it to our children, we must do it publicly. “In the case of the Torah, making it public knowledge is emphasized as an obligation in the text itself; the laws are supposed to be read in a public ceremony and made known to the community at large,” Halbertal says. In Deuteronomy, Moses instructs the people to undertake public reading of the Torah:

And Moses instructed them:
Every seventh year... at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before your G-d in the place that [G-d] will choose, you shall read this Teaching aloud in the presence of all Israel. Gather the people—men women, children, and the strangers in your communities—that they may hear and so learn to revere your G-d and to observe faithfully every word of this Teaching (31:10).

Torah Study Builds Community

Thus, throughout the world Jews read, alone and publicly, the same weekly Torah portion, *parashah*, which also becomes the focus of deeper, more analytical Torah study throughout the week. So, we congregate not only to read Torah but also to dive more deeply into its wisdom and teachings. “The Torah thus laid the foundations for mass education in Judaism,” Halbertal states—an idea Jews like to lay claim to.

At the same time, the Torah has become the nucleus of our religious experience. “The text reports sacred events like the Exodus, in which G-d revealed himself in history,” says, Halbertal, adding, “the very reading of the text becomes a religious drama in and of itself. G-d is present in the text and studying it is thus tantamount to meeting G-d; it is a moment of great religious intimacy. The Torah becomes a portable Temple, the sacred territory of scholars.”

When groups of people gather to study Torah, it strengthens and builds Jewish community, because it “enables people to

have a dialogical relationship,” says Rabbi Kliel, “where each individual deepens their personal understanding of Torah and understanding of the world.”

“It also creates that relationship with another human. I once heard when two people sit as study partners, as a *chavruta*, you find the presence of the Divine between them,” he adds.

Dialogue generates opportunity for growth, both individually and communally. “How else does one understand anything if they don’t engage in conversation with another?” he asks. “If we don’t get to appreciate somebody else’s insights, we think we have all the knowledge and wisdom ourselves. It’s a step out of our own egocentrism.”

Torah Study at Etz Chayim

Rabbi Kliel will be leading two Torah study groups for the Etz Chayim community this fall. Torah on Tap, geared to younger Jewish adults (age 18 to 25), meets monthly on a Wednesday at the Trans Canada Brewing Company on

Kenaston. Shabbat *Lishmah* happens monthly on Shabbat, immediately following services at Etz Chayim, and focuses on the coming week’s Torah reading, *Parshat haShavua*.

Rabbi Kliel invites everyone to try a study group, pointing out that Torah study benefits our lives when we delve into the stories through a contemporary lens. “In Jewish professional circles, we frequently ask, ‘How can we make Torah relevant?’” he says. “I strive to make this accessible to people by considering not only what happened in the past, during the time the Torah or Talmud was written, but to apply the themes and concepts to my life and their lives in the present.” He says we can ask ourselves, how can I apply this story or concept, translate it in a way that’s relevant or useful for my life?

Consider the story of Hagar, which we read at Rosh Hashanah (Gen. 16:1-16; 21:8-21). Hagar is an Egyptian slave who belongs to Sarah, Abraham’s wife. Sarah cannot conceive and gives Hagar to Abraham as another wife, to bear his children. But Sarah treats Hagar

The study of Torah, together, is considered the highest praise of G-d.



Samuel Hirszenberg, “Talmudic School,” 1895-1908

¹*People of the Book – Canon, Meaning, and Authority*, by Moshe Halbertal, Harvard University Press, 1997

harshly and the servant escapes into the wilderness. An angel finds Hagar, encouraging her to return home and promising her many descendants through a son (Ishmael).

Ancient Stories, Timeless Lessons

This story has significance for modern Jews for two reasons, says Kliel. “Firstly, it addresses social justice and compassion. The narrative sheds light on issues of power, vulnerability, and marginalization. Hagar serves as a call to action for Jews to empathize with the rights and experiences of the marginalized, to act with compassion and justice,” he says.

Secondly, the story offers valuable insights into family dynamics and conflict resolution. “The intricate relationships between Hagar, Sarah, Abraham, and their children mirror challenges faced by many contemporary families. Modern Jews can learn from the narratives about the importance of open communication, mutual understanding, and reconciliation within families and communities,” he says.

Ultimately, Hagar’s story offers timeless lessons on resilience, justice, and compassion, making it highly relevant to contemporary Jewish life and thought, he says. To fully benefit from the wisdom in the story, though, we must do more than read it by rote. We must spend time with the words, dissect them, explore their symbolism, comparisons, and contemporary interpretations with others, to apply the lessons to our modern lives. In this way, we might realize all the blessings and gifts the Torah has to offer. ■



Peter Paul Rubens, “Hagar Leaves the House of Abraham,” 1577-1640

It doesn’t matter what your Shabbat looks like, if it’s meaningful, we should do Havdalah together every week.



Havdalah Belongs to All of Us

Havdalah, which means *separation* or *distinction*, is a brief ceremony at the end of Shabbat when we bid farewell to the Sabbath. If we can see three stars in the evening sky, we may begin *Havdalah* by lighting a three-wicked, braided candle, pouring a glass of wine, and bringing out the spice box, *besamin*. We say the *Havdalah* blessings, which focus on distinctions like holy and ordinary; light and darkness. Then we drink the wine and smell the spices to ease the transition to the regular weekdays, awakening our senses in preparation for the work week.

Leslie Singer and Sheppy Coodin celebrate *Havdalah* together most Saturday evenings. “At the end of Shabbat, Sheppy says, *Baruch hamavdil bein kodesh lechol*, which means blessed is the difference between holy and regular,” Leslie explains. “Once he says those words, Shabbat is over.”

Leslie is a non-observant Jew, Sheppy is observant, and their household is *shomer Shabbat*. They make this work, but Leslie says when they first started dating, she didn’t feel she fully “deserved” to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *Havdalah* because her Shabbat observance wasn’t as strict.

“Sheppy told me *Havdalah* belongs to all of us, regardless of our observance. It doesn’t matter what your Shabbat looks like, if it’s meaningful, we should do (*Havdalah*) together every week,” he’d said.

So, they do. “We take turns leading. We have a couple candles that we reuse, and most often we use grape juice.” While they have a spice box, sometimes they just grab nutmeg or cinnamon from the cupboard, she says. “It’s very casual.” But she treasures their shared rituals.

“When we first started dating, it was one of the first ceremonies we did together,” Leslie explains. After that, even when the couple wasn’t yet living together, they almost always got together to do *Havdalah*. “We made a point of it—he came to my apartment, or I went to his house, and we did the service together. So, for me it’s very special.” ■

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I love that he's getting exposure to Hebrew and Judaism through songs and blessings.

Lily (pink skirt); Cantor Tracy (back)

Introducing Little Jews to Shabbat

Whether it's singing "Three Blind Mice," the ABCs, or the Shabbat blessings, there's no 'too early' with your child's education. Consider registering your newborn to 15-month-old for Baby Mitzvah Minds at Congregation Etz Chayim this fall. Designed for the youngest Jews with a parent or caregiver, this interactive morning led by Cantor Tracy Kasner introduces children to Shabbat through songs, stories, games, and crafts.

"Cantor Tracy leads a Shabbat circle where we sing songs, light the Shabbat candles, and say the blessings over *challah* and wine," explains Dena Stitz, who participated in Baby Mitzvah Minds earlier this year with her son, Benjamin. After circle time, the babies could play with toys and books during an informal play group.

Dena says she was happy Benjamin was receiving the beginnings of a Jewish education through the program. "I love that he's getting exposure to Hebrew and Judaism through songs and blessings. He hears these

Dena and Benjamin

at our family Shabbat but the more exposure the better!" she says. "Baby Mitzvah Minds is a great Jewish environment for him."

Another benefit was the familiarity Benjamin was gaining inside the *shul* because of the program. "It's good for him to be in the synagogue. As he grows up, it will be great for him to be comfortable in the synagogue."

Dena says Benjamin had a good time participating in the program. "He's always happy to crawl around and interact with the toys and other babies," she says. "He loves circle time and listening to the songs we sing. And he loves watching and being with other kids."

Tiffany Baird also participated in Baby Mitzvah Minds earlier this year with her daughter, Lily, and was equally positive about it. "Lily enjoys all the songs and the 'prepping' for Shabbat by 'making' chicken soup and singing the blessings," she says. "It makes it a fun and educational outing for us. It is also a way to expose Lily to Judaism, as my husband is not Jewish."

And there's something in it for the parent or caregiver, too. Tiffany says she enjoyed "reconnecting with other moms with babies the same age as Lily." Dena agrees. "It's a great opportunity for me to spend time with other parents with babies around the same age. I enjoy the opportunity to connect and chat with them," she says. ■

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MAZEL TOVS

Freda and Terry Robinson on the birth of grandson **Mason Sydney**
Jordana Etkin for receiving the *Harry Silverberg Young Leader of Distinction Award*
Steven London for receiving the *BB Camp Shem Tov award*
Wendy Daien for receiving the *Gwen Secter Creative Living Centre Shem Tov Award*
Bert Schaffer for receiving the *Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada Shem Tov Award*
Jessica Cogan on her position as *Vice chair of the Jewish Federation of Winnipeg's Board of Directors*
Karen Appel and Joseph Kalturnyk on **Emelia's Bat Mitzvah** on March 14
Courtney and Jonathan Feldman on **Louis's Bar Mitzvah** on May 10
Elissa Abrams and Alex Singer on the **B'nai Mitzvah of Benjamin and Claudia** on June 7
Lyla and Shane Solomon on **Ethan's Bar Mitzvah** on June 21
Laura and Josh Chisick on **Lev's Bar Mitzvah** on June 26
Rachel Brown and Aaron Catellier on **Coco's Bat Mitzvah** on September 6
Dawn and Ron Rittberg on the birth of their grandson **Remy**
Linda and Ed Calnitsky on the birth of their granddaughter **Toni**
Merrill and Shayna Shulman on the birth of their grandson **Adam**
Mia Elfenbaum and Marshall Stitz on the marriage of their daughter **Liat Stitz** to **Drew McGillawee**
Jakee Werbuk and Peter McGillawee on the marriage of their son **Drew McGillawee** to **Liat Stitz**
Gina and Bernie Chodirker on the birth of their grandson **Theo Nate**

SPECIAL ANNIVERSARIES

APRIL
Brenda and Jordan Hochman (20)
Bruna and Renato Kiarely (10)

MAY
Beverley and Morley Jacobs (60)
Mia Elfenbaum and Marshall Stitz (35)
Nola and Matthew Lazar (35)
Henriette Ivanans-McIntyre and Kevin McIntyre (30)

JUNE
Shaaron and Hymie Weinstein (60)
Colette and Darryl Segal (55)

JULY
Sherrill and David Levene (55)
Janet and Phil Simon (50)

AUGUST
Mickey and Roslyn Rosenberg (60)
Sharna and Ivor Berman (55)
Freda and Terry Robinson (50)
Sharon and Stan Zynoberg (50)
Debby and Brian Hirsch (45)
Janis and Ron Silver (45)
Shawna and Allan Cogan (30)
Kae Sasaki and Marc Schaeffer (25)

SEPTEMBER
Elaine and Herb Grosney (60)
Leslee and Allan Abosh (55)
Debra and Lloyd Baker (35)
Sheryl Singer and Kevin Segall (25)
Carolyn Dyan and John Hample (5)

OCTOBER
Susan and Arnold Permut (50)
Glory and Robert Pudavick (50)
Courtney and Jonathan Feldman (15)

SPECIAL BIRTHDAYS

MARCH
Sidney Chapnick, Allan Cogan, Michele Hoch-Faintuch, Gene Schacter, Darryl Segal, Karen Yamron Shpeller, Frank Weinfeld

APRIL
Val Benevet, Donna Cohen, Howard Keller, Kae Sasaki, Carol Tolchinsky, Neil Wildenmann

JUNE
Polina Anang, Sydney Cohen, Elaine Hochman, Wes Palatnick, Juan Schwersensky, Phil Simon, Robert Tallman, Lynne Trachtenberg

JULY
Sid Hochman, Sharon Graham

AUGUST
Carlos Benesdra, Aubrey Himelstein, Marvin Shane, Stephen Yuffe

SEPTEMBER

Norman Yusim

OCTOBER

David Lerner, Sherrie Lipson, Roslind Olin, Judy Schnoor

IN MEMORIAM

Beverley Jesierski
Sheldon Pinx
Margaret Kasner
Marilynne Cass
Kenneth Tennenhouse
Bill Mahon
Carol Litman
Mickey Hoch
Irene Marantz
Louis Colish
Herb Singer
Rebecca Dobbs
Morley Jacobs

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