

Old Walls, New Stories RABBI FELICIA L. SOL

With the extraordinary view of the Old City as a backdrop, we witnessed the ritual of the rabbinic ordination of an Israeli-born, of Iraqi descent, secular Jewish woman.”

It's a sunny day in Jerusalem. Hundreds of people gather in the auditorium of Hebrew Union College, a room that features floor-to-ceiling windows facing the old city. We, a delegation of 22, were there for the ordination of Chen Ben Or Tsfonti, a former Marshall T. Meyer Fellow, a founder of Hamidrasha, and a leader of Nigun Halev in the Jezreel Valley. With the extraordinary view of the Old City as a backdrop, we witnessed the ritual of the rabbinic ordination of an Israeli-born, of Iraqi descent, secular Jewish woman.

The speaker was Rabbi Michael Melchior. Rabbi Melchior noted that the Book of Bereshit is also called Sefer HaYashar, the Book of the Upright. He asked why this would be, given the complexity of its stories and the not-particularly-upright behaviors of many of our ancestors. The book is a struggle between “insiders” and “outsiders,” a confrontation with “the other.” He said the ultimate meaning of the book of Bereshit is whether we can evolve to stop perceiving inside and outside, a place where there's no “other.” When we can get there we will be yashar—upright.

At The Family Hanukkah Zimriyah



PHOTO: ELANA AYALON

See pages 12-13 for more photos of recent Youth & Family events.

Two days earlier, we davened Shaḥarit at the Kotel with the Women of the Wall (WOW) on the morning of Rosh Hodesh Kislev. We were in the women's section without any disturbances, and the WOW board decided to read Torah there too.

In 1994, Israel's Supreme Court rendered three decisions following WOW's petitions. The first decision tried to banish the prayer group to rubble-strewn Arab areas of Jerusalem. WOW returned to court in 2000 and rejoiced over a unanimous decision allowing prayer at the wall for 11 hours a year (one hour each Rosh Hodesh). The state immediately appealed. In 2002, WOW faced nine judges. Four were in their favor, four opposed; the fifth, deciding vote was cast by the great liberal and humanitarian, Chief Justice Aharon Barak. The government established a women's prayer site at Robinson's Arch.

So there we stood, with WOW members, pushing boundaries and reading Torah at the Kotel. Eventually men, and policemen, appeared, saying we needed to go. We rolled up the Torah and headed toward Robinson's Arch. One policeman began arguing with Nofrat Frenkel, a medical student, and Conservative Jew, from Be'er Sheva. The policeman was angry with her

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SOCIAL ACTION/SOCIAL JUSTICE

Become a "Green" Cyclist with the BJ Revolutionaries

you may have heard that New York is becoming a more bike-friendly city. Over the past several years, hundreds of miles of new bike paths have been created around the five boroughs, allowing for safer riding.

Members of the BJ community have played a role in advocating for new bike lanes.

This year, BJ will host several BJ-only training rides, starting in the late spring. This is a great opportunity to meet other BJ members while getting in shape. Alumni of past Hazon rides rave about the experience: no matter what level cyclist you were when you started, Hazon allows you to challenge yourself in a supportive atmosphere. Don't know how to change a flat? Don't worry:

We want to encourage everyone to ride with us this spring and summer. We're pretty sure you'll have a terrific time. Getting out even just once makes you a more confident and secure rider, a skill that always comes in handy. We hope you'll have so much fun that you will consider joining us as a member of the BJ Revolutionaries team on the ride over Labor Day. But there's plenty of time to think about that. As spring approaches, keep your eyes open for information in the KJ and on the BJ website about our BJ training rides. Hope to see you out there!



PHOTO: TAPANI TALO

Let's take advantage of this new infrastructure and the safer riding opportunities it provides.

For more than six years, the BJ Revolutionaries Team has been riding in the Hazon New York Jewish Environmental Bike Ride—the two-day Labor Day weekend fundraising event; we also train for it throughout the summer on weekly rides. Hazon provides a warm, fun, and supportive atmosphere for all levels of bikers, from folks who are just starting out to experienced century riders.

your ride leaders will help you. We also brief you on how to ride safely on city streets, though most of our rides take advantage of bike paths and less-travelled roads. Each ride also includes time to socialize over rest breaks (and occasionally over post-ride beers).

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The 2009 BJ Revolutionaries Team: Andrea Newman, Craig Rosenberg, Mark Lipsy, Rob Daley, Gil Kulick, Jenny Eisenberg, David Frankel, Boaz Dolny Lipsy, Ari Schlesinger, Lisa Schlesinger, Belinda Lasky, Rachel Alexander, Abby Volin, David Fitterman, and Carol Silberfeld.

For more information contact: Mark Lipsy at reMark1@gmail.com or x259. ■

— **Jenny Eisenberg**

Old Walls, New Stories

RABBI FELICIA L. SOL *continued from page 1*

belligerence. He shoved her, with the Torah in her arms, toward the police station. We followed. She was released a little over an hour later.

Women of the Wall push boundaries to assert that all Jews, no matter what gender, should have the same rights.

We also met with Israeli HUC rabbinical students. Many of them leave Israel to find a meaningful Judaism, whether to the United States or elsewhere. They desire a non-imported Judaism (although they were excited to meet us because they had heard a lot about BJ), but a home-grown Judaism that honors their story and provides an alternative voice to Israeli orthodoxy that has created only one way of Jewishness. This story was echoed in a panel of leaders of liberal emerging communities in Jerusalem, who are trying to forge a Judaism that meets people's spiritual needs and creates a new openness.

We also met with Piyyut's Yair Harel, whose organization created a website of liturgical poems and holds music events to renew these piyyutim for Israelis and the Diaspora.

Old walls, new stories.

I had the privilege of accompanying Chen to the bima and wrapping her in her tallit. She received a blessing and is now called Rabbi. She found a path that involved much struggling as she tries to lead a community that has never had a rabbi and is not sure it needs one, given that the main understanding of rabbi is an Orthodox male. But for that moment under the tallit, with the hands of HUC President Rabbi David Ellenson on her shoulders, with the old city behind her, all was yashar in this book of her life and for all of us there. The blessings of that moment carried us North where we spent the weekend with Nigun Halev, Chen's community. We celebrated, sang, danced, prayed, ate, and read the Torah that BJ had given to Nigun Halev.

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Our delegation met many people striving to be yehudim yesharim, upright Jews, searching for a spirituality that meets their longings and asks them to be better human beings, a Judaism that is inspiring, relevant. More Israelis are on this path than ever; BJ has been part of the inspiration for this, which is humbling yet exciting.

Here in New York City, there are many definitions of love and support for Israel. Twenty-two people crossed an ocean to celebrate Chen's ordination and feel at home at Nigun Halev. We, Hamidrasha and BJ, have been connected for over 15 years. This is one profound definition of love and support. ■



PHOTOS: BELINDA LASKY



Clockwise, from above: the BJ delegation on the boardwalk in Tel Aviv; with Chen Ben Or Tsfoni (second from left); Chen's ordination.

COMMUNITY

Ari's Bar Mitzvah Journey

Two years ago, during the bar mitzvah of our eldest son, Max, my husband Steven turned to me and said, "We have to do this for Ari in two years." I attributed his sentiment to "Bar Mitzvah Euphoria." After all, our son Ari has autism and did not speak until age 7. Ari finds speaking *English* to be a great challenge, let alone Hebrew.

And yet on November 14, 2009, Ari became a bar mitzvah at BJ. In the words of someone who was there, "Saturday night was an extraordinarily moving experience. I keep thinking about it."

Marcelo has asked me to share with you our incredible journey as we prepared our son, and BJ, for an autism-friendly bar mitzvah.

Once Steven convinced me that he was serious, we met with Marcelo to see if BJ would work with us. Marcelo was encouraging, although he, like most of us, did not at first appreciate the challenges involved with dealing with a person with autism. We all agreed that our goal was to create a meaningful ceremony that Ari could understand and in which he could participate. Marcelo suggested that we build the service around what Ari could do while simultaneously exploring what BJ was willing to do.

Ari learns visually. Because of this, we knew it would be important to develop specialized learning materials. We began by bringing Ari to services to see what interested him. After many months, we observed that, like many of us, Ari connected to the music of BJ. With music as an entry point, we started developing visually based materials that would enable Ari's teachers to provide the framework to teach him the music, ceremonies, and rituals of Shabbat.

It took eight people and many months to figure out the music, prayers, and order of service. Many times along the way, we asked

each other whether this was all worth the time and effort. As Marcelo said at one of our seemingly countless meetings, "This is a lot of work."

In fact, it was too much work for just one bar mitzvah. We choose to see this as a possible jumping-off point for other bar mitzvahs for children like Ari. While each child is different, we hope Ari's experience can be an example of what is possible. We were fortunate to have the resources in place to help us figure out how to make it work. In an effort to make it easier for others, we have donated to BJ all of the materials we used for Ari's preparation. Ari's bar mitzvah was meaningful not only



PHOTO: TERI BLOOM

to us; it seemed to touch many people. We have been surprised by the emotional outpouring we have received. Many people professed to identify with Ari's challenges, his triumphs, and our family's experience.

"I would not trade that hour for anything. It took our breath away from the beginning and just got more amazing and amazing as it went on. One of the most beautiful things I've ever seen was Ari's smile as the rabbi clapped and sang Siman Tov at the end. I can't imagine a more loving inspiring event ever taking place in that building."

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"I was deeply touched by your family devotion and your unwavering faith in Ari. ...it renewed my own faith in my child and made me even feel stronger that as we create these communities for our kids, we are making a difference for everyone."

"It was an exquisite service, a life lesson in courage...The support around Ari was a team effort...of teachers, helpers, loving family and friends....so much poured through that young

man and through the atmosphere of the service. His writings, his Hebrew phrases, spoken with so much force and attempted clarity. His playing the piano so beautifully, his focus and involvement ... it was remarkable."

We are grateful to BJ for creating this wonderful experience. However, we cannot help but wish it had been even richer. We would have liked Ari

to have felt the support and camaraderie of his peers. We wish BJ could have found ways to connect our son with other children, because becoming a bar mitzvah is also about becoming part of a Jewish community. There is a great deal we must change so that those with profound challenges can be truly part of our community. Let us as a congregation really embrace those who are different and find ways to connect them with one another and with all of us. ■

— Ilene Lanier

Tobi Kahn's "Sacred Spaces for the 21st Century" Exhibit

On a gray day in early November, about 60 people (many of them BJ members) gathered in one of the large galleries on the second floor of the Museum of Biblical Art to explore, along with artist Tobi Kahn, his solo exhibition, "Tobi Kahn: Sacred Spaces of the 21st Century." The show contains 30 recent paintings, sculptures, and ceremonial objects, many of them made with acrylic paint on wood.

Roly set the show in context, explaining how the element of time is most important in Judaism, but adding that space is also essential."

A large photo and replicas of individual ceremonial ritual objects gave clues to his artistic approach toward his most recent task: creating a visually cohesive environment for Congregation Emanu-El B'ne Jeshurun, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The sanctuary's interior consists of eight wall-scale abstract paintings; the sanctuary's ceremonial art includes the eternal light, memorial lights, menorah, tzedakah box, mezuzah, and doors to the ark. Kahn's abstract designs resonate with symbolism, fusing art and religion. They are also extremely original.

At first, most of us sat in the middle of the gallery on small canvas folding seats, but when Kahn invited us to come closer to the art pieces, the experience turned into a sixties-style "happening" in which we all participated and interacted with the works. The pieces seemed to surround and envelop



PHOTO: ©TOBI KAHN STUDIO

us, engaging all our senses. Regarding them became a journey, weaving in and out of the various spaces within the gallery. It reminded me of the theatrical events of the Middle Ages, where the audience would move from place to place (known as "mansions" or "stations") within a church to see the next scene of a religious drama. In addition to the artist's explanations, we also had the great pleasure of our own Rabbi Roly Matalon introducing Tobi Kahn and talking with him about the exhibit. Roly set the show in context, explaining how the element of time is most important in Judaism, but adding that space is also essential. What is sacred space? When does space become sacred? These became focal questions. As Roly told me afterward, "It was an exquisite morning, a great gift to be exposed to Tobi's heart and mind, while being surrounded by his beautiful and impressive art."

Surrounded by the extraordinary artwork, and also by the appreciative people, I found myself responding to all the pieces. They are powerful ritual objects that shine a light on the creative and imaginative talent who designed and brought them to life. When Tobi spoke about his work, he used his whole being! One could feel his energy and his passion flowing through his voice and his words.

Among the many pieces, two specific objects caught my attention. The first represents the four thronelike chairs created for mothers and grandmothers to sit on for the naming ceremony of a daughter. These chairs evoke the four Biblical matriarchs. Tobi explained his choice of colors and designs, including sacred spaces represented within the design, and helped us understand these decisions drawn from the religion and its traditions and symbolism. The piece reconceptualizes our rituals and brings them into the 21st century!



PHOTO: SOFIA HUBSCHER

Tobi Kahn discusses his sculpture "Saphyr-Omer Counter."

The second piece that I loved looked like a huge variation of a one-sided Rubik's Cube or an abacus with 49 protruding geometric wooden blocks, each unique in shape. It was so tactile that I wanted to reach up and turn them. Tobi said this wooden "wall hanging" was to be used for counting the Omer. (It turns out Tobi makes actual toys, too.) As described by the museum brochure on the show, "This imposing sculpture ... is designed to mark the transition of the Jewish people from a condition of slavery to one of freedom." Its combination of qualities vividly illustrates that Kahn has a playful heart as well as a creative and educated mind.

When I asked BJ member Judy Geller-Marlowe what she felt about this exhibit, she said, "Tobi Kahn's ritual objects have inherent beauty in their design, form, and structure. However, coupled with his textual references and explanations of artistic choices, he creates another layer of beauty with which each piece resonates. Hearing his stories amplified the experience for me, and I came away with such admiration and appreciation of his work." Her response echoes the way many of us experienced the works in the midst of this sacred space. ■

— Peninnah Schram

EMPLOYMENT TASK FORCE

Standing up to the Economic Downturn

On behalf of the BJ Employment Task Force, I want to take this opportunity to update the community on our accomplishments. This important initiative is led by Harold Goldman and Guy Felixbrodt, along with several volunteers with backgrounds primarily in human resources and mental health, and is supported by the BJ Rabbis.

About a year ago, several of us volunteers contacted the BJ Rabbis independently to suggest that our synagogue take on the challenge of helping members of our community who were affected by the severe economic downturn, and to offer our assistance to this effort. My experience during my eight years as a member is that BJ takes decisive action on matters that directly and indirectly concern our community and the world. I was pleased that BJ responded swiftly, beginning by getting us all together to form an organized action plan.

For the first year, the goal was to help the unemployed and underemployed members of our synagogue. During this time BJ offered extensive and diverse resources spanning many different areas. Several formal presentations were given:

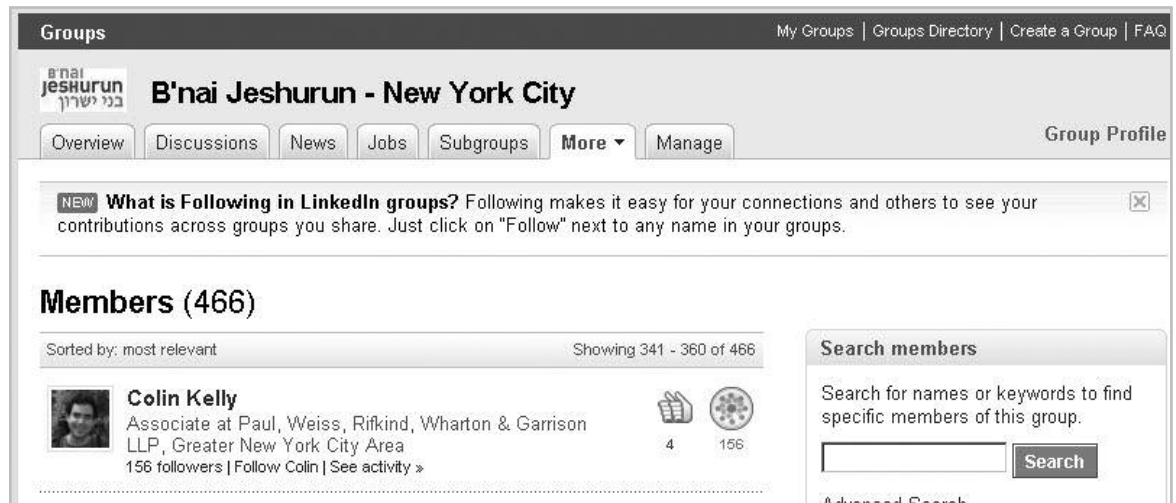
- *Job Search Advantage Event*, addressing valuable job-search skills including résumé-writing, image presentation, and changing careers
- *Redirecting Yourself*, a two-part series offered jointly with Kehilath Jeshurun, focused on strategies to help a job seeker stand out from the masses in the application process and on guidance in preparing a résumé to emphasize accomplishments

- *Finding Financial Stability in Times of Change*
- A training session on Google Docs.

In addition, there were monthly talks with the Rabbis geared to provide a forum for people to discuss issues related to their job searches, and a LinkedIn group was created that now has over 450 members. Other synagogues and Jewish organizations have taken note of the proactive stance we have taken in this area and are beginning to offer some of these services themselves.

We recently shifted our focus to concentrate on helping BJ members who are looking to promote their businesses or to launch new

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ones. In October, BJ offered a Business and Career Network Event, for members only, that had over 100 attendees. In the months ahead, we intend to schedule other events to continue this effort. Look for announcements in future issues of the *Kol Jeshurun*. ■

— David Zagorski

David Zagorski has been a BJ member since 2002. He founded the BJ Single Parent Havurah, and is now a member of both the Employment Task Force and the Singles Committee.

Expanding Religious Dialogue

Every year since 2005 Roly has traveled to Qatar to attend the Doha Conference for Interreligious Dialogue, a gathering that draws Christians, Muslims, and Jews from around the world to talk in a constructive way about common challenges. Initiated by the Emir of Qatar and the Archbishop of Canterbury in 2002, the conferences have led to the creation of the Doha International Center for Interreligious Dialogue (DICID), which works year-round to create and support this work.

In 2003 and 2004, the Doha conferences included Christian and Muslim religious leaders; in 2005, Jewish representatives were invited so as to include all three Abrahamic faiths. Roly noted, "This was requested by the Emir, and some of his own rejectionists were very vocal about not wanting to participate because of Jewish presence. The Government of Qatar stuck to its plan. The Emir has tremendous vision: this is not an entirely popular thing to do. To commit to this and to fund the efforts to work in this particular way is extraordinarily constructive."

The aims of the DICID are to:

1. become a center for advocating tolerance and acceptance of others
2. activate religious values in finding solutions to problems and issues that concern humanity
3. broaden the scope of dialogue to include aspects of life that interact with religion
4. increase the network of those involved in dialogue to include researchers, academics, and those who are concerned with the relationship between religious values and life issues
5. become an authority that provides academic, educational, and training information in the field of dialogue

The DICID does not intend to tackle purely theological issues or political disputes. Its focus is on promoting the common aspects and values of the three religions.

Roly is one of the six members of the DICID's International Board of Advisors, which also includes Prof. Aisha Al Mannai, Dean of the College of Sharia and Islamic Studies at Qatar University; Prof. Din Mohammad Sahib, Assistant Dean of the College; Father Vittorio Ianari of the Society of Sant'Egidio, Italy; Bishop George Saliba of the Syrian Orthodox Archdiocese of Lebanon; and John Taylor, UN representative of the International Society for Religious Freedom, Switzerland.

At this year's conference, there were over 150 representatives from more than 50 countries. Roly was part of a delegation of 10 rabbis and Jewish scholars, including six from the United States: Chaim Seidler-Feller of UCLA; Jacob Bender, documentary film maker; Reuven Firestone of HUC in Los Angeles; Robert Eisen of George Washington University; and Steven Katz of Boston University. The group supported one another, debriefed together after their presentations, and developed common strategies for the conference. The other Jewish representatives were from Argentina, England, Bosnia, and France.

The theme of this year's conference was Solidarity, and it was explored through plenary groups and breakaway sessions. Roly gave a presentation on "Jewish Responses to Natural Disasters and Famine."



"The most interesting thing usually happens after those sessions in the corridors and at the meals," Roly said. "People meet at the sessions and often continue the conversation beyond the specific topic that



PHOTO: JACOB BENDER

was presented. ... You get to know people on a more personal level. And after a few years and many meals, you begin to make friends."

"I can't tell you that everything is Kumbaya; there is a lot of 'No-Kumbaya.'" Roly observed. "There is considerable contention over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for instance, but disagreement through dialogue and the search for understanding is preferable to any other alternative."

He emphasizes that the Doha Conference is the only international conference that includes Muslims, Christians, and Jews and that has established continuity. "The more people get to know each other and the more trust is built over time, the more we are able to handle the gaps." Roly displayed a stack of business cards he collected at the conference and noted that between conferences and email exchanges he maintains these connections. This year on Sukkot, one of the Muslim participants from Oman, Ahmed Al-Mukhaini, visited BJ and made a wonderful presentation. Mr. Al-Mukhaini said that it was the first time he was in a synagogue and how moved he was by the experience.

Roly observed that there is a lot of local media attention for the conference. He has been interviewed every year and has appeared in the front page of the Qatari papers. Al Jazeera also reports about the conference. However there is not much attention from the Western and international press. "It would be great," Roly said, "for the media to be there and pick up on this, not just to show religions in conflict, but people dialoging, sorting their differences out, and working for the common good." ■

— Denise Waxman

COMMUNITY

Finding a Friendly Face

new York can be a lonely place. So can B.J. It's so easy to peek in and say, "Wow, this is an amazing community. What an inspiration. This is where I want to daven. This is where I want to belong."

So you go to Friday night service. That's when everyone goes, and you think for sure you'll at least meet a few people. Or maybe you go on a Saturday morning and there's a kiddush. You're bound to meet someone. That's how congregations work, right? But you went last week and felt so alone. The kiddush felt awkward; you weren't sure how to say what to whom, so you had a little bagel and egg salad and looked around before grabbing your coat and heading home. But you'll try again today. Today will be different. You assume, or maybe hope, "someone will talk to me." Or maybe you've been coming on and off for 10 years but

your community has dispersed. Your friends have gotten married; they've moved to Brooklyn. They have kids now and their lives are different. Or they've retired and moved to be near their children and grandchildren, but you're still in the city. And maybe you've stopped coming, maybe you've thought, "I should go back to B'nai Jeshurun. I made so many friends there." But you go and you're familiar with some faces, but mostly not, and everyone has their cliques. Why is it so hard to break in? You hear the Rabbis talk about all the ways to get involved, but the main thing you want is a friendly face that confirms, "Ah yes, this is the place for me." You just want to make some kind of connection. It's lonely to look through the sea of faces after services, searching for a friendly one as you put away your siddur, considering the prospect of heading home for a quiet Shabbat meal alone. But then the woman sitting next to you smiles and says,

“You hear the Rabbis talk about all the ways to get involved, but the main thing you want is a friendly face that confirms, ‘Ah yes, this is the place for me.’”

"Shabbat Shalom." The spell is broken. And you respond. And then something crazy happens: She asks you if you come often, you exchange a few words, and suddenly you've made a connection. You may never see her again, or maybe you'll see her next week. Who knows? Maybe you even meet the people she's with and establish some commonality. Her daughter next to her is back in town from Ann Arbor, and University of Michigan is your alma mater. Who knew? Either way, you've made a connection. This is a friendly shul after all. ■

— **Martha Ginsberg**

Martha Ginsberg is a longtime BJ member and serves on the Potential Members Team of the Membership Committee.

INTERFAITH

Fellowship Harvest

q. What do you get when you mix 90 Jews, Muslims, and Christians; two Iranian musicians; dozens of varieties of nosherai, many of them fall foods; a trivia quiz about the Abrahamic faiths; and a talk by the founder of a biodynamic farm?

A: An Interfaith Fall Feast. (Co-sponsors: BJ, SPSA, and the Muslim outreach groups ASMA Society and the Muslim Consultative Network.)

The event took place in November at SPSA (it was our sixth interfaith dinner since 2005), and it was a beautiful evening. The SPSA Social Hall was filled with laughter, friendship, and the amazing sound of the crumbling of separating walls. The renowned Iranian-American musician Amir Vahab spoke for all of us when he said,

"This is heaven": a room full of people of different faiths who came together in friendship rather than conflict, which happens all too rarely in our world. It was the second year that Amir graciously donated a performance for our event, this time with his drummer Yvette Goughassian, to give us the privilege of hearing their heavenly, ornate music and Rumi's poetry.

We also heard a talk by Jean-Paul Courtens, the founder of Roxbury Farm. It's a community-supported farm that uses biodynamic methods, which honor the interdependence of all organisms on a farm. (For some fascinating info, go to www.roxburyfarm.com and click on Biodynamic Farming; you can also find out how to sign up to buy organic produce.)



PHOTO: SABEEHA REHMAN

Just as the endangered bobolink (a lovely songbird) can't thrive without the kindness of a farmer willing to turn a hillside over to tall weeds, so our imperiled world will never be healed unless we all find the strength to acknowledge our interdependence. Perhaps peace, once the world finally attains it, really will be a harvest of sorts: "And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." ■

— **Jenny Golub**

Families and Conversion: A Complex Story

When I recently converted to Judaism, I chose Jacob as my Hebrew name. We learn in the Torah that Jacob wrapped sheep skin around his arm to trick his father Isaac into thinking that he was Esau, the brawnier brother, thus stealing his father's blessing. While we might denounce Jacob's deviousness, this story suggests—among many lessons—how personal growth sometimes requires consciously adopting a new identity. My conversion to Judaism was a process of discovery and reinvention, a process in which I sometimes felt that I was pretending to be someone else.

As a young boy, if posed the simple question—what religion are you?—I wouldn't have hesitated to answer, "I am Christian." After all, my father was once a Congregational minister and my family celebrated Christmas and I attended Sunday school. I was baptized as a baby and confirmed as a teenager.

But as I grew I learned that my family's religious roots were more complex.

My paternal grandfather, born in Hungary, was an evangelical Christian minister. He and my grandmother would answer the phone, "Jesus loves you and I love you." Following in his father's and grandfather's footsteps, my father was ordained as a minister, although he served in a church only briefly, and today is a financial planner.

My maternal grandmother, who grew up in Vienna and whose parents were secular Jews, was the first child in her family to be baptized Lutheran. My maternal grandfather, from a secular Jewish Viennese family as well, converted as an adult. My mother, born in New York City, was baptized and grew up attending Riverside Church. Shortly before I was born, my grandmother remarried another Viennese refugee who was Jewish. As a result, with my mother's family, I grew up celebrating both Jewish and Christian holidays: Passover and Hanukkah with our

step-family and Christmas and Easter with my mother and father's families.

By my early twenties my answer had become, "I am Christian but..."

Like many others, religion became more important to me when I had a family of my own. My wife, Rachel Laiserin, grew up certain of her Jewish identity. At first Rachel and I either melded our religious backgrounds or avoided religious decisions altogether. Our wedding was officiated by both a rabbi and my father. When our first son Daniel was born we conducted a simple non-religious ceremony before our families instead of having a baptism or *bris*. We continued to practice religion as we had when we were single—Jewish holidays with Rachel's parents and Christian holidays with mine.

Within a few years, with a second son, Joshua, we moved to New York, and soon thereafter started looking for a more spiritual life and a larger religious community. Though we had earlier believed we could simultaneously observe two religious traditions, our desire for a deeper commitment forced us to choose.

Although Rachel had always accepted my background, it was clear that it would be difficult for her to join a Christian community. Already partly Jewish, it was easier for me to join a Jewish community. Though some rabbis considered me Jewish, I began a search to discover what it would mean to be unquestionably Jewish. If we were going to raise our children as Jews, I wanted to serve as their role model.

Jacob was prompted by his mother to disguise himself; several people served as catalysts in my conversion. My primary guide on this journey was Rabbi Felicia Sol of B'nai Jeshurun in New York. Every several weeks she would present me with a new "sheep skin" to try on. She encouraged me to:

Observe Shabbat as strictly as possible. Off went all the electronics and we walked five flights of stairs rather than take the elevator (not easy with a baby stroller!).

Keep kosher. Though we already ate primarily vegetarian, this gave me a sense of the sanctity possible in everyday activities.

Learn Hebrew. I stuffed *Prayerbook Hebrew: The Easy Way* into my briefcase and studied on my subway commute. Not only did I begin to recognize words in synagogue but I also met countless other New Yorkers who spotted my Hebrew reading on the subway.

My conversion to Judaism was a process of discovery and reinvention, a process in which I sometimes felt that I was pretending to be someone else."

Explore my concept of God. Did I believe in God? As a child I was so certain of God's existence that I would pray to him regularly. Now I wasn't so sure. Ultimately, I concluded that, at the very least, this wrestling with God was an experience I wanted for my children.

Attend services. At first, I felt like an imposter sitting in synagogue. I didn't know when to bow or which way to turn. And I was sure that everyone else could see that I was merely mumbling the words. Like Jacob, I felt as though I was fooling someone.

Discuss my plans with my parents. This was not an easy step as converting had the potential to distance us. Not because they might reject my decision, but rather because it would be introducing new traditions and new ways of being together as a family. Would they feel that I was leaving them? And what did I risk losing? How could I commit to Judaism AND treasure and honor my unique roots and the people I love?

(continued on page 13)

REFLECTIONS

Photographing Time: The Rose Window and the DNA Crystalⁱ

Click! And the photograph is recorded. Click! And a moment is captured. Photography is a stopping of time forever, a powerfully magical, wholly unnatural intervention in the flow of time. We are so used to the notion that an instant may be captured in an image that we forget that the power to control time was—and remains—a central aspect of both scientific prediction and religious revelation. To illustrate my point I have chosen two photographs, one of which captures a religious articulation of this dream of mastery over time, while the other—more modestly perhaps but just as powerfully—captures our current capacity to hold the past and future in our hands through a chemical.

The first photograph I have picked is of the lower and smaller of two Rose Windows on the Western face of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, in Manhattan’s Morningside Heights, where I have lived and worked on DNA and its many meanings for the past 40 years.ⁱⁱ The photograph of the window captures the imagery of the Book of the Revelation of St. John the Divine: Click! And we have an image that conveys confidence in a fixed truth that is time-invariant in this world and that comes to fruition in another, wholly unnatural world to come.

The second photograph was taken from a computer screen some years ago. To create this photograph, the genetic material, DNA, in all its form-following-function, self-replicating glory, was first made into a crystal. The crystal was subjected to a beam of X-rays; by the image the X-rays made on a photographic plate as they bounced their way through the crystal, scientists were able to reconstruct in a computer the photographed image of the atoms of DNA as they would appear if a long string of it were looked at end-on: Click! And we have an image of the chemical that



Rose Window on the Western face of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

is the informational fuel of the unstoppable engine of natural selection. This engine has churned out novelty for four billion years, always requiring the mortality of individuals and of species, never pointing toward perfection, nor immutability, only more change.

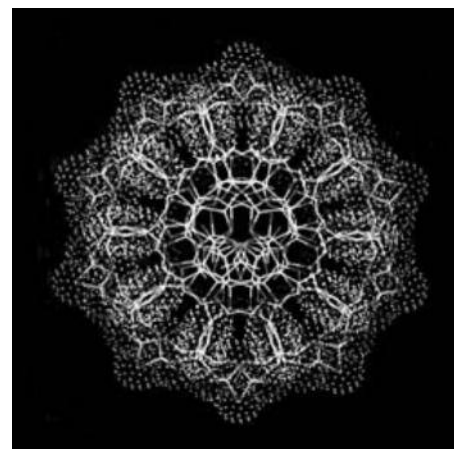
“**These photographs tell us that we are members of a species whose powers of imagination are as unbounded as the powers of natural selection, which has for four billion years and counting been able to find a DNA sequence that will survive any change at all in its surroundings.**”

Two photographs, two images of time captured in a circle of sorts. But what could be more different than these two photographic representations of our wish to predict unknowable if not unnatural futures? The photographs are of the same-sized circle, but the rose window itself is about 10 meters in diameter, while the cross section of a DNA molecule is about one hundred-millionth of a meter. In reality, then, the images photographed here capture structures whose diameters differ by about a billion-fold.

A billion-to-one is a big range, but it does resonate with ordinary life in at least two ways. First, each of us has been constructed from conception through the instructions contained in the DNA of a human genome that is—when considered lengthwise and not end-on as in this photo—a few billion letters long; and second, there are a few billion of us alive today, no two of us is precisely and exactly the same. That one-in-a-billion uniqueness is part of what allows us to live out the genetic potential of being a human being.

To me, these two photographs taken together warn us all not to make a religion out of DNA. The religious impulse to believe in something better than one knows is as powerful as the scientific impulse to know, but they are not the same, nor should either attempt to mimic the other. These photographs tell us that we are members of a species whose powers of imagination are as unbounded as the powers of natural selection, which has for four billion years and counting been able to find a DNA sequence that will survive any change at all in its surroundings. Side by side, they teach

(continued on page 13)



Photographed image of the atoms of DNA.

ⁱ This presentation to the Society of Arts, Culture and Contemporary Culture on October 30, 2009 was adapted from my contribution to the forthcoming Smithsonian Exhibit “Click: Photography Changes Everything.”

ⁱⁱ Quirk, H., 1993. “The Living Cathedral, St. John the Divine, a history and guide.” Crossroad, New York, pp 84-87.

Mazal Tov

To the following members and their families on their b'nai mitzvah (December and January):

Lena Eve Diamond	Amelia Geser
Jonathan Andrew Levin	Joshua Jacobson
Michael Sklar	Zoe Schein-Futerfas
Jenna Gail Solomon	Caroline Bergman
Jason Gurevitch	Sarah Adelman
Josephine Mariel Stern	Tess Bronfman

To the following members and their families (through January 8):

Hollis and Ari Gauss on the birth of their son, Aaron Edward Gauss.

Niki Singh, Dan Schimmel, and Theo Singh-Schimmel on the birth of their daughter and sister, Ela Liya Singh-Schimmel.

Robert and Margie Imershein on the birth of their grandson, Eliyahu (Eli) Gross.

Debra, Jeremy and Daisy Roberts on the naming of their daughter and sister, Riley Tess Roberts.

Miriam Palmer-Sherman, Andy Sherman and Joanne Palmer on Miriam's recent engagement to David Vaisberg.

Rachel Cowan on the birth of her grandson, Dante Ellis Salvatore Paul Cowan.

Ephraim and Theresa Gerstein on the birth of their son, Robert Harold Gerstein, and to Jonathan Gerstein on the birth of his nephew.

Jennifer Radin and Sanjay, Olivia and Aidan Puri on the birth of their son and brother, Julian Harper Puri.

Robert Morrison and Shalini Tewari on the birth of their daughter, Anaiah Raniah, and their son, Amir Kedar.

John, Silvia, Daniel and Gabriel Heller on the birth of their daughter and sister, Amalia.

Kelly Wachowicz on the birth of her son, Asa Edward Wachowicz.



Condolences (through January 8)

The community of B'nai Jeshurun mourns the death of our beloved member Irene Siegel, and extends condolence to her family and all her loved ones.

The community of B'nai Jeshurun mourns the death of our beloved member Dorothy Hilf, and extends condolences to her family and all her loved ones.

The community of B'nai Jeshurun extends sincere condolences to the following members and their families:

Arthur, Kim and Elias Birnbaum on the death of their beloved sister, sister-in-law and aunt, Ruth Roth.

Jason Fruithandler, graduate school intern in the Youth and Family Department, on the death of his beloved grandmother, Lillian Fruithandler.

Barry Lichtenberg and Sandee Brawarsky on the death of Barry's beloved mother, Vera Lichtenberg.

Naomi Kleinberg, Adi Kidon and Nava Kidon on the death of Naomi's beloved father, Jack Kleinberg.

Susan, Larry, Jason, Emily and Amy Chinitz on the death of Susan's beloved mother, Beverly Pasternack.

Miriam Herscher on the death of her beloved cousin, Donna Bensimon.

Madeline and Elizabeth Cohen on the death of their beloved mother, Pauline Cohen.

Jeffrey Horwitz, Ellie Bogdonoff, and Emma and Aaron Horwitz on the death of their beloved mother, mother-in-law and grandmother, Phyllis K. Horwitz.

Glenn, Alison, Arielle and Jesse Davis on the death of their beloved father, father-in-law and grandfather, Leonard Davis.

Eleanor Harrison Bregman and Peter, Isabelle and Sophia Bregman on the death of their beloved mother, mother-in-law and grandmother, Susan Harrison.

Heidi, Daniel and Ean Steinberger on the death of their beloved sister and aunt, Wendy Levinson.

Carolyn Meyer-Wartels and Gary, Rebecca and Noah Wartels on the death of their beloved father, father-in-law and grandfather, Kurt Meyer.

Otto and Lotte Knoller on the death of their beloved daughter, Judith Rose Vaughn.

Stephanie and Charles Finder and Emily Weiss on the death of their beloved mother, mother-in-law and grandmother, Mildred Angerman.

YOUTH & FAMILY EDUCATION

Finding Our Place at BJ

Like many parents, we had a big decision to make a year and a half ago. With our two little girls of Hebrew school age, what synagogue would become a part of our daily lives? Having been to a handful of services at BJ, we knew how much we enjoyed it, but still we wondered: How would our children deal with this new environment of learning, growing, and evolving in the Jewish world? Now we can say without question that becoming a part of BJ and its Hebrew school has been a wonderful decision.

There are countless examples in our daily lives of how the synagogue and the school have impacted our children. From coming home to find our 6- and 8-year-old girls listening to the Junior Congregation CD, to the phone calls we get while at work to make sure they are signed up to lead a

prayer... and that is just the beginning.

After starting Hebrew school with such concern about being in a new environment, the girls now seem to have an ever-increasing thirst to learn Hebrew and Judaic



BJHS Gan students visit the sanctuary.

studies. Our older daughter was thrilled to get her own siddur (prayer book) during the Bet Siddur Ceremony at Junior Congregation. In fact, there have been many times when we find her in her room reading from it. And our little one, while not required to attend Junior Congregation yet, not only wanted to go, but also insisted on having her own attendance card just like her big sister. And last but certainly not least, our girls have begun to cultivate friendships in Hebrew school, which has enriched their lives and experiences even more.

We are thankful to the educators, clergy, and everyone else involved for helping make this big transition in our lives and our children's lives so easy and wonderful. We all look forward to many more years at BJ and to being part of such a special place. ■

— Gary and Alyssa Apple

Yee-haw! for BJ Children's Services

When our daughter Lily turned 2 last year it was clear to us that despite her wide range of interests (princesses, birthday parties, and princess-themed birthday parties), her relationship with Jewish tradition was not yet "on track." We decided to take a tour of the many and varied children's Shabbat services available on the Upper West Side, in a systematic attempt to find our niche. At the advice of a friend, we took Lily and her baby brother, Jake, then 6 weeks old, to the BJ children's service one Shabbat morning in October. We never got around to visiting anywhere else, and except for the occasional trip out of town, we've returned literally every week since.

Why do we keep coming back? We could hint that we are simply, dutifully schlepping our children to their favorite weekly program, but that would minimize the pleasure we as parents take in participating in a vibrant community of young people learning to love their traditions and their

Torah. Every week, we look forward to so many aspects of the service:

- We rush to make it in time for the emphatic, cowboy's, "Yee-haw!" that wakes us up at the end of Modeh Ani.
- We speculate as to what Lily will volunteer when the kids take turns offering thanks during Birkhot Hashahar (some recent suggestions from other children: "parents," "sunshine," "animals," "trucks").
- We appreciate a few moments of peaceful, silent snuggling with our children during the Amidah.
- We love that our children get to watch a grownup chant a few verses of the weekly parasha from a real (if vertical) Torah.
- We especially enjoy the outstanding musicianship of the band, particular Ari, who sometimes leads us in "special" songs related to the weekly portion and often quietly adds meditative background musical quotations from composers such as Manuel de Falla.

■ ■ We've been attending BJ's children's services for over a year now, and we regularly catch Lily breaking out into Ma Tovv at the dinner table ..."

- We don't worry about staining when the kids rush to prepare for Kiddush on their own (it is no coincidence that the juice is always white).
- After services, we catch up with our friends (whom we've met through BJ), while our children enjoy getting into mischief of one kind or another with their own friends.

We've been attending BJ's children's services for over a year now, and we regularly catch Lily breaking out into Ma Tovv at the dinner table, or Ki L'Olam Chasdo in the bath. Whenever Lily sings her shul favorites, Jake claps along. And so do we, because we know we are all "on track." ■

— Rachel and Ben Lebwahl

Recent Youth & Family Events



Family Hanukkah Zimriyah, December 2009



BJHS Bet class visits the food pantry at SPSA.



Students learn about volunteer opportunities at the Mitzvah Fair.



ALL PHOTOS, PAGES 12-13: ELANA AYALON

Families and Conversion

continued from page 8

Fortunately, my discussions with my parents helped free me to make my own choices while not severing my ties to a rich past. My father and step-mother were excited for me and thereafter always eager for the latest update. And my mother and step-father took courses on Judaism themselves and today join us at synagogue. I will always cherish the kiddush cup they gave me as a conversion gift.

Today, we light Shabbat candles on Friday nights and attend children's services at synagogue. Our boys know to kiss the Torah when it passes us in synagogue and they've memorized an array of blessings. I continue to study Hebrew every morning on my way to work. And when asked my religion, I answer, "I am Jewish. But there's more to my story..." ■

— Toby Kovacs

Toby Kovacs has been a member of BJ with his wife, Rachel Laiserin, and their sons, Daniel and Joshua, since 2005.

Photographing Time

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us that since we can have no way to be sure that our species' DNA will survive our imagination, it is the work of everyone—scientist, engineer, artist, religious leader—to help make sure we do.

In just the period between when that window was fashioned in New York and when the X-ray crystallographic data could be converted in a computer to that lovely photograph, we and the people we know have endured state-sponsored eugenics, racism, and genocide and seen their ghastly effectiveness at causing pain, suffering, and death. Our DNA does not diminish our free will nor our obligation to choose not to do evil. Let us resolve not to make that mistake again when using the information we find in each other's DNA. ■

— Robert Pollack

Robert Pollack is Professor of Biological Sciences and Director, Center for the Study of Science and Religion, Earth Institute, Columbia University. Professor Robert Pollack and his wife Amy have been members of BJ since 1994.

COMMUNICATIONS

Your Thoughts, in Print!

attention, writers (aspiring or experienced): We would like your contributions for the *Kol Hadash*. Strengthen the BJ community by sharing a little of yourself. We are looking for reports on BJ events, reflective articles, human-interest stories, member profiles, staff profiles, personal essays, movie reviews, book reviews, as well as poems or other short creative pieces. Think outside the box.

All articles are welcome; feel free to submit an item by email. If you are willing to write on assignment, please let us know. We will save your information and contact you when we need a writer.

Please follow the following submission guidelines:

- Send articles as a Word (.doc or .txt) document with a word count at the top.
- We prefer articles that are one-half page (400 words) or one page (800 words) in length.
- Write an interesting headline—something that would catch YOUR attention.
- Include your name exactly as you want it to appear in print.
- Write a one-line "bio" of yourself as an introduction to the BJ community. (Send a photo too, if you can.)

All articles will be edited for spelling, grammar, and clarity, and they may be edited for length. If you request it, we will provide you with a copy of your edited article for review, and we will not print it if you object to the edits, but we do not have the staff or time to permit additional revisions.

If you have an idea and would like help developing it or just want some more information please call or email me. I would love to hear from you.

— Denise Waxman,
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DONATIONS (received as of December 14, 2009)

Adult Education Fund

The Thursday Lunch and Learn Class in honor and appreciation of Rabbi Roly's wonderful teaching and Richard Kalikow's generous and gracious hospitality Bernice Todres in memory of Nicole Joseph, Joseph Posternak and in honor of the Bat Mitzvah of Barbara and Len Sugin's granddaughter, Rachel's Bat Mitzvah Wendy and Arnold Yudell in honor of Helena Diamant Glass

Arthur P. Morgan Fund

Arthur and Kim Birnbaum in honor of Ari Priven's 20 years at BJ and Ari Kantor becoming Bar Mitzvah

Bikkur Holim Fund

Marcia Miller in memory

of Barbara Goldman Civia Zoe in memory of her brother, T. Mark Bankendorf

BJ/SPSA Homeless Shelter Fund

Barbara Simon in honor of Hella Moritz and in appreciation of Rabbi Felicia Sol and the Membership Steering Committee

Children's Services Fund

Jonathan and Andrea Feldman Rachel and Mark Klein in honor of Ari Priven's 20 years at BJ Harold and Helen Lehrman in honor of Ari Priven's 20 years at BJ Andrea Bigelisen Riskin in honor of Ari Priven's 20 years at BJ Sara Sapadin

Etz Hayim Fund

Rabbis Roly, Marcelo and Felicia in honor of Sara Litt's 50th birthday Helena Diamant Glass in honor of Ari Priven's 20 years at BJ

General Fund

Deborah A. Block in celebration of Craig Rosenberg's birthday John Bonavita and Harold Goldman in honor of Sara Litt's 50th birthday and Vicki Abrams' 70th birthday Alan Cohen and Robert Bank in honor of Sara Litt's 50th birthday Thomas and Donna Divine in support of the important work of the synagogue Stephen Finkelstein in honor of Bill Stein Miriam Fogelson Alex Hill

Joan Hochman and Christopher Reid in honor of Sara Litt's 50th birthday Joel Kazis and Sara Nathan in honor of Sara Litt's 50th birthday Leona Kern in honor of Adam Kern becoming Bar Mitzvah Alexander Mandel and Debra Kroll-Mandel Samara Minkin and Trent Gegax in honor of Felicia Sol and Yaffa Garber Alissa Neil Aldo Polak and Ana Bluth in honor of Sofia Polak Susan Sanders in appreciation of Ari Priven's support and assistance for her mother's, Dora Sanders, funeral Mark and Robyn Tsesarsky in honor of Sara Litt's 50th birthday

Greening BJ Fund

Donna Weinstein in memory of her parents, Min and Maynard Weinstein

Hebrew School Fund

Muriel Einhorn in honor of Benjamin and Rebecca Chynsky Joshua Isay and Cathie Levine Isay in memory of Arthur "Ozzie" Barat

Helen Radin Memorial Zayin Adar Annual Teaching Fund

Patricia Goldstick in celebration of Alan Dienstag's birthday

Hevra Kadisha Fund

Amelia Knor in memory of Nicole Joseph Elissa Meth Kestin and Daniel Kestin in honor of Robert Gruenspecht being Hatan Torah 5770

DONATIONS continued from page 14

Holiday Programming Fund

Jonathan Rotter

Homeless Shelter FundSanda Bernstein in honor of Arthur and Susan Elefant
Judy and Glenn Marlowe in honor of Elenor Radzivilover**Judith Bernstein Lunch Program**Arthur and Kim Birnbaum in honor of Susan Samuels' birthday
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Sharon L. Stein in memory of Michael Stein**Kiddush Fund**Elaine Nevins in honor of Robert Gruenspecht being Hatan Torah 5770**Miriam Siroky Education Fund**

Livia Asher in memory of Miriam, Helena and Martin Siroky

Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer Memorial Fund

Judy and Glenn Marlowe in honor of Ari Priven's 20 years at BJ

Shira Palmer-Sherman Memorial Fund

Rebecca Rosenthal and Adam Arenson in celebration of Amelia Geser becoming a Bat Mitzvah

Teen Program Fund

Lisa Messinger in celebration of Nathaniel Gertzman becoming a Bar Mitzvah

Yizkor FundAdam and Pearl Atkin in memory of their parents
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Judith and Charles Bogomol in memory of her father, Solomon Matmon
Irwin and Arlene Brandon in memory of his sister, Evelyn Ruth
Judith Cromwell in memory of her father, John Lissauer
Aliza Felix in memory of her mother, Shirley Schwadron
David Fitterman in memory of his parents, Isaac and Rita Fitterman
Jules and Susan Frankel in memory of his mother, Rose Frankel
Earl Freiman and Paulette Douglas in memory of her parents, Helen and Hal Douglas
Jane Gabin in memory of her parents, Billie and Al Gabin, and aunt, Norma Gabin
Sheila Gabins in memory of her mother, Helen Janice
Harriet Goren in memory of her father, Daniel Goren
Nancy Greenblatt and Jack Richard in memory of her parents, Lilian and Sidney Wolkenberg
Barbara Greenspan in memory of her father, Solomon MatmonSonny Greenwald in memory of his father, Jacob Greenwald
John Guffey and Barbara Somerfield in memory of Rose and Morris Jacobovitz
Jessica Hammerman and Isaac Peterson in memory of Vera Lichtenberg
Barbara Kane and Tony Gabriele in memory of her mother, Sara Kane
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Stephen Kaufman and Marina Pinto Kaufman in memory of Gertrude Kaufman and Salomon Pinto
Ronald Keller in memory of his father, Kenneth Kurt Keller
Florence Keller in memory of her husband, Kenneth Kurt Keller and her mother, Anna Glick
Ann Kern and Jerome Gotkin in memory of her aunt, Helen Goodman
Lorraine Korn in memory of her mother, Rene Korn
Albert and Naomi Levine in memory of her father, Max Levine and mother, Henrietta Lassar
Cindy Levy in memory of her grandmother, Sylvia and her father, Benjamin
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Audrey Melkin in memory of her companion, Werner Engel
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Cecile and Susan Rodau in memory of her mother, Fae Mittleman and grandmother, Sarah Baier
Charles and Amy Rudnick in memory of her mother, Rita Teicher and his father, David Rudnick
Eric Schlesinger in memory of Emanuel Schlesinger
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Robert and Barbara Small in memory of her father, Harry Kanowitz
Leonard and Barbara Sugin in memory of his father, Oscar Sugin
Rabbi Pamela Wax and Chaim Bronstein in memory of her father, Herbert Wax
Scott Weiner and Beth Siegel in memory of her mother, Gloria Roemer
Zelda Weiss in memory of her mother, Fannie Prenskey
Barbara and Robert Willinger in memory of her father, Eddie Halin
Debra Winger Howard and Arliss Howard in memory of her father, Robert Winger
Holly Zabitz in memory of her grandmother, Sadie Chesler and grandfather, Samuel Zabitz
Anne Ziff in memory of her father, Emanuel Finkelman
Nina Jaroslaw in memory of Carolyn Desch's father, Arthur Barat**KOL HADASH new voice**

February 2010

The *Kol Hadash* is published every other month (in 2010: February, April, June/July, September, November). **We would love to print your stories and articles about BJ! For submission guidelines, contact communications@bj.org.** All material is the property of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun and cannot be reprinted without permission.

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