

## The Unexpected Client: A Journey to Planned Parenthood

RABBI FELICIA L. SOL

“The issue of reproductive rights touches me deeply as a woman, as a citizen of this country, and as a Jew.”

Reproductive rights and women’s health issues have been at the forefront of our national conversation given the controversy over Susan B. Komen and their funding of Planned Parenthood, the uproar by religious leaders over the requirement for insurance plans to provide access to contraception as well as with the Republican primaries and the upcoming presidential election. The issue of reproductive rights touches me deeply as a woman, as a citizen of this country, and as a Jew. I recognize that having grown up following the legalization of abortion that I took most of these rights for granted for many years. I didn’t have to fight for them, and the majority of my thoughts about these issues were theoretical—about a woman’s right to choose and be in charge of her own body—but I didn’t consider them personally ... until last summer.

On a beautiful July morning, my mother drove me to downtown Providence, R.I., and parked in a lot. Not just any parking lot, the Planned Parenthood parking lot. We got out of the car and were escorted into the building. There was only one protester that day. He displayed a sign showing a fetus and had some choice words to say about abortion and what he understood me to be doing. But this was my lucky day in some ways. I didn’t have to encounter a large number of protesters, and I had a place to go to have a procedure following a miscarriage. I had found out the sad news about the miscarriage two days before leaving on vacation, and my choice was to delay my vacation to have the procedure in New York City or to find a place near where my family was vacationing in Rhode Island. Having this choice was a privilege that many men and women in this country don’t have. I had the wisdom of my doctor. I had insurance. I had vacation plans, and I had the resources to navigate what to do. Planned Parenthood was the first organization I sought out, and sure enough they were able to accommodate me promptly and with care and concern. On the phone, the receptionist warned me about the protesters and explained in careful detail what would happen from the moment we parked our car. I am one of the 95 percent of the people who have been blessed to use the services of Planned Parenthood for a procedure that was not an abortion. I received quality medical care at a critical moment promptly and with gentle understanding.

I share this story for a handful of reasons: (1) The experience of miscarriage is not often spoken about and is often uncomfortable to share but it is something that many women experience and has its own mourning process. It is very important to acknowledge this experience, even though it is frequently unspoken or taboo (I feel very blessed that, b’ezrat Ha Shem, God willing, I will give birth to a baby this summer); and (2) The story that transpired with regard to Komen’s

*(continued on page 3)*

### BJ Teens in the D.R.



PHOTO: SHOSHI ROSENBAUM

See page 6, 7, and 8 for more photos and stories from the recent BJ teen service learning trips to New Orleans and the Dominican Republic.

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SOCIAL ACTION/SOCIAL JUSTICE

## Garden of Earthly Delights

By Larissa Wohl

If you were to ask a member of the BJ Hazorim CSA why they participate, you might get answers like “I enjoy the CSA community,” “I want to buy locally,” or “I like the variety of produce I receive.” These are all wonderful reasons to participate in a community supported agriculture program like the one we offer here at BJ. In addition to these responses, there is one idea that is often untouched upon, but is important to CSA culture: *seasonal eating*. It may not be a concept we are used to thinking about when purchasing our food, but is an important part of why we eat locally, for many reasons.



PHOTO: ARIEL SCHNEIDER

Community supported agriculture promotes the decision to eat only those foods that are planted seasonally. The growing seasons of corn and cucumbers are not often on our minds as we walk through the grocery store, deciding what to buy. In a society where we’ve become accustomed to eating tomatoes in the dead of winter or noshing on strawberries and peeling juicy oranges year round, it is sometimes difficult to think of what life would be like not having all of those options at our fingertips.

For the moment, let’s imagine that we’ve committed to purchasing only local foods that are coming to us in season. What is one of the observations we might make about them as we take a taste of our fresh salad greens or bite into a ripe tomato? They taste amazing. Foods that are grown at the

optimal time for a particular region are more flavorful and nutritious than those that have been shipped from around the country and have sat in the grocery store. There is also something to be said for deprivation over the year. If you’re a corn lover, you know that the best-tasting corn comes during the late summer when you haven’t eaten it in nine or 10 months. Waiting for your favorite fruit or vegetable to be in season makes it taste even better when it’s fresh from a local farm!

It’s also easy to forget that seasonal fruits and vegetables aren’t just for the summer. Did you know that we can get the equivalent amount of Vitamin C found in fresh summer tomatoes from Brussels sprouts and broccoli in the fall and early winter? We can also get the antioxidants found in cherries from cranberries in the fall and from cloves in winter dishes. There are many options for nutritious and tasty seasonal foods year round, not just in the summer when farmer’s markets start popping up.



Free Bird Farm, BJ’s CSA farm.



PHOTO: ARIEL SCHNEIDER

Waiting for your favorite fruit or vegetable to be in season makes it taste even better when it’s fresh from a local farm!

Eating locally also encourages us to try new things. Instead of picking out what we want at a grocery store, we are presented with eight-10 different varieties every week of the farmers choosing. We purchase a share in what they grow, and they pay us in dividends of their best weekly produce. The fun comes in deciding how to cook what comes in your CSA share. It might just be time to try out those new recipes you’ve been saving.

Finally, our choice to eat locally is more sustainable for the environment, reducing the harmful impact of greenhouse gases and promoting better growing practices. On average, our food travels 1,500 miles by plane, train, or truck to arrive at our table. However, it isn’t just about how far our food has traveled to us; it’s also important to understand the

growing practices of local farms, especially those that are certified organic. Most CSA farms, including ours, practice pesticide-free farming and diversification, including crop rotation. “What is taken out of the environment is put back in, so land and resources such as water, soil and air can be replenished and are available to future generations. The waste from sustainable farming stays within the farm’s ecosystem and cannot cause buildup or pollution” (from [sustainabletable.org](http://sustainabletable.org)).

Whether you purchase a CSA share because you like how good the produce tastes or you just want to support local food, you are making a big commitment to your own health, your local economy, and the environmental sustainability of New York. I am excited for our upcoming CSA season and hope to see many of you there! ■

## Donate a Mahzor for the Yamim Nora'im



PHOTO: SIAN GIBBY

**O**ur new prayer book for the Yamim Nora'im, *Mahzor Lev Shalem*, debuted in 2011 to high praise from numerous BJ members and will be enjoyed for many years to come.

"I love the new mahzor; it's a beautiful book—a gracious design, and so

easy to use. The commentary in the margins really illuminated the High Holy Day services for me. The new mahzor is a treasure."

—BJ Congregant

We still have a limited number available for special dedications, and we ask that you please consider joining others in our community who generously made donations to help defray our costs. We will

## Membership and High Holy Day Information

Spring is here, which means it is membership renewal season! Visit the BJ website at [bj.org](http://bj.org) toward the end of May for 2012-2013 membership applications, information about dues, and High Holy Day locations. You'll also receive a package in the mail containing these materials. Questions? Contact Belinda Lasky, Assistant Executive Director, at x224 or [blasky@bj.org](mailto:blasky@bj.org).

thank you by acknowledging you, or someone you want to honor or remember, with one of our custom bookplates.

To assure that your contribution is recognized in time for the use of the books during the Yamim Nora'im this year, please make your donation as soon as possible and not later than August 1, 2012. You may donate at [www.bj.org/mahzor](http://www.bj.org/mahzor) or call Jacob Shemkovitz at 212-787-7600 x256. ■

## The Unexpected Client RABBI FELICIA L. SOL continued from page 1

decision to defund Planned Parenthood, and their rescinding of the decision, raises huge questions about how the politicized abortion debate is manipulated to deny essential medical access and care to hundreds of thousands of women (particularly low-income women) and how important organizations such as Planned Parenthood are in providing that care.

While many of us are ardent supporters of Planned Parenthood and similar organizations and are pro-choice, as Jews we should be cautious about taking an uncomplicated stand on abortion. Reproductive rights challenge us to integrate our religiosity and our faith with our perceived secular values and our role as citizens of this country. Supporting a woman's right to choose and being a fierce advocate of abortion remaining legal does not necessarily mean that these decisions come without consideration for our tradition and the value it places on the sanctity and miracle of life. It is true that Jewishly a fetus

is not an autonomous human being, and the Mishnah (Ohalot 7:6) teaches that one should abort a fetus if the mother's life is in danger. However, in a teshuvah approved by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards in 1983, Rabbi Robert Gordis speaks to the complexity:

The law on abortion is and should be liberal, to meet genuine cases of hardship and misery that are not solvable in any other way. But society has an obligation to educate its members to ethical standards that rise above the level of abortion on demand. In other words, abortion should be legally available but ethically restricted, to be practiced only for very good reasons. Men and women must be persuaded that though the abortion of a fetus is not equivalent to taking an actual life, it does represent the destruction of potential life and must not be undertaken lightly or flippantly.

I can tell you, having been a client of Planned Parenthood, that in no way was the sanctity of life treated with any sense of levity, and for the diversity of women and men of all ages, races, and ethnicities that sat in the waiting room that day, we were all grateful that there was someplace to go that recognized our need for medical advice and care and an organization that was our advocate. As a rabbi, I can tell you that in the case of abortion there is also a process of mourning that takes place, even when it was the right decision for the woman.

As a woman of faith I am in awe of my body that was created in God's image with the potential to create life and the need to mourn when that potential is not realized. I recognize that having been created in God's image means to constantly strive to uphold that image and not only to fight for my own (and all women's) reproductive rights and choices, but to have the humility and awe to understand the sanctity and holiness of God's creation and what hangs in the balance. ■

COMMUNITY

## Capturing Our Stories

By Martha Ginsberg

**O**n a chilly evening in mid November, eight people gathered in my apartment. As we went around the room introducing ourselves we all mentioned our favorite food for the upcoming Thanksgiving meal. For three of us it was the cranberry sauce—but we all had particular preparations in mind, and individually rich stories to accompany the recipes. This was the first group meeting of the newly formed Capturing Our Stories (COS) committee, led by my co-chair Toni Siegel and me. Our mission is to gather stories of BJ members: to learn who we are, where we come from, and who we want to be.

The idea is to capture our stories and compile a video library of footage that would be available for many purposes from documentary, to research, to marketing; the opportunities are endless.

One person in the meeting shared that her father had written an autobiography, which proved an invaluable treasure for the family. Indeed. A number of years ago, when my father first got a computer, he decided to write an account of his experience in World War II, partly to correct an erroneous account he had read in a book, but mostly just to put down his story—make sure someone would know it. Its 20 or so pages are infused with his own brand of humor



*Martha teaches Ivan, Ellen and Linda how to use the camera.*

and prankster mentality (evident even back then in his 19-year-old self) and weighed down with a healthy dose of fear. At his shiva my mother displayed *The Military History of Harold Ginsberg or How We Defeated Germany in World War II* proudly and prominently. Everyone read it. Though he was a big storyteller in life, many of us had never heard his own personal story. This was the one he wanted to make sure he had the chance to tell.

At the end of that first meeting, we decided to hold a big group intensive training/ interviewing day. On Sunday, January 8, 11 volunteers with huge hearts and eager ears showed up at the BJ office for the first training session to practice some basic interviewing techniques and figure out some technical aspects of shooting video. With video, we can capture the spoken word,

Our mission is to gather stories of BJ members: to learn who we are, where we come from, and who we want to be.”

facial expressions, and the animation of the interviewee and also feature artifacts and meaningful objects.

We started the day capturing the story of BJ member and fellow COS volunteer Ellen Turk, who talked about her recent search to find her past in her grandparents’ communities in Belarus as well as about her youth as a social activist, and the joy of being the mother of BJ musician Matt Turk. In the afternoon we recorded the story of longtime BJ member Vivian Yale who by age 7 had lost her mother and by age 20 had married the camp counselor she met years prior. Her constant quest for treating people with dignity led the couple to later join the Westchester delegation of the now-famous March on Washington. Thanks to both Ellen and Vivian for sharing your lives and dreams with us. And thank you to Andrea Newman, Ellen Turk, Harriet Abraham, Ilene Richman, Ivan and Sue Rosenblum, Linda Marshall, Michel Evanusa, Rochelle Friedlich, Sian Gibby, and Susan Sanders for helping to capture our stories!

The day was incredibly productive and a lot of fun, so we’ll be scheduling additional training days. We are planning to add many more recollections to a library already graced with the beautiful stories of Nancy Greenblatt, Jack Richard, Joe Antenson, Larry Gifford, Ellen Turk, and Vivian Yale. Only 3,994 to go! If you would like to join us as part of the interview team or if you would like to be interviewed, please contact Belinda Lasky at [blasky@bj.org](mailto:blasky@bj.org) or Sarah Guthartz at [sguthartz@bj.org](mailto:sguthartz@bj.org). Everyone has a story to tell. ■

*Martha Kate Ginsberg has been coming to BJ since 1991. She serves as a sleepover volunteer for the shelter and is also on the Education and Communications committee. She likes to take long walks on the beach and is equally comfortable in jeans or a little black dress ... but it’s rare that you’ll find her in stilettos.*



*Sue Rosenblum, Martha Ginsberg, and Rochelle Friedlich work the camera as Ellen Turk interviews Vivian Yale.*

PHOTOS: BELINDA LASKY

## Under One Roof: A Conversation With Jeannie Blaustein

By Sian Gibby

**b**uying a new home is widely acknowledged to be one of the most challenging and momentous changes we face in our lives.

Board President Jeannie Blaustein spoke to me about the mammoth undertaking of BJ's moving back to our historic house—and she expanded on the ramifications and opportunities involved. She shared that returning to our former home gives us the chance to look at ourselves, as a synagogue and as a community, with clear eyes and to attend to some important “home renovations” of an organizational and aspirational, as well as a physical, kind.

**In the end, this is all really about creating the most vibrant community we can from an internal point of view as well as building a stronger platform for BJ to have an impact on the larger Jewish world.”**

As we continue working with our architects to plan for the future of our community house, Jeannie says, “the second piece, intimately related to that, is a *community-building* initiative. Looking at where we are overall and also within individual constituencies; thinking about what we need to do to create a closer web of relationships for both new and long-term members.”

She continued, “When we think about welcoming and community building, we often think about new members, but we’re also giving attention to what it means for people who have gotten over the new blush, the honeymoon effect, at BJ. Once that new-member experience is over, then what happens?”

Jeannie says finding more intimate ways for congregants to get involved and to make connections is key. But those smaller groups still need to be in contact with one another and with the larger whole. At 89th



PHOTO: DENISE WAXMAN

*Original blueprint of 88th Street building exterior.*

Street, she adds, “There’s a lot of potential for that, and this brings us back to the building.”

In reacquiring it, our principal goals were “to create a single campus home where we could celebrate Shabbat together, have our offices and Hebrew School housed together, where the groups I’ve been talking about, whether it’s a children’s class, a teen group or an adult study group, could interact in more serendipitous ways. All of that is closely connected to the purchase of the building and our hopes for reuniting the community under one roof.”

And that aspiration raises another piece of Jeannie’s vision for us: governance, the ways we organize our day-to-day workings. As a result of B’nai Jeshurun having become, over the years, increasingly complex and multidimensional, we now have the

chance to try to implement a more nuanced structuring, involving shared responsibility and better communication. “We are not a small group anymore,” Jeannie points out. “With three rabbis and our *hazzan* leading a very large number of people, we need to create stronger and more effective partnerships throughout the community.”

“In the end, this is all really about creating the most vibrant community we can from an internal point of view as well as building a stronger platform for BJ to have an impact on the larger Jewish world.”

A critical piece of our dedication to our next chapter will be making sure that the administrative infrastructure is operating at top capacity, that the best people are in place, working hard to do the very best job they can, individually and collectively. Toward this end, Jeannie is thrilled that we are looking closely at all of our systems and procedures in the office, and that we are moving full steam ahead to strengthen our development department and senior management team. “It’s about sustaining ourselves so we can grow and support the programming and the impact that we all believe in.”

Finally, the huge task of reclaiming the building has, Jeannie concludes, “raised profound questions about how we understand our very real challenges related to money and sustainability in the context of our egalitarian community, being very committed to social justice and an egalitarian ethos within and beyond our walls. ... BJ is ultimately not about a building. It’s about the energy and spirit and vision; it’s about creating an opportunity for transformative experiences in Jewish life.” ■

*Sian Gibby has been a BJ member since 2005. She is the copy editor for Tablet Magazine and is writing a book about Jewish food.*

YOUTH & FAMILY EDUCATION

## BJ Teens Laboring and Learning in the D.R. A Conversation With Shoshi Rosenbaum

By Sian Gibby

**a** group of 17 BJ teens—plus staffers Shoshi Rosenbaum, Adam Roffman, and David Lieberman—returned to Santo Domingo, D.R., recently for a service-learning trip. I spoke to Shoshi on the phone, and she sounded physically tired (they did some serious physical labor there) but otherwise energized about the depth of the experience the teens, and the people working with them, had shared.

The trip was chiefly characterized by the labor. They stayed in Santo Domingo and worked on two projects, in the city and in a batey (bateys are neighborhoods or villages known for producing sugar cane) called San Luis. BJ partnered with an organization called Visions, which has ongoing projects in the region. This time, the group helped out with Visions' bigger projects by re-pouring and leveling concrete floors, in a community center and an elementary school.

Of the teens, 12 had gone on last year's trip. The returning ones felt pleased and encouraged to see places they had worked before and the progress that had been made since.

Shoshi said, "We learned the complicated process of mixing concrete, adding dirt to make mesclun, adding water, carrying the buckets, pouring it out, spreading it level. Alberto (the staff liaison from Visions) had some friends who were working on the

*(continued on page 8)*

...The big objective from our perspective, the staff and BJ rabbis, is to invest in our teens and give them an immersive, intensive experience, in a Jewish context, that's intertwined with Jewish values, and that involves really living out those values."



Scenes from the BJ service learning trip to the Dominican Republic.

## Post-NOLA Perspective

By Cara Geser

From Jan. 12-16, 2012, 37 of BJ's eighth- and ninth-graders went to New Orleans, La., (NOLA) to participate in a Service Learning Project with Teen Coordinator Shoshi Rosenbaum, Assistant Director of Education Emily Walsh, Hazzan Ari Priven, and B'nai Mitzvah tutor/teen educator David Lieberman. While in New Orleans, the group worked in the Ninth Ward, the area of New Orleans hit hardest by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Cara Geser reflected on her experience in New Orleans upon her return.

**a**s I was walking through my basement after the plane ride back from NOLA, I saw my house in a completely different way. All I could think about was the house that my group worked on, the house that been untouched since Katrina. In that house, all that was left was plaster on the floor, broken wood everywhere, and wooden poles in place of walls. I even found a few toys on the floor. I couldn't imagine my house with destroyed walls, our books and toys lying on the ground unclaimed. It was painful to imagine.

But I couldn't stop thinking about it, especially when I hung up my coat in the closet. The coat closet used to have shelves on the right wall that held hats, scarves, gloves, and other wintery things. We never worried about those shelves coming loose until one summer day when I was 10 and we heard a loud crash. My dad screamed and my family came running. He wasn't hurt,

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“ I couldn't imagine my house with destroyed walls, our books and toys lying on the ground unclaimed. ”



BJ teens in New Orleans, January 2012.



ALL PHOTOS PAGES 6, 7 AND 8 COURTESY SHOSHI ROSENBAUM

YOUTH & FAMILY EDUCATION

**BJ Teens in the D.R.** *continued from page 6*

process, so it was really neat to be working with Americans and Dominicans side by side.”

The BJ participants also taught English at the school. Shoshi said, “There were several strong Spanish speakers on the trip. It was amazing to watch them in the classrooms teaching English and just speaking to people in casual ways—making friends.”

■ **It’s important to encourage our teens to look differently at our material possessions, our values.”**

The group worked every morning, stopped for lunch, and then worked more. Their afternoons were centered around educational and recreational activities. They did some touring, saw beaches, visited Santo Domingo’s only synagogue, and spoke with the rabbi there. “We played baseball with the kids because it was baseball week at school. Some of our participants were really excited about that,” laughed Shoshi. They also visited more challenged batey communities, at which they witnessed alarming poverty levels.

They learned about complex political and economic issues in the D.R. Some Dominicans refer to bateys as “Haitian villages,” but the teens learned that some bateys were generations old; when do their residents become Dominicans? Do

they identify as Haitian or Dominican?

Some of the returning teens reconnected in Santo Domingo with kids they had met last year. Names and faces were recalled;

Facebook friendships were made. And, Shoshi said, “It was really moving that in one batey, where BJ teens had been, the little kids remembered them.”

When asked about Shabbat, Shoshi said, “We didn’t go to the synagogue because it wasn’t walking distance. The rabbi at the synagogue had given us some challah for Shabbat and we ate it Friday night and Saturday. It was delicious; comparable to NY challah!” Shabbat was very different: “Combined with the incredibly hard work these teens had been doing all week—so tiring, so physically demanding—Shabbat was a real break, a real rest; they felt it more than usual. So we talked about what it means to rest, and how the rest contributes to productive work. In the afternoon we played baseball and other games with local teens and kids.”

Shoshi said of the trip goals: “It’s important to encourage our teens to look differently at our material possessions, our values. We were living for more than a week in a place where we couldn’t flush our toilet paper,



where hot water and electricity weren’t dependable, and we were in a middle-class neighborhood. To keep that all in perspective really changes the ways we relate in our own lives when we come home. For all these teenagers it’s very meaningful to have had that experience first-hand.”

She concluded: “It’s a service learning trip. We’re doing hard work, building floors, and that’s something small we can do to be helpful. But the big objective from our perspective, the staff and BJ rabbis, is to invest in our teens and give them an immersive, intensive experience, in a Jewish context, that’s intertwined with Jewish values, and that involves really living out those values. They have to do with community, with bearing witness to some grave injustices in the world, figuring how to listen to the stories of the people that we connect with and how to bring those stories home with us.” She added, “I think of it as my job to insure that these trips are life-changing for our teens.” ■

**Post-NOLA Perspective** *continued from page 7*

though, just surprised. We looked everywhere to find the source of the noise, but found nothing until a week later.

My dad opened the coat closet and BAM! There were all of our gloves and hats and scarves on the floor, mixed with chunks of wood. The shelves had come crashing down like dominos, and the outcome of that was all over the closet floor. Again my dad screamed, and the rest of the family hurried downstairs, to see his feet covered in debris.

It didn’t take long to rebuild: three days to clean up the closet and by the fifth day we were repainting the walls. It was a little scary, but it didn’t seem like a big deal at the time. Our closet fell, but we cleaned it up, hooray! I went right back to my iPod touch. I was 10 years old.

But the closet is only one room in our entire house. After our trip, that closet crash means so much more. I can’t imagine my entire house looking identical to that closet, and leaving it looking that way for years. I can’t

imagine the amount of time it would take to clean and fix and rebuild everything. Yet somehow, that’s an everyday reality for the people of New Orleans. It’s easy to see the importance of Katrina when you visit New Orleans, but seeing aspects of Katrina in my own life in New York really helped me to take that message home. ■

*Cara Geser is an eighth-grade student at Fieldston. She volunteers at Tot Shabbat monthly and participates in the BJ Teen Program.*

## Learning the Service of the Heart ... in Hebrew

By Rise Dimson

Until I became a member of BJ I didn't feel the need to read Hebrew. I knew many prayers by heart and was content to read the English translation while the congregation prayed. At BJ the passion and the power of the tefilah made me want to add my voice to my newfound community. I had learned my "alef bet" and Hebrew words, but, like many of my generation, I lacked the ability to translate the prayers I chanted each Shabbat into English. After becoming proficient in reading I joined a Bat Torah class and was called to the Torah, celebrating this achievement with family and friends. I continued my studies by traveling to Israel with Roly and fellow congregants and attending the Shalom Hartman Institute. Later I enrolled in Me'ah, a two-year program focusing on the chronology of Jewish history. Though these experiences introduced me to text study, biblical history, and Torah study, I was not capable of delving into the meaning of the liturgy.

Six years ago I gave myself the gift of studying biblical Hebrew. My goal was to

Then we opened the Siddur and, with my dictionary, started to read and translate the Shema. I worked at home and in coffee shops, with Danny repeatedly writing the Hebrew and then the English."

unpack the words of the Siddur and the Torah, an ambitious endeavor for someone who is, as I am, dyslexic. I searched for and finally found a patient, dedicated, and brilliant teacher, Danny Mond. He taught me the rules of grammar and encouraged me to build my vocabulary. Then we opened the Siddur and, with my dictionary, started to read and translate the Shema. I worked at home and in coffee shops, with Danny repeatedly writing the Hebrew and then the English. After I had achieved a comfort level with the Shema, we translated the prayers that make up the K'riat Shema and then the Amidah, utilizing the same process. I loved doing my homework and found my lessons with Danny very fulfilling. The Siddur came alive in my hands and spoke quietly to me.

Several years into my studying, Danny expanded my study to include learning Torah. I asked Carol Dikman to be my hevruta partner. The writings of Rashi and Nehama Leibowitz formed the basis of our study, which was enriched with midrashim that Danny brought to each lesson. Line by line, Carol and I read and translated each parashah. After two and a half years of dedicated study we had taken in each word of Bereshit. We celebrated with our families and Danny's family. Danny's father is a rabbi, and he led a teaching to which Carol and I added our reflections.

When Danny took a full-time teaching position at Solomon Schechter School in Westchester, I envied his students. I am still finding it difficult to begin my search for a new teacher.

Did I accomplish my goal of learning biblical Hebrew? Yes and no. Yes, I can translate many of the prayers we daven on a regular basis. I find my interpretations resonate for me more profoundly than what is written in English in the Siddur. I find that the more I study, the more I grapple with what I don't know and want to learn. This journey never ends, as throughout the history of our people study remains one of the pillars of Judaism. ■

Rise Dimson has been a BJ member for 14 years.



PHOTO: PENNY DANNENBERG

Rise Dimson and Carol Dikman during a study trip in Israel.

לְכָה דוּדֵי לְקִרְאֵת פְּלִיאָה  
 שְׁמוֹר וְזָכוֹר בְּדַבְרוֹ אֶחָד  
 הַשְּׁמִיעֵנוּ אֵל הַמְּיוֹחָד.  
 יְהוּה אֶחָד וְשְׁמוֹ אֶחָד  
 לְשֵׁם וּלְתַפְאֵרֶת וּלְתִהְיֶיהָ  
 לְכָה דוּדֵי לְקִרְאֵת פְּלִיאָה  
 לְקִרְאֵת שַׁבָּת לְכוּ וּנְלָכוּ  
 כִּי הִיא מְקוֹר הַבְּרָכָה.  
 מֵרֵאשׁ מְקֻדָּם נְסוּבָה  
 סוּף מַעֲשֵׂה בְּמַחְשְׁבָה תְּחִלָּה

B'NOT TORAH

## B'not Torah Mark Milestones

By Rochelle Friedlich, Rutie Havazelet, and Monica Fuchs

**W**e'd been friends for years and were all approaching milestones: two of us were about to turn 50, and the third was about to complete her course of study at JTS. A Bat Torah ceremony felt like the perfect ritual to mark our respective transitions. We come from different Jewish backgrounds and levels of Jewish learning and experience. How could we create a process and structure that would meet our individual needs and expectations? Ultimately, the power of our commitment to one another and of our connection to BJ allowed us to trust that the process would evolve and that the pieces would come together as we moved along.

We began by meeting a few different times to clarify our goals for the experience, both individually and as a group, to reflect on, and share, what it meant for each of us to publicly recommit to Torah and to our community at this pivotal time in our lives. The shared excitement generated by those conversations also fueled our passion and forward movement. Monica contacted Ari in October to organize a date for the ceremony. Due to the number of Bar and Bat Mitzvahs scheduled, our choices were Christmas Day or Memorial Day! We chose the latter and then set out to find a Torah teacher.

**Rochelle:** Carrying the Torah through the congregation, my heart swelled to receive the sea of warm, familiar, and encouraging faces. As I turned the corner to reach the bimah, I could see tears in my father's eyes. The reception of joyous dancing and singing that followed at the bimah was overwhelming.

On the Shabbat during Sukkot, the three of us stood in the BJ sukkah, deeply engaged in conversation about how to organize our study. Just then, we happened to notice Harriet Goren standing nearby. There was our answer! Along with her attention to detail and her kind and patient encouragement, Harriet inspired us with her genuine love of Torah and her commitment to serve the BJ community. On the day that we were called to the Torah,

Roly commented about our amazing BJ community, where members, like Harriet, and her teacher, Lizzie Kraiem, learn to chant from BJ "vatikim,"\* and then become teachers who pass along the tradition.



PHOTO COURTESY ROCHELLE FRIEDLICH

From left: Rochelle Friedlich, Monica Fuchs, and Rutie Havazelet.

Another important part of our journey was our meeting with Felicia. She encouraged us to be deliberate and intentional about our preparation for the day to enhance its specialness and meaning. She suggested a preparatory visit to the mikvah. We compiled our own "script" of blessings and songs that helped us to appreciate the intimacy and power of this cleansing ritual.

The Shabbat morning service at which we were called to the Torah contained so many memorable highlights: Roly's d'var about transforming fear into possibility through responsibility and action; feeling the support of our rabbis on either side; receiving the beautiful blessing delivered with so much heart by Michelle Dardashti; and feeling the wave of love and support from the community—even people we

**Rutie:** While I chanted, my father stood behind me. I felt his pride. I saw his hand holding the etz and knew that he and I were both thinking about the same thing—my mother. Later, when my father walked down with us from the bimah after closing the ark, he said to all three of us: "I'm so proud of you girls. Judaism is poetry; you love the poetry."

**Monica:** I was one with the Torah, and so focused that I did not notice what was going on in front of me. Many friends told me that they had stood up out of respect. I could feel the warmth and the support of the rabbis. I thought of my father. Before his passing he had said to me: "I don't have to worry about you. You're not alone; you have Judaism. You are going to study."

didn't know approached us with hugs and congratulations.

Among the rewards of this experience was hearing people say afterwards that they were inspired by what we had done. They expressed a desire to do the same and were glad that adult Bat Torah ceremonies for groups of women were once again being celebrated at BJ. ■



PHOTO : MAX ORENSTEIN

**Rochelle Friedlich** has been a member of BJ for 17 years and works as a geriatric social worker for The Carter Burden Center for the Aging. **Monica Fuchs** has been a BJ member for 15 years and has a Master's degree in Jewish Studies. **Rutie Havazelet** has been a member of BJ for 15 years. She is a psychotherapist in private practice.

\* In modern Hebrew the word *vatik* (plural *vatikim*) means veteran, old-timer, senior. Originally *vatik* meant experienced, steady, earnest. God is described as *vatik* in some prayers, and a Talmudic source has God saying that He has made Israel *vatik* among the nations.

## Bret Schlesinger: Still a Fountain Pen

By Sam Bruce

**n**early everyone reading this has experienced arriving just in time for a packed B'nai Jeshurun Friday night service. We scan the crowd; seeking familiar faces while calculating the odds of finding one before every available seat has been claimed.

The next time this happens to you, take a moment to consider the hundreds of people who just passed through your gaze. It is always a highly diverse crowd in just about every way: age, profession, religious observance, where they live and how often they come, for starters. Think about how all these people have been influenced by this place and by each other and then imagine the myriad ways they in turn influence the world. Now multiply that by the thousands more who have been touched by this kehillah (community).

**He recalls BJ after the war as a congregation that could strike a balance between the political and the personal, as it still does."**

Bret Schlesinger is an accomplished artist who has done an array of ink-and-watercolor pieces on historic architecture and synagogues are a prominent feature of his portfolio. One of his illustrations, depicted here, was generously given to BJ and has for years been featured on BJ's notecards and postcards. It is of the interior of the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew (SPSA) with the banner that hangs there, where BJ has long prayed on Shabbat mornings. It perfectly captures and memorializes the long and important relationship between our congregations.

In a manner befitting an artist who captures the essence of historic places, Mr. Schlesinger was kind enough to share a personal perspective on the BJ of the '40s and '50s. He counts his grandmother, Birdie Spier, as one of the earliest and most important influences on his Jewish identity (hardly an uncommon influence, a Jewish grandmother). Her Jewish practice, much like that of BJ, did not exactly fit into any

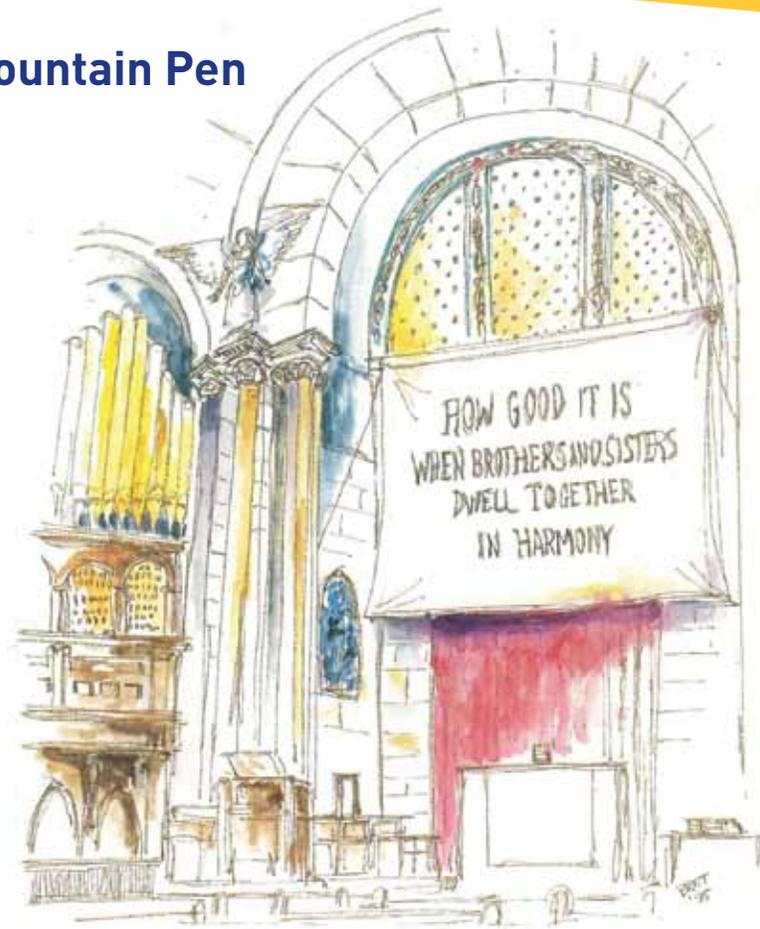


ILLUSTRATION: BRET SCHLESINGER

particular subdivision or label used by Jews to classify their brethren. There was not, however, anything ambiguous about how important the BJ community was to her. So extensive were her social connections here that she could sit in a pew and "hold court" with all the friends who came to see her at services. The Spier family maintains a prominent place within the BJ community to this day; Birdie's husband, Harry, has a stained-glass window on the sanctuary's left wall dedicated to his memory.

He recalls BJ after the war as a congregation that could strike a balance between the political and the personal, as it still does. Rabbi Israel Goldstein, BJ's rabbi for 42 years, a founder of Brandeis University, and a leader of national and international Jewish organizations delivered passionate sermons on the social issues of the day. During his tenure a young Mr. Schlesinger received a Jewish education with a tight-knit group of BJ classmates. Studying under the stern eye of Cantor Schwartz required the support

and friendship of his peers. This pre-teen community was essential to his success in reaching the goal of saying, "Today I am a fountain pen!" (the typical gift for a Bar Mitzvah during the era).

Becoming an adult meant a separation from BJ as Mr. Schlesinger attended college at Michigan State and later Brandeis University. He then embarked on a career of drawings and watercolors; his works were displayed at universities and galleries, including the Museum of Natural History, as well as in the book *Roam the Wild Country*. Architecture features prominently in Mr. Schlesinger's work, and synagogues in particular. His tour of world synagogues has gone as far afield as Bukhara, Uzbekistan. Through members like Bret Schlesinger, the spirit of B'nai Jeshurun reaches far and wide, even to the other side of the world. ■

*Sam Bruce has been a BJ member since 2008. A native of Virginia, he moved to New York to attend graduate school and now works in the field of forensic mental health.*

INTERFAITH

## Poetry in Motion

By Toni Siegel

And may my way through rooms be  
like finger-touches on piano keys.  
Tenderness, you ineffable name of God,  
be my image of God!

— from “My Seal,” published in *The Ineffable Name of God: Man*, by Abraham Joshua Heschel, 2004, Continuum International Publishing Group, New York

**t**his poem of Heschel’s, along with ones written by Islamic and Christian poets, introduced the Interfaith Poetry Feast in November. Three things to think about in that sentence: interfaith, poetry, and feast.

**The idea behind the dinners, when we first started them six years ago, was to find a way to help us meet one another.** “



Malikhah Pinkston and Rev. K Karpen.

Each year, the Interfaith Committee at BJ, in conjunction with SPSA, the Muslim Consultative Network, and the American Society for Muslim Advancement, hosts an interfaith vegetarian potluck dinner. There is usually a theme, ranging from music to the environment, autumn to (this year’s) poetry. We always have wonderful food and lots of good conversation as the tables are purposely set up to include members of all faiths. This year, our hosts, Revs. K Karpen and Julia Kristeller from SPSA, Rabbi Marcelo Bronstein, and Imam Tariq Towe, delivered beautiful prayers. We were also treated to a moving poem to honor Ven. Myo Ji Su Nim, Abbot of Korea Buddhism Jogei



PHOTOS: KHALID REHMAN

Temple as well as Persian and Sufi music played on an oud and a tanbour by Amir Vahab and his ensemble.

The idea behind the dinners, when we first started them six years ago, was to find a way to help us meet one another. That year, Yamim Nora’im fell during Ramadan—something that happens only every 33 years. Jenny Golub used this opportunity to organize an interfaith break-fast. Through her leadership, that break-fast has grown into annual interfaith dinners—feasts! Now, at each dinner, we meet old friends and make new ones. Although we share the same worship space, many BJ people had never met anyone from SPSA; many of us had never spoken to a Muslim. Not that we didn’t want to—we just hadn’t thought about it much and so it had never happened.

The interfaith collaboration on the dinner has brought us closer to each other, so although the events are held at SPSA, we are all hosts; we all welcome each other’s guests. After we chose poetry as the theme for this year’s event, we learned how important verse is to Islam and to modern Muslims. In planning the event, we had a discussion about what poetry means in each faith. For instance, the Quran is written poetically, but not considered poetry. Jenny and I debated whether we should contribute something from the Psalms or a more modern and secular poem. We settled on the poem above. Sabeeha Rehman, Megan Putney, and Debbie Almontaser, each representing Muslim organizations, chose spiritual, but not Quranic, works. K offered a verse from the Christian tradition, and Julia

from SPSA helped us all to write our own poems.

This year’s poetry feast was the best event yet. But that’s how we feel every year—probably because the interfaith connection just keeps getting more and more comfortable. This year, after we heard the words of great poets in the original and then in translation, we wrote our own poems to share at an open mic. Remarkably unselfconsciously ...

Over the years we have worked together, the group of people from each tradition who plan these dinners have become friends. We meet a few times a year to discuss and to schmooze and have found that our camaraderie has grown into deep affection and respect, a feeling, we believe, that extends to many of our guests as well.

As Debbie Almontaser of the Muslim Consultative Network commented:

When people come in to gatherings with open hearts, opportunities of common ground are boundless. After moments of inspiration, participants began to complete one another’s sentences through the rhyme and rhythm of poetry.

If you would like more information about the Interfaith Committee at BJ, please contact Belinda Lasky at [blasky@bj.org](mailto:blasky@bj.org). ■

*Toni Siegel, a longtime member of BJ, is the co-chair of the Interfaith Committee.*

## Mindfulness at the End of Life

By Robert Pollack

**O**ur brains do not contain minds at birth; a mind emerges through weeks, months, and years of interaction with some small number of other members of the species, usually but not necessarily our biological parents. For people in this role, the newborn must be of such deep meaning that he or she is fed and cared for despite being wholly without any utility to anyone. Our version of DNA does not encode a thought, but it does encode this path to mindfulness and meaning, through a survival strategy that depends on a novel human capacity for sharing—interdependence—to get us through an extended period of dependency.

We need love and are capable of giving love, both without measure; and from those inherited, inborn capacities emerges a human being with the sense that some acts are right and others wrong. This has been true for every human in all generations. It is equally true that this DNA-encoded strategy of survival through interdependence leaves us at risk of becoming an adult who chooses to live in a world of imagined, total independence.

Our version of DNA does not encode a thought, but it does encode this path to mindfulness and meaning, through a survival strategy that depends on a novel human capacity for sharing—interdependence—to get us through an extended period of dependency.”

In the end, whether one takes that path or whether one holds on to the experience of interdependency to become an adult who chooses to share in an interdependent way throughout a lifetime, we all have some sense of right and wrong linked to the biological necessity of freely given love in each of our pasts. If we do not know it earlier, we learn it when we return to a state of total dependency at its end.

As Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, whose siyyum on completion of his Talmud was only last year, said once to me in a conversation about evolution, “Ha Shem says to the angels, ‘Make for Me a creature who can decide to say Thank You. I do not care how.’”

That gets us to the question at hand: What is the place of religion in doctor-patient relations at the end of life? Let’s say that “religion” is the acknowledgement of the existence of right and wrong as meaningful despite their absence from nature. Then the place of religion, in all cases including the one we are addressing, is always the same. It is to insist that when we know something is wrong, we say it is wrong. That means we cannot ignore its wrongness even though right and wrong are not among the facts of nature as understood through science.

In particular, it means that we may not excuse wrong acts by a claim that they serve a “greater good for the greater number.” We know this from Pesah: Certainly the greater happiness of the greater number in Egypt was dependent upon a small number troublesome slaves to do the dirty work, even of making bricks without straw. But slavery, we know as Jews and as human beings, is wholly without love, and so always wrong.

Have we examples of current policies and future trends that make sense in political terms, in fiscal terms, in business terms, in utilitarian terms, and in professional terms, but that are wrong nevertheless? When we find such a situation, the place of religion is simply to say, “No, that’s wrong.”

Consider the work my colleagues and I are doing with the Terence Cardinal Cooke Hospital and the Archdiocese of New York. We are working to establish a procedural guide for all places where people are helped at the end of their lives, by physicians as well as by others. Our model involves bringing all helpers into the conversation with doctor and family, so that everyone who knows the person about to die contributes to the discussion of what that person’s wishes are likely to be.

Those wishes, rather than the person’s utility, are at the heart of the sacred component of this project. ■

*Professor Robert Pollack and his wife Amy have been members of BJ since 1994.*

DNA model

SHABBAT

## Communal Challah

By Sian Gibby

For the last couple of years I have been writing a book about Jewish food. The idea came about as I grew into my new life as a Jew (after going to the mikvah in 2005 and assuming the Hebrew name Shirah bat Avraham v' Sarah) and I realized that certain aspects of our culture, my new culture, came more easily than others did. Study and prayer habits were easy to slot myself into. And some other customs, like how to behave at a shiva minyan, took some learning about.

The most problematic part of my life as a conscientious Jew is clearly food. Even though I didn't come to Jewishness from a strongly defined food culture in my previous life, nevertheless I had trouble swallowing, as it were, some new-to-me foods, like lokshen kugel, gefilte fish, tzimmes, knishes. I decided, since I was finding it hard to get used to Ashkenazic foods, I should learn how to cook them.

It's true that, as Jews, we have an enormous array of different kinds of foods to claim in our traditions; Roly introduced me to a wonderful book about Syrian Jewish delicacies, and I have tried making several of those. As many of us who have been to Israel with BJ trips can attest, there's a panoply of delicious foods available in Israel, from a vast swath of traditions. So, eating

“When the loaves were at last braided and in the oven, Susan’s beautiful apartment was filled with an ancient and delicious aroma.”

“Jewishly” didn't only mean bialys and ptchah (calf's foot jelly) and cholent. Still, those are the foods that my community eats and serves me at lovely Shabbat and hagim meals. So, I set out to cook with members of my home community.



PHOTO: SIAN GIBBY

Susan with challot.

The most recent cooking adventure I had was with Susan Viuker Landau. When I first started this project in 2010, I tried, as my maiden voyage in the Jewish kitchen, baking challah. Then over the months, I made chopped liver,

flanken, matzo-ball soup, lemon chicken, a variety of kugels, Syrian ka'ak, Hungarian sour cherry cake, classic sponge cake, stuffed cabbage ... the list goes on. But challah may be the most basic, most Jewish food, right? Bread being the staple of any meal, and Shabbat having the central place in our tradition that it rightfully claims.

Susan generously proposed that the two of us team up to bake challah one Friday morning recently, and I accepted her offer with alacrity. So, one cold and frosty Friday, I arrived at her gracious apartment, and we gathered the ingredients and set to baking.

A great thing about challah is that it lends itself readily to communal manufacture. In the old days, Jewish women in shtetls used to make their challah dough at home and then bring it to the group ovens to bake. Also, on account of two stages of proofing (where the dough sits to rise in bulk), challah baking affords plenty of time for chatting and preparing for Shabbat. Susan and I, who hadn't known each other well up to that point, spent a fun morning schmoozing and looking at photo albums, sharing family stories and histories, discovering unlikely connections, readying ourselves for the Shabbat. When the loaves were at last braided and in the oven, Susan's beautiful apartment was filled with an ancient and delicious aroma. It really began to feel like Shabbat then!

We agreed it would be so great if more BJ people could do something like this, getting together to make the Sabbath loaves, evoking in a very basic and primal way a family and communal activity of blessing and celebration that Jewish women (and men!) have enjoyed and cherished for thousands of years: producing, with b'ezrat HaShem, God willing, the central foodstuff of the Sabbath meal, consecrating it, and further beautifying the holy day. ■



Ron Seitenbach, the Director of Finance and Administration for BJ for the last 10 years, died on March 8. He will be missed greatly by the BJ staff, and the entire community. He served our community with loyalty, commitment, dedication, skill and love. Ron died in March as this issue was going to press; he will be featured in an article in the July/August issue of the *Kol Hadash*.

PHOTO: DENISE WAXMAN



## Mazal Tov

To the following members and their families on their B'nai Mitzvah (March and April):

Emma Forman	Max Adelman
Sarah Mandel	Hannah Hooper
Eli Eshaghpour	Eitan Lewittes
Clara Citron	Laura Schwarz

To the following members and their families (through March 30):

- Ruth Lazarus and Michael Feldberg on the naming of their granddaughter, Anabelle Eve Levin.
- Susan Grobman Myers and Blake Myers on the naming of their daughters, Sophie and Annabel Myers.
- Leora Frankel and Andrew Sage, and Jules, Susan, and David Frankel on the birth of their daughter, granddaughter and niece, Miriam Rose Sage.
- Jonathan Adelsberg and Anita Sibony and Rosa Adelsberg on the birth of their son and brother, Marko Aleksandre.
- Deborah Brissman on the adoption of her daughter, Lena Isabel Anastasia.
- Marcy Einhorn on the engagement of her son, Benjamin Chynsky, to Jessica Feinberg.
- Michael Kark on his engagement to Keren Ritchie.
- Shelly Ostro on the engagement of his daughter, Randy Ostro, to Brian Moore.
- Adam, Richard, Rae, and Dan Janvey on Adam's engagement to Emily Cooper.
- Elisheva Hirshman-Green and Steven Finston, Debra Hirshman, and Myles Hirshman Roven on the marriage of Elisheva and Steven.
- Rabbis Eric and Jenny, Meirav, and Adi Solomon on the birth of their son and brother, Natan Yakar.
- Jenny Eisenberg on the birth of her son, Lev George Eisenberg.
- Sandra Serebin and Morton Cohen on the birth of Sandra's granddaughter, Morgan Lara Serebin.
- Shelley Simpson on the birth of her grandson, Keegan Oliver Simpson.
- Letty Cottin Pogrebin for being honored at the Jewish Women's Archive annual luncheon.
- BJHS teacher Saul Zebovitz on his marriage to Rebecca Lurie.
- Mark Lipsy on his engagement to Lisa Schlesinger.
- Jamie, Matthew, and Ella Mandelbaum on the birth of their son and brother, Levi Samuel.
- Ed, Ben, Marty, and Joey Brill and Micki Levin on Ben's marriage to Marie Papazoglou.
- Tara Goodman, Michael and Gavin Miller on the birth of their son and brother, Caden Levitt Miller.
- Elain, Barry and David Waldman on the birth and naming of their daughter and sister, Rebecca Rose Calmon Waldman.

## Condolences (through March 30)

**The community of B'nai Jeshurun mourns the death of**

Ron Seitenbach, Director of Finance for BJ, and we extend our condolences to his wife, Lori, his children, Justin and Johanna, his mother, Ilse, and his brother, Irwin.

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

- Debra and Susan Fine, Lauri Fine Friedman, Martin, Jordan, Abigail and Philip Schneider, Arnon, Allison and Pamela Mishkin, Shmulik, Ayal, Sivan, and Daphna Friedman on the death of Debra, Susan and Lauri's mother, Norma Fine.
- Edward Miller and Bena Green on the death of Ed's daughter, Stefanie Miller Jacobowitz.
- Leslie Nelson, Jill Hayman, and Remy and Micah Nelson on the death of Leslie's father, George Nelson.
- Bonnie Schwartz on the death of her father, Milton Schwartz.
- Larry, Eileen, Sydney and Tessa Butler on the death of Larry's mother, Rosemary Butler.
- Anna, Jacob, and Aaron Krayn on the death of Anna's father, Fridrikh Gurvich.
- Leah Negrin on the death of her grandmother, Helen Negrin.
- Barbara Jerud Lorch, Sydney, Samantha, Sandy, and Allison Lorch on the death of their father-in-law and grandfather, Harry Lorch.
- Richard, Lesley, Alexander, and Maxwell Baren on the death of Richard's mother, Anita Kaplan.
- Avi, Lorraine, and Maia Ashman on the death of Avi's father, Yaakov Ashman.
- Ann Kern, Jerome Gotkin, Jonathan and Beth Kern on the death of Ann's brother, Marty Powers.
- Judith Plaskow and Martha Ackelsberg on the death of Martha's father, Oscar Ackelsberg.
- Marcia Grossman, Steven, Piper, and Phoebe Fialkoff on the death of Marcia's mother, Estelle Grossman.
- Madelaine, Marc, and Cornelia Strauss on the death of Madelaine's mother, Catherine Miller.
- Ed Brill, Micki Levin, Ben, Marty, Joey, and Marie Brill on the death of Ed's brother, Michael Brill.
- Ilene Katz on the death of her sister, Celia Katz Trimboli.



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