

## Bless Them One by One JONAH GEFFEN, BJ RABBINIC FELLOW

Life is full of things to be blessed, and it is our responsibility to recognize this and act accordingly.”

*It was taught: Rabbi Meir used to say that a person is obligated to say one hundred blessings every day. For it is written: "Now Israel, what does Hashem your God ask of you?" (Talmud Bavli, Menachot 43b)*

This short braita (a statement or passage found in the Talmud that could have been included in the Mishnah, but is nowhere to be found in the Mishnah) has stuck with me since the day I first heard it. It brought to mind that old line, “count your blessings” that we have all heard so many times. It turns out that that line is from an old Christian hymn by Johnson Oatman, Jr. The chorus is:

*Count your blessings, name them one by one,  
 Count your blessings, see what God hath done!  
 Count your blessings, name them one by one,  
 And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.*

The hymn is to be a mantra of reflection, a reminder for us to sit back every once in a while and take stock of our lives and appreciate how wonderful creation is ... if we were only to pay attention. The message of the song being that when life feels hard, when the realities of the everyday are experienced as a heavy burden, if we focus on our blessings (the good things in our lives) we will be freed from the weight of the world and find ourselves blessed.

But that, of course, is not what Rabbi Meir was referring to, at least not in totality and certainly not in method. As our tradition understands it, the one hundred blessings that Rabbi Meir is talking about are blessings we make, blessings that we actually pronounce. Our tradition places great weight on the blessing. Blessings have a specific formula, an order of words that differentiates them from all other kinds of speech. We make a blessing before we eat, and once we are done eating. We bless wine to mark holy moments, and we have a long list of blessings for the everyday; recited over things like seeing a rainbow or an especially funny-looking person. Even the first tractate of the Mishna and the Talmud is Tractate Brakhot (blessings).

Rabbi Meir tells us that we must find a way to fit saying one hundred blessings into each day. His goal is the same as that old Christian hymn, namely that we spend our days ever mindful of the miracle of life and conscious of the works of the divine that we witness day in and day out. Still what Rabbi Meir is telling us to do is vastly different in method than the hymn. We are to recite one hundred blessings each day, regardless of mood, regardless of situation. Reciting these blessings is not a reaction to life, reciting these blessings is life! Life is full of things to

*(continued on page 11)*

### Hanukkah at BJ



PHOTO: BELINDA LASKY

*A season of light and shadow, page 14.*

Social Action/Social Justice . . . . . 2  
 Community . . . . . 4-5  
 Staff Spotlight . . . . . 6-7  
 Youth & Family Education . . . . . 8-10  
 Limud . . . . . 12-13  
 Hanukkah . . . . . 14  
 Announcements . . . . . 15  
 Contacts . . . . . 16

## inside:

**Dots for Books** . . . . . 2  
**Get To Know BJ Lingo** . . . . . 5  
**Orli Moss: BJ's New Bridge to Israel** . . . . . 6  
**The Membership Department Team** . . . . . 7  
**Educating and Advocating for LGBTQ Rights** . . . . . 8  
**Aviva's Blessing** . . . . . 12

## Dots for Books: BJ Reads Introduces a New Literacy Effort

By Larissa Wohl

**BJ** Reads is one of two literacy programs spearheaded by B'nai Jeshurun in New York City Public schools under the guidance of Sandy Davidson and Ellen Schecter. For three sessions every Monday and Wednesday during the school year, volunteers read one-on-one with first- and second-graders at PS 166 on the Upper West Side.

Walking into the cafeteria of PS 166 during BJ Reads may, at first glance, seem like your run of the mill reading program. Strewn about the long lunch tables are volunteers paired with small children, poring over books of various sizes and engaging in conversations, sometimes silly, sometimes inquisitive, and sometimes simple. Each time a child finishes a book, they choose a new one from baskets lined up in the back and receive a star for their efforts if they've read a book themselves.

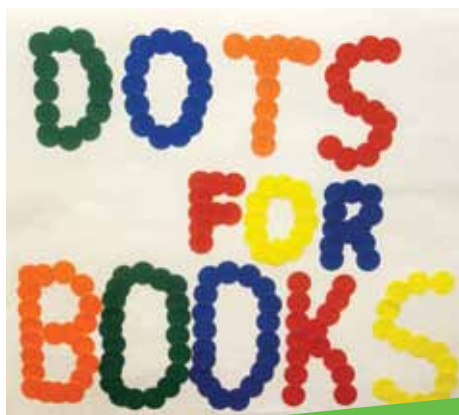
But, starting last spring, they don't just get to choose a new book; they also receive a colorful dot. Each week, Ellen Schecter, BJ Reads co-chair, tallies up the number of books or chapters each child has read and puts the correlating number of dots into an envelope. Every child receives his or her envelope of dots the week after finishing the books.

But what are the dots for? Do they go on the child's folder? On a chart next to their name? Do they get stuck to their clothes only to fall off after school?

They go on the cabinet that acts as their library.

Why the cabinet? Why the dots?

The Dots for Books project grew unexpectedly out of a YouTube video Ellen received from Ilene Nadel, a longtime volunteer with BJ Reads. The video showed an artist completely covering a white room—



white walls, ceilings, table, chairs—with dots. It made Ellen think of the cabinet that needed some beautifying, and so the project was born. Ellen recently wrote a piece on the Dots for Books program that was published in the Spring 2012 newsletter of the National Jewish Coalition for Literacy. In it she writes:

Our library is an ugly pink metal cabinet in the cafeteria, where we now have all our sessions. Once you open it, you find dozens and dozens of beautiful picture books for reading on all levels—but the cabinet itself is an aesthetic disaster.

Big Idea: Cover it with dozens of brightly colored dots. And connect the dots to reading.

How? All our children keep track of all the books read to them or that they read themselves. The ones they read themselves merit a star—that's how some first-graders learn how to draw stars ... and some of their stars are Jewish stars. So we counted up all the books each kid read this year up to the end of April, and gave them a dot for each book. Those who read chapter books got a dot for each chapter. And they now get a dot for each new book or chapter.

The kids are covering the cabinet dot by dot. It doesn't look beautiful YET ... but it will. And we'll continue next year till the pink is entirely covered by bursts of color. Each volunteer helps his/her child take turns putting up their dots so there isn't total chaos, and the kids patiently wait their turn.

Individual creativity is beginning to show up: a complicated flower pattern; a line of red flowing down the front; requests for adults to place dots up high where the kids can't reach.

Sandy and I were afraid Dots for Books might turn into a competition, but it



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hasn't. Some kids decide to hold onto their dots to decorate their own folders instead of the group activity, which is fine. We'll continue next year until the pink is totally covered. It will be so beautiful! We'll ask all the kids to sign one dot to show their participation.

Recently she added that "they are not competitive about it, or quickly reading books so they can get more dots, which I think is terrific." The kids are proud of the number of dots they earned, but that doesn't seem to push them to compete with their classmates over who had the most. It seems to be a personal accomplishment—the triumph of completing a new book or moving on to the next chapter—and they get to be part of something larger. Each dot is an individual accomplishment, and yet each dot helps to beautify the whole cabinet.

Ilene added that it was initially successful because it was a fun activity tied to their

**The kids are proud of the number of dots they earned, but that doesn't seem to push them to compete with their classmates over who had the most. ... Each dot is an individual accomplishment, and yet each dot helps to beautify the whole cabinet."**

achievements. It made them feel good about what they had accomplished and gave them something to look forward to. Sounds like a win-win situation to me. The students have something to show for the books they've read and the cabinet gets a much-needed makeover.

Sue Daniels, a five-year volunteer with the program, thinks that anything to make the space bright and cheery is a step in the right direction. The kids gravitate to the cabinet because it holds endless possibilities of new books to read.

Sue and Ilene spoke fondly of volunteering as Reading Partners in the program. Sue commented about the wonderful feeling of working with a child from October through May and seeing how that child grows in a love of reading. It is very important for the reading partner to make the experience fun and enjoyable and is a task she takes very seriously. She added that as someone who is older she has experienced a certain diminishment in her life, but every week, when she walks into the school and sees the kids coming down the stairs with their big smiles, and maybe even receives a hug, it gives her the best feeling. Ilene stands behind BJ Reads, emphasizing the impact it has on the children and the tangible differences she sees with her students every year.

Dots for Books is just one of the many ways BJ Reads engages the students of PS 166. The program emphasizes a strong relationship between the children and their Reading Partners. BJ Reads approaches reading through the enjoyment of stories, helping to develop a child's interest and love of reading good books as the first step toward the work of reading. Partners do not teach the children to read; rather they support the reading skills being learned in the classrooms. They work on phonics, root words, and breaking down words in syllables.

To make the process easier, Reading Partners begin by reading to the child until the child is ready to read to them.

PS 166, the Richard Rodgers School of Art and Technology, serves a diverse group of 600 students in grades K-5. It is a NYC Department of Education Empowerment School, which means the principal, not the Department of Education, controls both the curriculum and budget. PS 166 offers a wide range of programs to its students including a newly renovated science lab, a strong performing arts program, a visual arts studio, gardening workshops provided by the Horticultural Society of New York, and more. BJ Reads has been around for more than 15 years and is still going strong. ■



PHOTOS: DENISE WAXMAN

COMMUNITY

## The Gatekeeper

By Shari Kenner

**a** man many of us know was recently evaluating his life, lamenting the fact that he has not, he felt, accomplished enough. In his sixties, he regrets he has not done more, has not “made it big” in any way clearly discernable to him.

When he told me this, I was quite surprised—I see him as someone very special. One of his jobs is acting as a security guard at BJ. His name is Chaim.

He stands at the door, in our times of intermittent violence toward houses of worship, making sure people coming in are all really shul-goers and none of them others wishing to harm those inside. While diligent about his job, Chaim has made it into much, much more. He is the gatekeeper, on many levels, for those entering the portal of our synagogue.

**Chaim greets each one warmly, individually, asking where they need to go—the main davening, the children’s services, the teens? ”**

BJ is a large, busy synagogue, with hundreds of adults, children, teens, families, members, guests, those familiar with synagogues, those not, coming and going when he is at the door. Many leisurely stroll in, others rush. Children fly in and out. Some elderly slowly, hesitantly walk through the door. People speaking many languages come, those with various agendas, thoughts, and concerns.

Chaim greets each one warmly, individually, asking where they need to go—the main davening, the children’s services, the teens? Those coming later: the kiddush? The restrooms? To find family members? To find older children who left already, or little ones he has lassoed before they escaped?! Some not quite sure where they are going or what to expect inside?

Chaim, however, makes the effort and has the heart to go beyond just making sure we are safe, greeting everyone, and guiding those entering where they need to go. In what is usually an impersonal job, he knows each regular shul-goer by name. And that is only the beginning—he knows many of their life stories, because he cares to ask how they are—how things are going in their lives. He remembers what they told him and follows up each week on issues unique to them. They feel his warmth and caring and respond openly.

I see him talk to the children about their services or other events. He’ll catch toddlers as they’re trying to run out the door and escape their parents’ grasp for a moment of freedom. He can be found chatting with adults who come out to take a break for a few minutes. He greets the rabbis respectfully and asks them if they need anything. He quietly does other tasks in the building beyond the purview of his job that others don’t want to do and without telling anyone.

When my father died several years ago, Chaim came to the funeral in Queens and then paid a shiva call to me in Manhattan another day. One of the rabbis walked in while Chaim was there and looked surprised. Although thankful, I wasn’t. I knew this was typical of the heart of this man. Strong on the outside, capable of taking care of himself, he is soft on the inside and likes helping take care of others.

When he was lamenting recently if he had accomplished enough in his life, made an impact, I reacted with bewilderment. For I



PHOTO: DENISE WAXMAN

have seen him accomplish a great deal even in those few hours he is there.

Some people are meant to accomplish their tasks in life in a very public, up there way. Our rabbis stand in front of a large congregation like BJ every Shabbat. Other people, however, like Chaim, perhaps, are meant to accomplish quietly, behind the scenes in a much less obvious but no less important type of way.

Jacob, our forefather, dreamt once of a ladder connecting the earth to the heavens. It was a portal for reaching the highest heights. He didn’t know G-d was in that place, and when he discovered this, exclaimed, how wondrous is this place—ma nora hamakom hazeh.

Some people are like the ladder Jacob dreamt about—portals to the heavens, gatekeepers—to help others along in life, as Chaim so wonderfully is at our synagogue. ■

*Shari Kenner has been attending, lovingly, BJ for about the past 13 years. She is a social worker who works with people with developmental disabilities and psychiatric diagnoses, and she writes occasionally.*

## Get To Know BJ Lingo

**t**he BJ community is very large and comprises an enormous range of religious practice and knowledge. In order to make our services more accessible to all, including visitors, the Education and Communications Team of the Membership Steering Committee has developed the following glossary to explain words and phrases often heard in the Kabbalat Shabbat service. In addition to

**Arvit** – (also known as Ma’ariv) – From the word “erev,” meaning evening. It is the evening prayer service.

**Daven** – (Yiddish) to pray

**Erev** – Evening, as in the eve of a holiday. It signifies the beginning of a (Jewish) holiday. The Jewish day begins in the evening because in Genesis it says, “evening and morning were the first day.”

**Frankel Hall** – BJ’s social hall, located downstairs from the sanctuary

**Gemilut Hasadim** – Deeds of loving-kindness, such as feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, and burying the dead

**Hakhnasat Orhim** – Hospitality shown to guests

**Hazzan** – Cantor

**Kabbalat Shabbat** – Receiving of the Sabbath. It is the opening section of the Friday night service.

**Kabbalat Panim** – Welcoming faces. This is a group of BJ members who welcome and introduce visiting groups to our Friday evening services.

**Kadosh** – Designated, differentiated, consecrated, or set aside for a purpose. The term is used in many prayers to denote holiness.

**Kavannah** – Conscious thought or intention. It refers to the ideal state in which one should perform actions such as prayer.

**Kehillah Kedoshah** – Sacred community. This term is often used to describe the congregation.

**Kippah** – (plural: Kippot, also known as yarmulke) A head covering. The BJ tradition requires men to wear kippot during services, at Shabbat meals at the synagogue, and during study. Women are welcome to wear them as well.

**Kol Hadash (KH)** – *Kol Hadash*, meaning new voice, is BJ’s bi-monthly magazine. Read the current issue at [bj.org](http://bj.org).

**Kol Jeshurun (KJ)** – “Jeshurun” is a poetic name for Israel. *Kol Jeshurun*, meaning voice of Israel, is BJ’s weekly newsletter. Read the current issue at [bj.org](http://bj.org).

**Kol yoshvei tevel** – All who dwell on earth. This is a phrase used for all the rest of humanity (other than Israel). At BJ, the phrase is added after “al Kol Yisrael” to denote that we are praying for all of humanity.

**Ma’ariv** – (also known as Arvit) – From the word “erev,” meaning evening. It is the evening prayer service.

being printed here you will be able to request a copy from one of the greeters at the back of the Sanctuary when you arrive on Friday night. We hope that you will find this useful. We welcome suggestions for improving the Glossary; please send all comments to Joe Antenson, Jeremy Hamburg, or Lisa Friedman at [lfriedman@bj.org](mailto:lfriedman@bj.org). ■

**Morning minyan** – The daily morning service prayer group. On Monday and Thursday mornings the Torah is read. At least 10 participants are needed in order to pray the complete service, including the public Torah reading and the Mourner’s Kaddish.

**Niggun** – A tune or melody, it is a song without words.

**Oneg** – Joy or delight. A gathering after Friday night services is called an oneg.

**Panim el Panim** – Face to face. This is the name of BJ’s community organizing and advocacy initiative, which brings the community together in conversation around social justice issues and provides a collective base of ideas and individuals from which we are deepening and expanding BJ’s efforts toward tikkun olam, healing the world.

**Parasha** – Portion or section. This refers to a Torah portion.

**Parashat Hashavu’a** – The Torah portion of the week, it is also the name of the weekly class at BJ taught by a rabbinic fellow.


**Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972)** – Heschel was a scholar of Talmud, mysticism, and ethics who immigrated to the United States just before the Holocaust. He is considered by many to be one of the greatest Jewish theologians and philosophers of the past century. Heschel strove to integrate traditional Judaism into modern American life and was very active in the civil rights movement and protesting the Vietnam War. Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer, BJ’s rabbi from 1985-1993, was a student of Rabbi Heschel.

**Rosh Hodesh** – The first of the month. Rosh Hodesh is the beginning of each month on the Jewish calendar, which coincides with the new moon. It is also traditionally a celebration of women and femininity. At BJ, women gather to study, discuss, and celebrate together at these times.

**Siddur** – From the word “seder,” or order. The Siddur is the daily prayer book. The High Holy Day prayer book is called a *maḥzor*.

**Simha** – Happiness, a joyous occasion

**SPSA** – The Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew at 86th Street and West End Avenue. We are involved in a number of interfaith activities with SPSA, and BJ holds Shabbat morning services there during the winter.

**Yasher Koah** – Straight and strong. This is a phrase often used to recognize someone’s accomplishment and congratulate someone. 

STAFF SPOTLIGHT

## Orli Moss: BJ's New Bridge to Israel

By Adam Roffman

**W**hen I spoke to Orli Moss, BJ's new shliḥah, in late July, she was sitting in her home in Kfar Saba surrounded by boxes. Though Shabbat was coming in just a few hours, all of her attention was focused on moving her family—her husband, Jonathan; and her three children, Nomi, Tomer, and Ella-Poppy—to New York City in a matter of weeks.

Shaliaḥ means “messenger” or “emissary” in Hebrew; the plural of the word is Shliḥim. A Jewish Agency Shaliaḥ works in a wide variety of educational and communal settings providing a living bridge to Israel, engaging Jews with Israeli life and society and providing a critical resource for Israel education, engagement and advocacy.

At the top of the list of her priorities is Israel engagement: “Where within the community is there room to engage people further with Israel? If they are already engaged, what can I do to engage them further?” Orli hopes to build a long-term program at BJ for trips and missions to Israel—not just congregation-wide, but across various interest groups. For those who already plan to visit Israel, she hopes to serve as an adviser, “helping them to see the multivocal Israel” that she has grown to love.

“I really enjoy asking difficult questions that also allow me to grow as part of the process, together with the people that I’m working with. But I’ll also be doing lots of listening, as I get to know the community. I strongly believe you can learn from everybody.”

There’s a good fit there with how BJ works. During the selection process, Orli found the rabbis, Jeannie Blaustein, and staff both reassuring and inspiring. They spoke the same language: “Whilst everything is open to discussion, the nature of the conversation is such that it allows people to express themselves in a respectful way.”

“BJ is a place of integrity,” she told me. “People don’t just talk. A conversation with BJ members can really make a difference in how people behave. Marshall Meyer is

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an inspirational figure, and his legacy is one of drive and commitment. He built a community where people are in touch with what’s going on—people who want to be a real partner in the conversation, to be nurtured, and to grow in a very inspiring setting.”

Orli is also charged with further developing the partnerships and relationships that BJ has built with congregations and organizations in Israel, fostering exchanges between the two so that people can be hosted on a communitywide level. In other words, Orli sees herself as a bridge—with Israel on one side, and the American Jewish community on the other. Working in a dynamic, diverse, and savvy community such as BJ will allow her not only to serve as an educator, bringing people closer to Israel, but also to transmit what she learns about the richness of our community to the complex and changing landscape of Judaism in Israel.



PHOTO: MIKE ARNOLD

*Orli Moss with husband Jonathan Cummings and children Tomer, Nomi, and baby Ella Cummings.*

Born to South African parents who made aliyah, Orli grew up in the Masorti (Conservative) movement. She began her training as an informal Jewish education



PHOTO: YAIR MOSS

at the Melitz Institute, after which she worked with youth movements Young Judea, NFTY, and Netzer. As a professional Jewish educator, Orli has worked in a wide variety of settings. This year, she also began an MA in Jewish Education at the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem, as well as intensive training by the Jewish Agency before joining us at BJ.

Orli is tremendously excited about bringing BJ back to her homeland—not just after her return, but even during her two-year stay within the community. Using technology like Skype, she hopes to organize study opportunities with BJ’s partners in Israel for congregants and staff alike.

Orli’s arrival comes at the perfect time for the BJ community; our love for Israel has grown and become as complex as it is deep. Over the next two years, with honesty, openness, and caring, Orli hopes to guide us as a community toward a relationship of even greater maturity and understanding with Eretz Yisrael. At the same time, “slowly, slowly, as one starts to find more shades of gray than there have been before,” in Israeli Judaism, there remains much BJ can offer to our homeland. ■

## Cultivating, Connecting, and Clicking: The Membership Department Team

By Belinda Lasky and Lisa Friedman

**t**he Membership Department of B'nai Jeshurun supports and enhances the infrastructure of the BJ community. The two staff members of this department are Belinda Lasky, the Assistant Executive Director and Director of Membership, and Lisa Friedman, the Membership Associate. Belinda and Lisa are proud to partner with over 50 volunteers through a dozen membership committees and teams.

Lisa Friedman comes to us fresh off the plane from Jerusalem, where she recently spent six months on the WUJS (World Union of Jewish Students) Israel program. Lisa is no stranger to developing welcoming and inclusive communities. Before WUJS, she spent two years as the Program Director for the University at Albany Hillel, before which she spent two years as Jewish Student Life Coordinator at the University of Rhode Island Hillel. During Lisa's time with Hillel, her focus was on creating innovative group programming while also nurturing individual relationships and developing leadership initiatives. She has a love for education and tikkun olam, having led three service-learning trips to New Orleans and four Taglit-Birthright Israel trips.

While in Israel, Lisa interned in the Israel and Overseas office of the Jewish Federations of North America. She developed and evaluated programs aimed at providing social, educational, and cultural services to Israelis all over the country. Her major project focused on providing the means for Israeli organizations to build sustainable ventures aimed at building and strengthening the Negev. She was even spotlighted and filmed for Masa promotional materials, and when she returned to NYC, someone on the street recognized her from the video! Now, *that's* what we call a "small Jewish world."

Lisa's journey to BJ began even before she started in the office. For a long time, she has referred to herself as an "Under-Constructionist" Jew, explaining

that although she grew up in the Reform movement, she has always loved exploring the expansive variety of Jewish observance and tradition. While in Israel, she spent her time "shul-hopping"—visiting different synagogues and minyanim in the city. She made a symbolic decision to throw away any self-imposed boundaries and thoughtfully explore Judaism as a whole. She tried on different Jewish observances and traditions and found a more meaningful, relevant Judaism in the process. When she expressed concern about her return to the



Lisa Friedman and Belinda Lasky.

United States and how that would affect her observance, one of her roommates, a native Venezuelan who had been living in NYC, pointed her toward BJ. It must have been fated, because we are thrilled to have her as part of our community, and she is thrilled to be here!

Lisa serves as the staff liaison to the Education & Communications Team, the New Members Team, Tzei'rim, and Kabbalat Panim.

Belinda Lasky has had a long and diverse career serving the Jewish community. Originally from Westchester County, she decided to give the Southwest a try after college. She moved to Tucson to do outreach

Belinda and Lisa are proud to partner with over 50 volunteers through a dozen membership committees and teams."

work with college students at the Hillel Foundation at the University of Arizona. She and Lisa share stories about their Hillel careers.

After her stint out West, Belinda came back to New York where she received her Master's Degree in Social Work and a Certificate in Jewish Communal Services from the Wurzweiler School of Social Work at Yeshiva University. She then worked for several years at UJA-Federation of New York as a fundraiser in the Real Estate Division.

In December 2003, Belinda joined the BJ staff and since that time has delighted in meeting hundreds of members of the community, identifying and cultivating lay leaders, strategic planning through several critical membership initiatives, and connecting members to volunteer opportunities that fit their particular interests.

In addition to her programmatic role, Belinda also manages the seating and logistics for the High Holy Days, which includes new and renewing memberships and working with our many service locations. Seating 4,000 people is always an entertaining endeavor!

Belinda serves as the staff liaison to the Membership Steering Committee, Mekusharim, the new group for ages 35-55, the Interfaith Committee, Capturing Our Stories, and the Shalom BJ Welcoming Initiative.

You can find Lisa and Belinda at the BJ office, happy to help with any of your membership needs. ■

YOUTH & FAMILY EDUCATION

## Educating and Advocating for LGBTQ Rights

By Isaac Santelli

**i**n September of my seventh-grade year, Tyler Clementi, a student at Rutgers University, committed suicide. His roommate had watched him in a sexual encounter with another man via a webcam, and Clementi jumped to his death from the George Washington Bridge soon after. This and other gay youth suicides across the country sparked the “It gets better” campaign. These events, coupled with my interest in politics, inspired me to join the struggle to stand up against homophobic bullying and to support legislation for gay marriage.

Almost every night I sit at the dinner table with my parents and brother discussing a range of topics—anything from the war in Afghanistan to the different types of sexually transmitted infections and possible preventative measures. (My parents both work in public health.) These discussions,

along with my formal education, have allowed me to gain a better understanding of the world and helped me to form my own opinions. Throughout my life, I have been among the most privileged. I am not a member of any historically disadvantaged group. I believe that all people deserve equal rights—and those rights extend to marriage. To live out these beliefs, I chose to work with two different organizations around marriage equality and homophobic bullying for my bar mitzvah social-justice project.

Keshet, the first organization I worked with, educates people to speak up about homophobic bullying. With help from the gay-rights working group at my synagogue, I created a presentation about the discrimination that homosexual students around the country face on a daily basis. I spoke to my Hebrew school classmates,

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friends, and family about what everyone can do to stop bullying. Approximately 95 percent of the people with whom I spoke pledged not to commit acts of homophobic bullying and to intervene when they saw it occurring. I did not feel awkward or nervous because I felt so passionate about the work I was doing, and the power it had to transform lives.

The second element of the project was campaigning for marriage equality legislation. In May 2011 my mother and I went to Albany with a group from BJ to advocate for LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Questioning) rights. I was the only young adult in the group of 40 people. When we first got off the bus, we went into a presentation room and sat at tables by the district we were representing. Although my family lives in New York City, we went to the table for the upstate district in which our summer home is located. We did this because our senator from New York City was one of the leaders of the movement whereas the senator from my upstate district was less likely to vote in favor of the legislation.

Despite not being an adult, I led off the meeting with Sen. Nozzolio from Wayne County, N. Y., our upstate district. I talked about having three homosexual teachers, who were among my favorites, and how one was insulted because of her sexuality. I also







spoke about how the homophobic bullying I see on a regular basis affects our school community. Others told stories and talked about the different ways discrimination has affected them. Afterward, I went to the youth meeting, where I was one of the only non-LGBTQ youth in the room. Everyone was friendly, but I felt awkward. This gave me a great sense of what it feels like to be the “other” in the room and helped me build an even greater sense of empathy for LGBTQ youth. ■

*Isaac Santelli is a member of B'nai Jeshurun who has been a part of the community since second grade. He is going to the High School of American Studies at Lehman College this year as a freshman and looks forward to learning about American history and building a new computer.*

*Top: Isaac talks with Senator Michael F. Nozzolio and constituents outside the NY State Senate Chamber in Albany. Right: Isaac at rally outside the New York State Capital Building.*



PHOTOS: JENNIFER HIRSCH

YOUTH & FAMILY EDUCATION

# Tibet: Creating Awareness and Connections

By Rachel Fischer

**a**round my 11th birthday, I became aware of the plight of the Tibetan people. My mitzvah project was to look for ways to help them.

My research led me to two organizations; Free Tibet, a political organization based in the UK to advocate for the rights of the Tibetan people; and the Tibetan Children's Village (TCV), an educational community for Tibetan children in exile.

Many people, I discovered, were unaware of Tibet's dire situation. So, I created awareness bracelets reading "COMPASSION" on one side and "Free Tibet!" on the other. Anyone who donated \$3 or more to TCV could receive a bracelet. The bracelets all my friends were suddenly wearing stirred up so much conversation at school, that the Head of the School requested I conduct a presentation about

**The bracelets all my friends were suddenly wearing stirred up so much conversation at school, that the Head of the School requested I conduct a presentation about Tibet. After that, the whole middle school and even some teachers learned about Tibet's current status."**

So, I collected warm winter clothing for TCV. I also asked them if I could pen-pal some of their students, and shortly after, I received letters in the mail from three girls living at TCV. They wrote inspiring stories about themselves, in better English than my Tibetan, and I wrote back. Eventually, I made my bat mitzvah invitations, and in them I requested donations to TCV and Free Tibet and mentioned that I would happily distribute bracelets. Each guest also received an invitation to create a virtual yak on a website I created with the help of a Free



PHOTO: KAREN SUSSAN

writing the Tibetan girls. Our discussions remind me that there are people like me halfway around the world, but also that I am working for their welfare. They have told me that by merely writing them, I have made



Tibet. After that, the whole middle school and even some teachers learned about Tibet's current status.

That summer my friend and I sold bracelets outside a coffee shop. I was glad I had enlightened so many people about Tibet. However I felt like I needed to do something for the children directly.

Tibet representative, thanks to my parents' donation in honor of my becoming a bat mitzvah. When a guest visited the website, they could accessorize their own yak, while being educated about Tibet.

I have not completed my bat mitzvah project yet, and I'm not sure if I ever will. I have already donated \$900 to the organizations, collected four bags of clothing, and sold 200 bracelets. My favorite part of the project is

them feel more visible. And that, by itself, is a huge success. ■

*Rachel Fischer (above) is entering Suffern High School. She has been a member BJ since birth, loves reading Torah and haftarah, currently participates in Rosh Hodesh: It's a Girl Thing! and had a wonderful time on the recent BJ teen trip to New Orleans. She also enjoys art and competitive gymnastics.*

## Bless Them One by One JONAH GEFFEN continued from page 1

be blessed, and it is our responsibility to recognize this and act accordingly.

And still, this really seems tough. One hundred blessings! How could that even be possible?

I did the math; assuming 16 waking hours in a day, that's saying a blessing about once every 10 minutes. That is an extraordinary level of mindfulness and one that's exceedingly difficult to maintain. And so, as usual, Jewish practice developed to make such seemingly daunting tasks possible.

If one were to pray all three daily services (Arvit, Shaḥarit, Minḥa), that would hit 91 blessings. Which leaves only nine more to say in the course of your day. Take on a practice of saying blessings before and after you eat, and voilá! At least one hundred blessings each day.

But it's not that simple, because the reality is that I certainly don't manage to pray three times each day (as much as I may want to), and so I assume this is true for you as well. This is our contemporary reality.

Take on a practice of saying blessings before and after you eat, and voilá! At least one hundred blessings each day.”

On the same page of Talmud where Rabbi Meir's quote comes from, we actually find a list of quotes of his. And read in a row as they are presented, they seem a bit disconnected from one another ... until they're read through the eyes of that old Christian hymn,

*Count your blessings, name them one by one,  
Count your blessings, see what God hath done!*

*Count your blessings, name them one by one,  
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.*

With the help of this hymn, it becomes clear that Rabbi Meir is actually sending us this same message. Pay attention, he seems to say. Pay attention! *See what God hath done!* Paying attention to the small things, like the color blue on the threads on a tallit, those little things actually draw your attention to the grandeur of the universe.



Israel sky.

The opportunities for us to say blessings are endless, all we need to do is decide to try. Maybe in the morning you take your Siddur off the shelf and open it up to birkot hashahar (the morning blessings). Maybe learn the blessing said over a rainbow, or for seeing beautiful scenes of nature, or for hearing thunder, or wearing new clothes (all of these actually exist!). Maybe start blessing your food. Maybe commit to coming to the morning minyan every once in a while.

The truth is, you don't have to get to a hundred, but just trying will open your eyes. *Count your blessings, bless them one by one, Count your blessings, see what God hath done.* ■

The Red Sea.



PHOTO, TOP: AMBROWN. BOTTOM: JAKE\_GAGNE

LIMUD

## Avivah's Blessing

By Susan Reimer-Torn

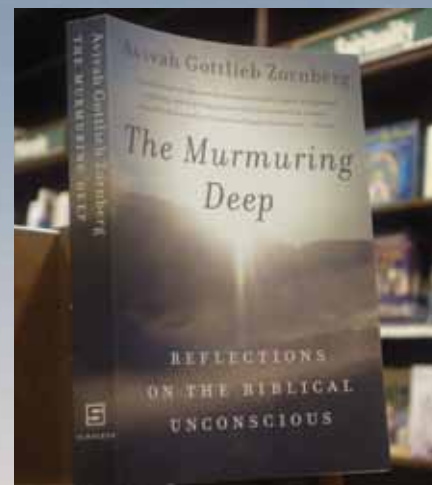
When women share a heady excitement this Mother's Day, and I am among them. For the past two years we have been studying Avivah Zornberg's *Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious*. As our completion of the book coincides with Dr. Zornberg's annual U.S. lecture tour, she has agreed to join us for an at-home siyyum or traditional celebration at the home of Toni Siegel.

For the past two years, this BJ-based group organized by Ann Millman has been on a collective journey. By studying Zornberg together, we have acquired navigation skills. We begin with a query raised by the biblical text or the fate of a character, we look for clues in language, then bring in a wide scope of commentaries. We then overlay it all with an indispensable psychoanalytic lens. We redistill the message of the midrash and marvel at the expression of a similar thought somewhere in the repository of world literature. Only it is much more of a freely associative flow than a precise formula.

If this were but an elegant and intricate exercise of the mind orchestrated by a leading biblical commentator of our day, it would suffice. But the Zornberg journey has an inescapable personal component; it awakens a parallel inner quest, calling for self exploration and beckoning the baring of souls. We are a diverse group, BJ-based, of various educational and professional backgrounds. But we have bonded through this shared study and now we are welcoming Avivah into our midst.

Our guest settles in a high-backed armchair as a blossom-scented breeze arises from the river. I recall how she once described a blessing as a fragrant aroma, something ethereal and invisible, yet potent like perfume, leaving a trace, capable of shifting dispositions and prompting new awareness. A blessing, like a teaching, is a catalyst of personal refinement. We are, most appropriately, in the period of the Omer, leading to Shavuot and revelation.

As requested, we have sent her questions in advance, but she lets us know she



prefers to dispense with formal structure. Unmoored, I push the wrong button on my tape recorder leaving us without a historical record. But in keeping with the tone of the day, we have a potpourri of notes, a treasury of murmured insights, an assemblage of shorthand suggestions, the sort of intimated insights and glimpsed gems that always give Zornberg her unique sparkle.

“We are a diverse group, BJ-based, of various educational and professional backgrounds. But we have bonded through this shared study and now we are welcoming Avivah into our midst.”

“Communication takes place in the unconscious realm. This is the realm of the midrash, of disturbance, provocation, and ambiguity in the real world.”

On the eve of the Shavuot holiday when the heavens are auspiciously aligned, I recall how in all that she said there were whispered hints about increasing receptivity. In the season of revelation, she was diffusing infinite longing for a fullness of being. I decant from our notes so that we might share Avivah Zornberg's teaching along with the blessing blowing on the scented breeze.

**Seven Blessings From Studying With Avivah Zornberg:**

Avivah Zornberg learned Torah from her father, beginning at a young age. He had two daughters, and he taught each of them at home, daily and separately. Share your learning with someone, one on one so she gets to know why she is unique and the many ways in which she is fully human.

God speaks to us through human beings. Therefore there is a great urgency for us to clear out anything that does not allow us to become our truest, most conductive selves. Take a few deep breaths as neshama is the Divine inspiration of the neshama, the soul.

Erotic energy informs and animates everything. Love of another, or of God, love of this life, or of the spiritual life is the remaining adventure. Rapture ... desire ... seduction ... all these speak of allowing ourselves to be plucked up and transported somewhere else. Even as things change, let life be informed by desire.

Communication takes place in the unconscious realm. This is the realm of the midrash, of disturbance, provocation, and ambiguity in the real world. The more we let that in, the richer our lives become and the closer we move to real understanding.

Women reside in the hidden sphere, the realm of soulfulness murmuring deep. The rush to compete out there and the willingness to attune to inwardness ... each of these has a different quality. Women would do well to know the difference and move with grace between the two.

To be human we have to acknowledge the despair, the terror, the anger, the fear, the resentment of God. Reconciliation arises in stillness, in the nearly inaudible whisper of the heart.

Where might a human being stand? How do we hold the center with so little certainty, so much instability? Where is our platform? In the search for certainty we risk self-deception.

Abiding truth comes to us as fragrant whispers, there is no need to proclaim. ■

*Susan Reimer-Torn is an author, executive coach and BJ member. She blogs on her travels with Roly in Talmud land and other things at [susanrtorn.wordpress.com](http://susanrtorn.wordpress.com).*

*Avivah Zornberg's website: [www.avivahzornberg.com](http://www.avivahzornberg.com)*



PHOTOS: LEFT, DEBBI COOPER, [WWW.DEBBICOOPER.CO.IL](http://WWW.DEBBICOOPER.CO.IL). OPPOSITE PAGE, DENISE WAXMAN. BACKGROUND, JONAS\_K.

“Women reside in the hidden sphere, the realm of soulfulness murmuring deep. The rush to compete out there and the willingness to attune to inwardness ... each of these has a different quality.”

HANUKKAH

# Hanukkah Lights

By Robert Pollack

**T**he miracle of Hanukkah is light, more light than the world of Greek science of the day could imagine to be possible. The festival is celebrated each year in the month of least light and longest darkness, just at the end of the waning of the moon, as even more darkness surrounds us. HaNerot Hallelu are a hope, a prayer, and an offering of light, in the expectation of light coming back to us. And every year so far, light has come back, first with the dawn, then with the waxing of the new moon, then with the longer days of spring. Well and good.

But for some of us—the intellectual descendants of those of the Y’vanim who were the world’s first scientists—the gift of longer days each year is shadowed by the clarity with which we can explain it as one of the consequences of being on a planet that tilts on its axis of rotation as its moon rotates around it and as both planet and moon travel in an annual ellipse around our sun. Another even more radical diminishment of the miraculous lies in the picture of the universe we have through science.

The world of nature of which we and our sun are a part has its own beginning, about 13.7 billion years ago, in an instant at which both time and space began. As time has gone forward, the universe has expanded from that dimensionless point until today it is of unknown volume. At the same time as it has expanded, the material within space has been gathered into clumps, and clumps of clumps, by the force of gravity. Today our sun is one of 100 billion suns in the clump we call the Milky Way, our galaxy.

The problem with this picture is not that it is inaccurate so far, but that it is incomplete. Gravity is not strong enough to account for the clumping that has occurred, unless the universe is filled with a kind of matter that contributes its mass to gravity but that does not interact at all with the energy and atoms we are made of; we call this material “dark matter,” and there is much more of it in the universe than there is of the stuff we are made of.

Space may go on in all directions beyond this radius, but since nothing in nature travels faster than light, no information from beyond that radius can have reached us in the time since the universe began.”

And that’s not even yet a complete picture: The universe is expanding too fast for it to have been flung out by an initial push. We call the energy that causes the universe to expand ever faster “dark energy.” The material we are made of and the forces that hold it together, including the material of our candles and the energy of the light they shed, are made up of only a small minority of the material and forces that permeate the universe.

More shadow: Light itself sets a cap on what we may know of the universe. The universe that we can know is a sphere 13.7 billion light years in radius in all directions from us; a light year is the distance light travels in a year, traveling at about 300,000 kilometers/second. Space may go on in all directions beyond this radius, but since nothing in nature travels faster than light, no information from beyond that radius can have reached us in the time since the universe began.

The lights of nature that we can and now do know, therefore, include not only our candles and our sun, but also the hundred billion suns of our galaxy and a similar number of similar suns in each of about a hundred billion other galaxies in the observable universe. More curious than any other fact of nature, our candles matter more than all those ten thousand billion billion suns: the lights they shed on Hanukkah are full of meaning.

Meanings are not in nature, except when we find them there.

*Robert Pollack and his wife Amy have been members of BJ since 1994. He’s a Professor at Columbia University, and the Director of the Center for the Study of Science and Religion.*

PHOTO: ENASA/JPL-CALTECH, D. FIGER (SPACE TELESCOPE SCIENCE INSTITUTE/ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY) AND THE GLIMPSE LEGACY TEAM OF E. CHURCHWELL, B. BABLER, M. MEADE, AND B. WHITNEY (UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN), AND R. INDEBETOUW (UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA).

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## Mazal Tov

**To the following members and their families on their B'nai Mitzvah (September and October):**

Eli Schiff	Curtis Motulsky
Eli Kline	Sabina Sternklar-Davis
Jesse Davis	Maxwell Singer
Aaron Priven	Sam Antar
Bina Schatsky	

**To the following members and their families (through August 24):**

- David and Michele Slifka on the birth of their twins.
- Michael, Rebecca, and Lila Kelberg on the birth of their son and brother, Lucas Albert.
- Carl Leibowitz and Jason Horowitz on the birth of their daughter, Tova Samantha.
- Rabbi Rebecca Rosenthal, Adam and Simon Arenson and Ruth Jarmul, Irv, Rachel, and Sarah Rosenthal on the birth of their son, brother, grandson, and nephew, Leo Evan Rosenthal Arenson.
- Lenore Ruben on the birth of her granddaughter, Sasha Beth Levenson.
- Shira Nadich Levin and James Levin on the engagement of their son, Benjamin, to Sara Jonisch.
- Susanne Stern Catinella on her engagement to Marc Deitch.
- Dana Kalfas on her engagement to Jesse Bodine.
- Bernice and Nadia Todres on the birth of their grandson and nephew, Benjamin Isaac Todres.
- Susan Thal on the marriage of her daughter Gabrielle Thal-Pruzan to Jesse Horowitz.
- Scott Weiner and Beth Siegel on the birth of their grandson, Evan Zachary Mallo.
- David, Marian, and Caroline Landau on the wedding of their son and brother, Brian Daniel, to Arielle Densen.
- David and Julie Schwartz on the birth of their granddaughter, Elinor Mae Schwartz-Noar.

## Condolences (through August 24)

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

- Stacey Merel, Ron, Leah, and Samuel Taffel and their entire family on the death of Stacey's mother, Frances Merel.
- Joy Sardinsky on the death of her father, Sol Sardinsky.
- Helen Rubinstein on the death of her brother, Michael Rubinstein.
- Connie and Steven Robinson on the death of Connie's brother, Ken Kaiserman.



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Accounts Payable.....227  
Accounts Receivable.....237  
Adult Education Information .... 233  
Bar/Bat Mitzvah .....223  
Bikkur Holim.....233  
BJ Reads .....391  
Communications.....275  
Community Programs .....255  
Conversion .....261  
Daily Minyan.....232  
Development  
& Donation Information .....228

88th Street Rental.....255  
Family Activities: Hotline.....318  
Hakhnasat Or<sup>h</sup>im.....255  
Havurot.....255  
Hevra Kadisha ..... 233  
Homeless Shelter .....212-339-4250  
Interfaith Committee ..... 379  
Kiddush Scheduling .....255  
Kol Jeshurun.....275  
Kol Hadash.....275  
Life Cycles.....233  
Lunch Program.....338  
Mekusharim.....224

Membership Information.....224  
Ralph Bunche School  
Partnership ..... 301  
Social Action .....259  
Teen Programming.....242  
Torah/Haftarah Reading.....232  
Tze'irim ..... 250  
Ushering.....233  
Visiting Groups.....250  
Volunteer Information .....255  
Youth & Family Education .....225

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