

» JEWISH DISABILITY, AWARENESS & INCLUSION MONTH

# Jewish Observer

A publication of the Jewish Federation of Central New York

## of Central New York

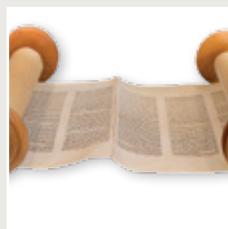
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## POST-GAZA JUDAISM



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## From the Editor



Barbara Davis

“U.S. faith levels plummet to lowest on record” screamed the headline. “Fewer than half of Americans now say religion is an important part of their daily lives, a 17-percentage point drop since 2015, which ranks among the largest declines in the world, according to a new Gallup poll.”

So we are not alone. It’s not just the Jews who are abandoning the pews. The United States was once exceptional among wealthy nations for its high religiosity. Ten years ago, 66% of Americans said that religion was essential to their daily lives. Today that number is 49%. An unprecedented 15,000 churches in the U.S. closed last year, far more than the few thousand expected to open. A record number of Americans (29%) are identifying as religiously unaffiliated and while 62% identify as Christians, that number is down from 78% in 2007, according to the Pew Research Center.

Our people are not doing so much better. Fewer Jewish Americans attend services weekly compared to the general U.S. population. While 2.4% of U.S. adults identify as Jewish by religion, many more identify with Jewish culture or ethnicity. Religiosity is strongly tied to specific movements: Orthodox Jews are much more likely to report religion as very important than those in the Reform or Conservative movements. About 12% of Jewish Americans attend religious services at least weekly, compared to 27% of all U.S. adults. Only 21% of Jewish Americans say religion is “very important” in their lives, while 53% say it is “not too” or “not at all important.” About a quarter of Jewish Americans (26%) believe in God “as described in the Bible,” compared to 56% of all U.S. adults.

Recent surveys have also uncovered increasing fragmentation within the American Jewish world. Respondents cited widening ideological divides around Israel, politics and religious observance as threats to unity. Writing in *The Forward* in September 2025, columnist Jay Michaelson asked whether the war in Gaza “has changed Judaism itself.” Michaelson said, “There is no question, of course, that the war has changed the Jewish community, especially in the United States. We are more divided than ever, calcified into three camps: for the war, against the war, and conflicted about but now mostly against it.” These three camps, he says, “rarely speak to one another anymore; we’re exhausted by the rhetoric, and by one another. And many of us are horrified at what Israel’s nationalistic leaders are capable of doing. We can never un-see these things.”

Rabbi Sharon Brous, leader of the independent IKAR congregation in Los Angeles, has said, “What we are facing today is a spiritual catastrophe, and what is at stake is not just the future of the state of Israel, but the very soul of the Jewish people.” Not all prominent rabbis are in agreement, but they all share deep concerns about the present moment. Rabbi Shmuley Boteach wrote that Jews today “need spiritual leaders who roar with pride. Rabbis who declare that Israel is our shield, our heart, our destiny. Rabbis who teach that Israel’s war is not only just but holy -- a fight for the survival of the Jewish people against the forces of annihilation”.

Peter Beinart, in his book *Being Jewish after the Destruction of Gaza*, argues that the devastation of Gaza forces Jews to confront a profound moral crisis: Jewish identity can no longer rest primarily on narratives of victimhood or unquestioned

loyalty to Israel but must instead grapple with Jewish responsibility for Palestinian suffering. He dismantles the rhetorical “ways of not seeing” that allow many Jews to excuse or ignore mass death in Gaza, challenges Jewish exceptionalism and the sacralization of the state, and calls for a reimagining of Judaism rooted in justice, equality, and human dignity.

An article by *Forward* reporter Louis Keene, who covers the Orthodox community, included the following statement: “For more than a century, the American Jewish consensus has been a deeply liberal one, reflected in mainstream institutions as well as cultural depictions. Orthodox Jews have never controlled the narrative of Jewish identity because they represent just a tenth of American Jews.” He points out, however, that “as Orthodox Jews have allied with the Christian right, there has been a values exchange. Orthodox Jewish organizations are now participants in the weakening of the separation of church and state, which liberal Jews tend to see as the bedrock of Jewish success and security in this country.”

What 2026 holds for the Jewish community is an open question. It has been said that “Jewish text study reminds us that engaging across differences is actually a way to strengthen Jewish peoplehood. When we learn to talk through hard issues with those who share our core values, history and culture, we build deeper connections through our differences. This is the Jewish cultural goldmine: not uniformity, but the sacred act of arguing *l’shem shamayim*,” for the sake of heaven.”

This issue of the *Jewish Observer* deals with several concerning issues in the post-Gaza Jewish world. On the positive side is an article detailing the major innovations and strides that Israel has made in the agricultural realm, despite the losses suffered during the war – a potent reminder of all that this small country has done to improve the world and a highlight of our recognition of *Tu b’Shevat*, the New Year of the Trees. Other articles deal with issues of disability and inclusion, because February is Jewish Disability, Awareness and Inclusion Month. One of these articles specifically highlights another topic that may quickly rise to the top of the political agenda in the wake of a new book by Suzanne O’Sullivan entitled *The Age of Diagnosis: How Our Obsession with Medical Labels Is Making Us Sicker*.

Finally, on another happy note, we celebrate in photos the wonderful success of our 2026 campaign kickoff event which **defied gravity**, was extremely **popular** and was a **Wicked** hit with young and old. The Federation’s annual campaign which was inaugurated by this extravaganza is the foundation of our Jewish communal life, providing the essential infrastructure that supports our local Jewish community as well as Jewish communities worldwide, connecting us to care for one another, respond to crises together, and build vibrant Jewish life for generations to come.

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## MESSAGE FROM MARK SEGEL Federation President & CEO



### A Light in the Darkness: Why Our Support for Israel is a Global Imperative

**The lights of Chanukkah—the Festival of Lights—were dimmed by an unspeakable shadow. The horrific, antisemitic terrorist attack that struck a Chanukkah celebration on Sydney’s Bondi Beach the first night of Chanukkah, claiming the lives of at least 15 innocent people, including children and a revered rabbi, is a devastating wake-up call. It was an act of pure, unadulterated hatred, one that reverberates across every Jewish community worldwide, including our own here in Central New York.**

This massacre, which took place in a country long viewed as an oasis of tolerance, is the tragic, extreme manifestation of a trend we have been watching with growing alarm: the **unprecedented, global surge in antisemitism.**

The fifth and final pillar of those I’ve been sharing with you these last few months is **support for Israel.** Since the horrific attacks of October 7, 2023, the Jewish world has been contending with a crisis of security and belonging. Organizations worldwide, like the Community Security Trust (CST) and the Combat Antisemitism Movement (CAM), have documented staggering increases in anti-Jewish incidents. One report shows a **107.7% global increase in antisemitic incidents in 2024**, fueled by a toxic convergence of far-left, far-right, and Islamist extremism. Even in places like Australia and Italy, countries that once felt immune, antisemitism has reached historic highs. Our community, too, has felt the chill of heightened security needs and the pain of seeing hate normalized in public spaces and on social media.

This is not merely a political issue; it is an existential one. When Jewish families celebrating a holiday—a simple, joyous act of identity—are slaughtered in cold blood on a public beach, it underscores a terrifying reality: Jews, simply for being Jewish, remain a target, even in the furthest corners of the earth.

It is in this stark, unforgiving global climate that the purpose and importance of the **State of Israel** shines brighter and more crucially than ever before.

Israel is more than a geographic or political entity; it is the **eternal, sovereign sanctuary of the Jewish people.**

It represents the culmination of a 2,000-year dream for a place where Jews could determine their own destiny, free from the whims and hatreds of others. The Bondi Beach massacre reminds us that while we are committed to building vibrant Jewish life in Central New York and advocating for safety everywhere, there must always be a bedrock, a final guarantor of Jewish safety. That bedrock is Israel.

For the Jewish Federation of Central New York, support for Israel is not an abstract political position—it is a moral and practical imperative. Our commitment is demonstrated through:

- **Security and Solidarity:** Our Federation immediately stood in solidarity with the victims in Sydney. Furthermore, our funds support security initiatives in Israel and here in Central New York, directly protecting our synagogues and institutions from the kind of hate that manifested violently in Australia.
- **Aliyah and Absorption:** We support programs that help Jews from around the world make *aliyah* (immigration) to Israel, providing a haven for those who, like the community in Australia, may now feel a profound sense of insecurity in their home countries.
- **People-to-People Connections:** We foster vital connections with our partners in Israel, reminding us that we are one global Jewish family. Our support helps Israelis rebuild their lives and communities, especially those affected by ongoing conflict and terrorism.

To those who believe that criticizing Israeli government policy somehow separates them from the Jewish people—the events in Sydney prove otherwise. The perpetrators of hate do not distinguish between Orthodox, Reform, secular, or politically engaged Jews. They only see a target. In the face of this indiscriminate hatred, our community must be absolutely unified.

**Our response to the darkness of antisemitism must be an unapologetic increase in light.**

We must redouble our commitment to our Jewish values, to educating our children, and to celebrating our identity publicly and proudly. Most importantly, we must ensure the continued strength and resilience of the one Jewish state.

The attack in Sydney was a devastating act of terror, but it will not break our spirit. It must instead solidify our resolve. We mourn with the families of the victims, and we vow that their memories will spur us to action. Let us continue to support the Jewish Federation’s vital work, for it is through this collective strength—locally, globally, and in our unbreakable bond with Israel—that we can ensure Jewish continuity and security in a world that clearly still demands a sovereign Jewish home.

**Although Chanukkah has passed, it still serves as a reminder to let us all be a light against the growing darkness. Let us be united. Let us be strong. Let us be unequivocally supportive of Israel.**

### Federation’s New CFO: Terry St. Amour



“I am a hardworking and driven individual who strives to be the best at everything I do. I have had many different unique working experiences throughout my life, which have helped to make me a more rounded person and get a sense of what I want to do in my life.” This is how Federation’s new Chief Financial Officer, Terry St. Amour, describes himself. St. Amour is a Syracuse-based administrative and financial professional whose career has centered on strengthening the operational backbone of local organizations. A graduate of SUNY Oswego a bachelor of science degree in business administration, he built

early expertise in accounting and financial systems during his years at Grossman St. Amour CPAs, PLLC, where he worked from 2012 to 2016 in billing and collections for one of Central New York’s leading accounting firms. He then worked for five years as fiscal and human resources manager for Nephrology Associates of Syracuse, P.C., overseeing both the financial management and HR functions of the medical practice. His background reflects a consistent focus on precision, organizational stewardship, and the practical business skills that support Syracuse’s professional and healthcare communities. Federation President & CEO Mark Segel said, “We are very excited to have Terry join the small but mighty Federation team. Our plan is to grow and strengthen the Federation over the coming years and Terry will play a significant role in our future success.”

Happy Valentine's Day

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# Every Whistle Welcome: Becoming a True Sanctuary

by Rabbi Oren Steinitz, Congregation Beth Shalom-Chevra Shas

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we read the Haftarah which tells the story of Hannah's prayer. Hannah, desperate for a child, went up to the Temple in Shilo, and prayed with everything she had in her. Eili the Priest watched her in her prayer and noticed that she was mouthing the words but not making any sound, so he mistakenly thought she was drunk and scolded her for drinking in the Temple. "No, my lord," she answered, "wine or liquor I have not drunk, but I have been pouring my heart unto God!" Embarrassed by his own behavior, Eili apologizes and tell her that he hopes her prayers will be answered.



You know that Hannah was indeed blessed with a child—the Prophet Samuel. But the story does not end there. The rabbis of the Talmud were so impressed with Hannah's prayer that they used it as a model for proper Jewish prayer. The *halakha* of how to pray the Amidah (the only part of the service that the rabbis considered to be "prayer") is that you must mouth the words with your lips but not make any sound that is intelligible to the person standing next to you.

Think about that for a second. From its very beginning, Jewish prayer has been modelled after someone who did not appear to be praying "normally." Someone who prayed in a way that was considered completely inappropriate for a place of worship. Someone who, quite frankly, appeared to be a little odd.

Why would the rabbis do that? Why would they set a standard for Jewish prayer that is so different? It doesn't end with prayer though. Traditional Jewish life has always been different. A little on the quirky side. Try and picture a traditional *beis madresh* or a yeshiva. Chances are that the image you come

up with would be of a busy, noisy room, filled with ever-so-slightly shabby men rocking back and forth at their *shtenders*, chanting from old yellowing books in a sing-song, arguing about the tiniest details of laws, some of them about Temple rituals abandoned over 2000 years ago. How does a place like that look to an outsider? Honestly—how does it look to *us*? What may seem foreign, bizarre, even scary to the outside world, has been the heartbeat of our tradition for centuries.

When Rabbi Ruti Regan was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 2017, a newspaper article tried to name her as "the first autistic rabbi." She found it very amusing. "I may be the first one to *admit* it," she said, "but I'm certainly not the only one." "What do you do in a *beit midrash*?" she asked, "You sit in the same place, learn with the same people, study the same texts, ask the same questions for hours on end, as you rock back and forth, and talk to each other in a sing-songy voice." For Regan, the rabbinate is a natural place for people on the autism spectrum; it is a calling 'that has sanctified the cognitive skills, the movements, and communication styles often associated with neurodiversity.'

Rabbi Regan's point is very simple. What the world calls "strange," Judaism calls "holy." I want to take it a step further. For the last two hundred years or so, in an attempt to make Judaism more "palatable" to the wider world, we have insisted on orderly services instead of lively *davening*, grand architecture in place of functional spaces, and polite responsive readings instead of the natural hum of the *shtiebel*. Psychologists now have a term for this kind of thing. They call it "masking"—the effort of hiding one's natural way of thinking, moving or communicating in order to fit in. Masking can make someone look like they belong, but it leaves them drained and depleted. If that is what we have been set on doing for the last two centuries, is it really surprising that so many Jews feel uncomfortable in the synagogue and other Jewish spaces?

The Breslover Rebbe taught that a community cannot call itself a congregation until it has at least one person who sings off-key. But the truth is, a congregation is not truly alive without the unexpected sounds, movements, and interruptions that may feel disruptive at first: the kid who cannot sit still, the adult who always needs their same seat, the question that bursts out right the middle of a *d'var torah*, the baby crying in the middle of the silent Amidah, the person who gets audibly annoyed when the *davener* uses the "wrong" melody for *l'cha dodi*. Without them, we would not be a truly Jewish congregation.

There is an old Hassidic story about Yom Kippur: The candlelit synagogue was full to the brim. The hazzan sang beautifully, the Hassidim were praying with all their strength, not leaving out a single word of the *machzor*. In the back of the shul sat a young shepherd boy who could not read. He

desperately wanted to join the prayers, to offer *something* to God, but he did not know how. Then he remembered the little shepherd's whistle in his pocket. At the height of the service, he blew his whistle—one sharp, piercing note.

The congregation gasped in horror. How dare he disrupt the holiest day with this childish noise? But the Rebbe—some say it was the Baal Shem Tov himself—banged on his *shtender* and silenced the raging crowd. "This young boy's whistle opened the Gates of Heaven more than all our words," he said, "because it came straight from the heart."

That whistle was not sacrilegious, and it was not a disruption—it was the sound of a soul that refused to mask and insisted that it too had something to offer.

We take a lot of pride in our congregations, and we have a lot to take pride in. We genuinely feel that we do a lot in terms of not only accepting but celebrating differences. But there is always more we can do. It is one thing to celebrate diversity when it doesn't bother us, but are we able to welcome every whistle, every cry, and every quirk? Are we okay with unexpected sounds and movements that others—and we ourselves—may find disruptive? Will we be able to say, "Come here, and be exactly who you are"? Can we say: "it is difficult enough to be Jewish in this world—we will not make you change to fit in"?

If we can, then our congregations will be more than communities. They will be true sanctuaries.



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# Judaism and Difference

**Judaism provides complex and often deeply compassionate teachings about the meaning of human difference. Within biblical texts, rabbinic literature, and modern Jewish thought, disability is neither hidden nor dismissed. Instead, Jewish sources consistently raise questions about dignity, leadership, power, and the nature of human diversity.**

The foundation of Jewish thought on disability begins with the most universal statement in the Torah: that all human beings are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. Genesis 1:26–27 declares, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness... So God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” This single theological assertion becomes the anchor for much of the Jewish tradition’s insistence on the equal and inherent worth of every person. Modern Jewish disability-inclusion initiatives repeatedly return to this verse, noting that if every person reflects God, then no physical, cognitive, or sensory difference can reduce that sacred status.

The Torah’s ethical laws further codify this principle. Leviticus 19:14 commands, “You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your God: I am the LORD.” This verse is among the strongest early statements in world literature affirming the responsibility of a society toward people with disabilities. Rabbinic tradition expands it metaphorically: a “stumbling block” is not only a physical obstruction but any barrier—economic, social, moral, or institutional—that prevents someone from full participation in community life. The final phrase, “fear your God,” signals that the way one treats people with disabilities is inseparable from one’s religious and ethical standing.

Perhaps the most striking biblical moment involving disability is seen when God commands Moses to lead the Israelites, Moses demurs, saying, “Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words... I am slow of speech and slow of tongue” (Exodus 4:10). God’s response is astonishing in its directness: “Who makes man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?” (Exodus 4:11). The Torah here explicitly places disability within the realm of divine creation—not punishment, not defect, but part of the human condition that God declares to be purposeful. Moses, a man with a speech impairment, becomes the greatest prophet and leader in Jewish history, modeling inclusion not through theory but through lived example.

Rabbinic literature continues the conversation. The *Mishneh Torah* (*Hilchot Berachot* 10:12) records blessings recited upon seeing people with visible physical differences. One says, “Blessed...who makes people different.” Rather than a prayer of pity, this blessing recognizes diversity as a feature of creation. Rav Abraham ben David and later halachic commentators note that such blessings teach gratitude for the variety and uniqueness inherent in humanity. In this sense, disability is not hidden in Judaism; it is named, acknowledged, and even blessed.

Another rabbinic text, from *Pirkei Avot* 4:3, advises: “Do not despise any person, and do not be dismissive of anything, for there is no person who does not have his hour, and there is no thing that does not have its place.” This teaching has often been read as an ethical corrective against ableism: no individual can be dismissed as valueless, because every soul has a moment of unique contribution. Every human being has a role in the divine tapestry of creation.

One of the most poetic and challenging rabbinic visions appears in *Sanhedrin* 98a, where Elijah reveals that the Messiah sits among the sick and suffering. The Talmud describes the Messiah as sitting with the other infirm people, loosening and tying one bandage at a time so that he will be ready when redemption comes. Symbolically, this connects suffering and sacredness, suggesting that divine redemption is not distant from disability

but intimately present within it.

Modern Jewish thought deepens these themes. Rabbi Sid Schwarz writes of the blessing “who makes people different” and observes: “The default behavior of human beings is to judge others based on how similar or different they are from us... The insight inherent in the blessing is that no two people are alike.” He recounts his relationship with a young man with Down syndrome whose weekly smile became “his gift.” Rabbi Schwarz’s reflection reframes disability as a source of human connection and sacred presence.

Rabbi Benjamin Hecht of *Yad HaChazakah* emphasizes dignity and empowerment: “We all need each other, some more and some less. The obligation to care about others calls upon each of us to help one another...The inalienable right of the human being to possess and maintain dignity demands that we ensure our caring empowers the individual...that our acts of giving...have the intent to empower... to meet their Divine potential.” His interpretation grounds disability inclusion in mutual responsibility and the pursuit of each person’s “Divine potential,” echoing the theology of creation in God’s image.

In Judaism, disability is not viewed as a deviation from the human norm but as a dimension of human existence fully encompassed by divine creation. The ethical commands surrounding disability are not peripheral to Jewish life but central to covenantal responsibility. Leaders like Moses show that disability places no limits on spiritual or communal authority. Rabbinic teachings insist that every person has worth, every person has a moment, and every person has a place. Modern thinkers echo these convictions by emphasizing empowerment, dignity, and the inherent value of difference.

Judaism does not merely call for accommodation. It calls for recognition

that people with disabilities reflect the image of God, teach the community about compassion and diversity, and contribute essential gifts to collective spiritual life. Disability is neither an obstacle nor a flaw; it is a call to build a world without stumbling blocks, where every individual’s sacred potential can be realized.

The 21st century Jewish community still has a way to go in its treatment of people of differing abilities. According to the U.S. Center for Disease Control, 1 in 4 American adults have at least one family member with a disability. “Closing the Inclusion Gap,” a recent study by the disability inclusion nonprofit Matan, found that Jewish organizations lag behind secular ones in making their spaces accessible for people with disabilities, despite intentions to be welcoming. The study, conducted from 2018–2025 through surveys, interviews and focus groups of 15 communities across the U.S., showed that inclusion is “a very solvable problem,” according to Meredith Polsky, Matan’s executive director, but it’s a problem that if left festering will cost the Jewish community not only Jews with disabilities, but the families who care for them. Polsky’s message is powerful: “This work is not just about access—it’s about belonging. It’s about ensuring that people with disabilities are not merely present in Jewish spaces, but that they are valued, heard, and empowered as essential contributors to our communal life. It’s about recognizing that inclusion is not a destination, but an ongoing process that requires continual reflection, adaptation, and accountability. We must examine who holds power, who sets the norms, and who is still waiting to be invited in—not only physically, but spiritually and communally. The Jewish community has shown what is possible when we commit to change. Now we need to go further.”



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# FEDERATION 2026 CAMPAIGN KICKOFF



# Front Row Players at Temple Adath Yeshurun

*“Our goal is not for a perfect show.*

*We ask all that attend to listen with their heart, see with understanding, and experience with pride all the work and growth that has occurred.”*

Front Row Players is one of Syracuse’s most inspiring cultural endeavors, providing inclusive performing arts opportunities for adults of all abilities. As one early supporter put it, the group gives people the chance to be “an integral part of something magical.” The magic is not simply the applause or the bright lights—it is the joy of being seen and celebrated for one’s talent and dedication. FRP offers instruction in acting, singing, and choreography, with professional instructors nurturing each actor’s voice. Sharing that voice promotes awareness, inclusion, and confidence.

Temple Adath Yeshurun member Iris Evans serves on the Front Row Players board. Her grandson was diagnosed with autism at age two and is now twelve. She explains that “the vast majority of the Front Row Players are high functioning autistic people. Two of them were born with Down’s Syndrome. Despite the obstacles they have experienced in their lives, they are productive as individuals and as a group.” Front Row Players began a decade ago with 13 members but now has 38 participants. “There is a strong partnership between Temple Adath Yeshurun and the Front Row Players,” Evans says. “They have performed at Temple Adath three times per year during the past couple years.”

Board member Leo Eisner, Evans’ significant other, says that after taking her grandson to a performance, “his reactions, enjoyment, were so encouraging, that convincing my company, Halo Branded Solutions, to co-sponsor events with me, was easy. We have supported every performance financially and attended each production and fund raisers.” Eisner cites the late Jim Valvano, former NC State coach: “There are three things we all should do every day. We should do this every day of our lives.



Number one is laugh. You should laugh every day. Number two is think. You should spend some time in thought. Number three is you should have your emotions moved to tears, could be happiness or joy. But think about it. If you laugh, you think and you cry, that’s a full day.” For Eisner, watching Front Row Players satisfies all three, “giving me a perfect day that day.”

The organization puts on two shows annually and has a special relationship with Temple Adath Yeshurun. Executive Director Alicia Gross said that “Temple Adath Yeshurun is honored to host Front Row Players throughout the year

and to provide them with a true home where their talents can shine for the entire community. What began as a simple rental has grown into a genuine partnership—one in which we support one another during our respective events and celebrate each other’s successes.” Rabbi Moshe Saks added, “It’s with great joy that we are able to provide the space for Front Row Players, a supremely noble endeavor for inclusion of those who face challenges in their lives. Although the organization is not Jewish, they certainly reflect the Jewish values of welcoming and reaching out in community to those in need.”



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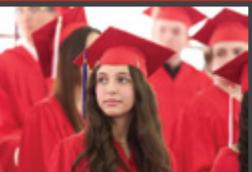


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There has been a notable surge in the demand for mental health services within Israeli and diasporic Jewish communities in the aftermath of the October 7th attack on Israel and subsequent Israel-Hamas war, according to the American Psychological Association. At the same time, there is growing concern about the overdiagnosis and misdiagnosis of children with mental health conditions in a society that has lost sight of the fact that child development is a complex interplay between a child's biological characteristics and the environment. Psychologist Michael Gordon addresses this issue in the following article.

## On the Distinction Between Symptoms and Impairment

by Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

I just finished speaking with the daughter of dear friends. She was concerned about her 10-year-old son, whom I'll call Max, who had gotten into another minor altercation at school followed by a brief "meltdown." Two years earlier, for similar reasons, she had taken him for a psychiatric evaluation at a major medical center. He was initially diagnosed with ADHD, and shortly afterward autism was added. He was also tried on several medications—stimulants and antidepressants among them. According to her, none of those interventions helped over time.

Children are notorious for traipsing in and out of typicality. Some "get with the program" early and often, others don't even know there is a program until their brains myelinate a bit, and still others encounter circumstances that push them temporarily off-track. Deviations from perfection are the rule, not the exception. If we diagnosed every child who went through a phase of being inattentive or oppositional as having ADHD, we might as well put Ritalin in the water supply.

The first step in diagnosis is assessing how much the child's behavior truly deviates from appropriate expectations. Are the symptoms impairing the youngster's ability to function? If so, how seriously? Across which settings: school, home, socially? When did the problems start—and are they improving or worsening?

Good mental health care begins with a clear understanding of severity and impact. You don't want to swat mosquitoes with a cannon or fend off a tiger with a toothpick. Whatever the challenge may be, a proportional response is best.

However, many providers move quickly to treatment recommendations before establishing the scope of the problem. They may hear about a symptom and presume a disorder that needs remediation. Reports of sadness must mean depression; worry must mean anxiety; inattention must mean ADHD, and so on. Labels can be applied even when the presenting concern may reflect personality traits or temporary developmental fluctuations rather than a fixed psychiatric condition. While many children unquestionably face serious challenges that warrant an assertive response, others may be going through short-term struggles or facing others' reactions to their personality style.

Which brings us back to Max. His story illustrates the risks of premature diagnosis. From what his mother shared, he did have occasional behavioral outbursts at school, particularly in the months after moving from another city. These incidents were noticeable and upsetting—but generally resolved within ten minutes. His teachers reported that he was at grade level in math and



reading, though they believed he could do better if he were more attentive. He had a few good friends and was well-liked overall. In other words, he was operating within normal limits despite some challenges with adjustment.

Max's mother was reluctant to pursue another evaluation because she felt the first one had distracted her from more appropriate interventions. She told me that the providers never addressed what she considered the central question: "Are his difficulties substantial enough to require formal psychiatric treatment?" Instead, he was labeled, medicated, and sent on his way. She couldn't shake the feeling that the treatments "didn't work" because there simply wasn't enough of a problem for them to work on.

She was also troubled that Max had begun referring to himself as a "nut job" who needed medication because "his brain was broken." That is one of the potential hazards of moving too quickly

to psychiatric treatment. If a youngster truly is in distress, treatment can be life changing. But when a relatively typical child begins to believe something is fundamentally wrong with them, it can subtly erode their developing sense of self. Sometimes, initiating treatment too aggressively or too early can have unintended consequences—a poor self-esteem being one of them.

I don't begrudge any parent who seeks help when a child's development seems to be veering off-track. That impulse is often caring and appropriate. It's just unfortunate that so many clinicians fail to provide them with the perspective they need to make sensible decisions. In Max's case, professionals rushing to judgment might have created a detour away from more appropriate treatment. His path makes clear that when we leap to labels instead of understanding, we may end up treating the diagnosis instead of the child.

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# Post-Gaza *Tu b'Shevat*

*“The Lord will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty,  
to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands.  
You will lend to many nations but will borrow from none.”*

*D'varim 28:12*

The *kibbutzim*, *moshavim*, and independent farms of the western Negev are the breadbasket of Israel, supplying 75% of Israel's vegetables, 20% of fruit, and 6.5% of milk, as well as other products. On October 7, Hamas targeted and destroyed farm equipment and infrastructure, stealing or destroying irrigation pipes, computers, tractors and specialized farming vehicles. “Hamas came to destroy our identity, our community and our agriculture,” said Moran Freibach, head of agriculture and security for Kibbutz Nahal Oz. “Our victory is to go back to our fields and make them green again.”



Rebecca Caspi, senior vice president of the Jewish Federations of North America, noted that “so much of what Israel has achieved in the agricultural field is based on the groundbreaking science and the commitment not only to feed ourselves, but also so much of this knowledge and so much of what we've developed here is exported by Israel to

the developing world and to the parts of the world that are challenged to grow under very dry conditions. That is also part of the Zionist vision of how as a Jewish people we can help repair the world. Repairing the damages at home is just a steppingstone to allow us to continue that work of improving our world.”



In Israel, agriculture is more than food production—it is a story of resilience, ingenuity, and global impact. From ancient harvest traditions to cutting-edge laboratories, Israel has transformed a survival-based necessity into a powerhouse of agri-tech that blends science, sustainability, and diplomacy. Agriculture in Israel is at once ancient, experimental, resilient, and far-reaching. Israel has developed technologies like vertical “agricultural walls,” where crops grow in tightly arranged columns along a 70-meter façade, use minimal water and take full advantage of Israel's famously efficient irrigation culture. Drip irrigation—Israel's signature agricultural innovation—has transformed arid farming, not only domestically but in dozens of other countries that struggle with drought or salinity.

Research from Hebrew University has dramatically extended the shelf life of vegetables without refrigeration, helping farmers and distributors reduce waste across the supply chain. In parallel, Israeli companies are using plant-based waste to develop new eco-materials, illustrating the ways agri-tech intersects with sustainability and food science. The fresh-produce supply chain reveals some of the most futuristic aspects of Israel's agricultural economy. Eshet Eilon, a fruit exporter, uses spectral imaging to scan each piece of fruit for disease and imperfections. Software-driven solutions, such as Pointer Software Systems' PickApp, give farmers real-time data about harvest quality, labor productivity, and crop conditions. These digital layers turn the field into a controlled ecosystem, part monitoring station, part laboratory.

Israel's fisheries and dairy sectors are also innovating. Ventures like LivinGreen build modular fish farms adaptable to dense urban spaces or remote regions. Israel's dairy industry produces world-leading milk yields despite a decrease in the overall number of farms in another example of how technology, animal science, and data integration produce a counterintuitive result.

Israeli know-how is exported globally. Specialists deliver drip-irrigation training in Swaziland, sharing techniques that allow farmers in drought-prone areas to survive climate stress. Indian/Israeli ag-tech accelerators showcase Israeli water management solutions, and Israeli-built agricultural systems operate in Papua New Guinea and other nations seeking food security. Israel has developed a non-toxic pesticide derived from edible oils that protects leaves, stems, and fruits without chemical side effects. Biotech companies like Evogene work to enhance fertilizer uptake and drought tolerance in rice. More recently, Israeli-developed tomato seeds have become critical in regions facing crop collapse, expanding Israel's agricultural influence into plant genetics. For Israel, agriculture is not only a matter of local survival—it is a tool of global diplomacy.

Israel is a country that blends ancient harvests with laboratory precision, rural traditions with sensor-rich data systems, and local crop development with global food-security outreach. At *Tu b'Shevat* and year-round the world, Israel demonstrates how science can coax abundance from scarcity.

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# Tu b'Shevat – Why Trees?

by Rhea Jezer, Ph.D.

*Tu b'Shevat*, traces its roots to the Bible (Leviticus 19:23–25), where trees commanded to be planted and nurtured. The holiday evolved over many centuries and now is celebrated widely in Jewish Communities throughout the world. Trees are and were probably chosen to be celebrated because they play an essential role in our ecosystem. Without trees, human life on Earth would be impossible. Trees offer crucial benefits by helping prevent flooding, releasing oxygen, reducing pollution, and enhancing both physical health and emotional well-being. They play a crucial role in fighting climate change by absorbing carbon dioxide from the air and through photosynthesis, reducing greenhouse gas levels, and through sequestration which provide us with oxygen to breathe.

Trees are often referred to as lungs of the planet. A single mature tree can absorb approximately 48 pounds of carbon dioxide per year, and forests globally store nearly 289 billion metric tons of carbon. Further, the roots of trees anchor soil and prevent flooding as well as erosion. Trees are essential for shade, particularly with the extremes of heat caused by climate change. Shade provided by trees can help lower temperature in urban areas, helping comfort and reducing energy costs for cooling. Access to trees and nature can lead to improved mental and physical health. The Mayo Clinic, in Rochester Minnesota, one of the nation's best hospitals, uses trees both to solve environmental challenges and to support healing. Landscaping at the Clinic, recognized by the Arbor Day Foundation as a "Tree Campus Healthcare Facility," includes trees strategically planted to provide shade and block reflected sunlight near parking garages and open space. The Clinic also includes trees as a vital part of the hospital's treatment plans. Decades of research have shown that exposure to nature can help improve mood, lower blood pressure, boost the immune system and even reduce recovery times.

There are approximately 3 trillion trees in the world and 37.8 billion fruit trees. Many of the fruits and nuts we eat come from trees such as apples, oranges, plums, bananas, pears, almonds, pecans, cashews, walnuts, cherries etc., not to mention chocolate (cocoa) and maple syrup. Some of our favorite spices also come from parts of trees including cinnamon, allspice, nutmeg, and cloves. Many tree species have medicinal properties. Ingredients for cough syrup, laxatives, pain relievers, burn treatment and tranquilizers come from trees.

Our Jewish Tradition celebrates *Tu b'Shevat* not only because of the noted ecological and health benefits



of trees, but also because it gives us the ability to practice a very important part of our Judaism, that is of *tikkun olam*. Caring for the earth is one of the cornerstones of Judaism and planting trees has been a bedrock of our tradition. The lessons of the Torah teach us that the moral underpinning of protecting and preserving the environment for ourselves and for our children includes fighting climate change. This is a religious and moral issue, not a political one, and the celebration of trees gives us the opportunity to focus on the overwhelming importance of trees to our ecology. We have been assigned as God's caretakers as we read in Genesis that God created Adam and placed him in the Garden of Eden "to work it and conserve it." Genesis 2:8-9

*Dr. Rhea Jezer is a New York State environmental consultant and lecturer working primarily on policy and legislation for clean renewable energy and climate change. She is president of Energy21, a not for profit which promotes renewable energy policy, director of the Symposium on Energy, chair of the CNNY Sierra Club and works with SUNY ESF.*

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**HADASHOT TOVOT** **GOOD NEWS!** **GOOD NEWS!** **GOOD NEWS!**

Three local candidates celebrated Central New York election victories this fall. Hanah Ehrenreich was elected Councilor-at-Large on the Syracuse Common Council, securing a citywide seat and bringing new leadership to City Hall. In the suburbs, Sam Young won reelection as Town Justice in the Town of DeWitt, continuing his service on the local bench. Leesa Paul was elected Town Councilor for the 2nd Ward in the Town of Salina, earning the confidence of voters to represent her community on the town board. Together, their wins reflect strong voter support across city and town governments.



**Ari Gnacik was named BBYO Aleph of the Month**

**Nov. Aleph of the month**  
**Ari Gnacik**

**Q: What does this award mean to you?**  
 A: "This award means so much to me. I never thought that I would become this involved in BBYO over the last year. Becoming a member is easily one of, if not the best, decisions I have ever made. I have had the pleasure of working with so many wonderful people, including the Giving Day captains, the Winter Con steering committee, and the chapter board for Sof Haderech. Being part of BBYO has tremendously expanded my friendship group, especially all the people whom I met at Winter Convention last year, and with whom I regularly keep in touch! Being Aleph of the month is such an incredible honor, and I look forward to future events and continuing my BBYO journey!"



**Four former chairs of AIPAC's New Leadership Network welcoming the newest chair, Samantha Garelick.**

## Social Justice Shabbat at CBS-CS

by Joan Bordett and Eric van der Vort

Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra Shas will hold its first Social Justice Shabbat on Saturday, February 7, beginning at 9:30 am. The service is modeled on the congregation's successful Pride Shabbats held during the past two years.

The service will take place on *Shabbat Yitro*, when the congregation reads the Ten Commandments. *Yitro* is also the only Torah portion named for a non-Jew, offering a fitting context for reflection on justice, responsibility, and moral obligation.

The purpose of Social Justice Shabbat is to deepen awareness of the central role of social justice within Judaism. The service will highlight how the pursuit of justice is embedded in Jewish liturgy, Torah, and ongoing Jewish teaching, while also lifting up the work of the congregation's Social Action/Tikkun Olam (SATO) Committee. The hope is to inspire participants to take meaningful action in response to injustice in their communities.

The service will include special readings and liturgy, as well as a *d'var Torah* delivered by Eric van der Vort, a member of the CBS-CS Social Action/Tikkun Olam Committee. Congregants who are actively engaged in social justice work, either professionally or as volunteers, will be honored during the service. A kiddush will follow, along with a Lunch and Learn focused on themes of social justice.

The Social Action/Tikkun Olam Committee has recently focused on issues of food insecurity and health care accessibility. Its efforts have included collecting food and monetary donations for the Interreligious Food Consortium, We Rise Above the Streets, and the Onondaga Nation Health Center. These initiatives were highlighted at the congregation's first Social Justice Concert, which was attended by 105 people. On January 19, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, CBS-CS also partnered with Interfaith Community Collective to learn about and support its social justice work.

**The community is invited to attend Social Justice Shabbat.** For more information about Social Justice Shabbat and related activities at Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra Shas, contact Joan Bordett, Vice President of Social Action/Tikkun Olam, at [sato-vp@cbscs.org](mailto:sato-vp@cbscs.org) or reach out to the CBS-CS office at [admin@cbscs.org](mailto:admin@cbscs.org).

## Temple Adath Yeshurun Scholar in Residence Weekend



The annual Scholar in Residence Weekend at Temple Adath Yeshurun is a highly anticipated event. This year, TAY welcomes Dr. Benjamin Gampel, professor of Jewish History, during the weekend of March 13 through 15. As always, the weekend will be filled with lectures and learning paired with delicious meals and delightful mingling.

Dr. Benjamin Gampel serves as the Dina and Eli Field Family Chair in Jewish History at JTS. A specialist in medieval and early modern Jewries, Dr. Gampel's *Anti-Jewish Riots in the Crown of Aragon and the Royal Response, 1391–1392*, won the National Jewish Book Council's Nahum M. Sarna Memorial Award in Scholarship. This prizewinning volume treats the riots and forced conversions of 1391 in the Iberian Peninsula and explores why monarchic authority failed to protect the Jews during these fate-filled months.

Dr. Gampel, who earned his doctorate from Columbia University, spent almost a year researching in local Spanish archives for his first book, *The Last Jews on Iberian Soil*. Thanks to his painstaking work, Dr. Gampel was able to re-create some of the long-forgotten history of the Jews of the Iberian Peninsula. He also edited the volume *Crisis and Creativity in the Sephardic World, 1391–1648*.

In addition to his scholarship, Dr. Gampel is known as a stimulating teacher and delightful lecturer on the whole range of Jewish history. He has addressed synagogue and lay groups, organizations of all stripes, and scholarly conclaves. Truly an energetic scholar and teacher, Dr. Gampel is dedicated to bringing the history of the Jews to a wide public audience.

**For more information about the 2026 Scholar in Residence Weekend at Temple Adath Yeshurun, visit [adath.org](http://adath.org).**



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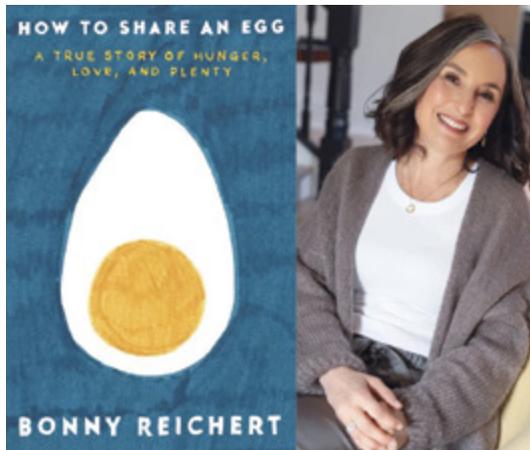
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## How to Share an Egg Author to Speak at Temple Concord



by Chana Meir

On February 5, 2026, at 7:30 pm, Bonnie Reichert will discuss her book *How to Share an Egg: A True Story of Hunger, Love, and Plenty* as part of Temple Concord's Regina F. Goldenberg Cultural Series.

Reichert, a chef, award-winning journalist, and daughter of a Holocaust survivor, grew up hearing her father's stories of near-starvation and ultimate survival in Auschwitz-Birkenau. She avoided thinking about the

Holocaust until, on a midlife trip to Warsaw, she experienced "a perfect bowl of borscht." This moment of revelation led to her explore how the ethnic foods with which she had grown up, such as the knishes and molasses porridge bread she had learned to make at her baba Sarah's side, became part of her family's history of scarcity and plenty.

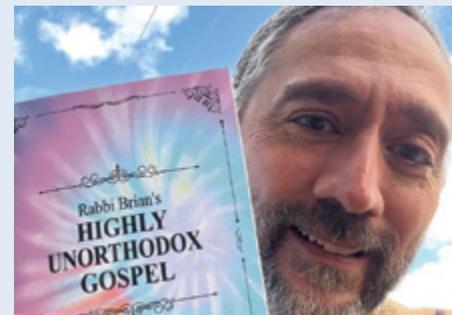
*People* magazine described the book as "absolutely transformative," and Ruth Reichl of *The New York Times* called it "beautifully written, heartbreaking, and hopeful."

**The event is virtual and free.** To receive the Zoom link, register by clicking the link on the Events Calendar at [templeconcord.org](https://templeconcord.org).

## Rabbi Mayer on his Highly Unorthodox Gospel at Temple Concord

by Chana Meir

On March 12, 2026, at 7:30 pm, Rabbi Brian Zachary Mayer will discuss his book, *Rabbi Brian's Highly Unorthodox Gospel: A Modern Guide to Compassion, Kindness, and Love*, as part of Temple Concord's Regina F. Goldenberg Cultural Series.



Mayer describes his Highly Unorthodox Gospel (HUG) as one that "lightens religious baggage." He attempts to make spiritual teachings accessible to everyone, including atheists and "the spiritually tender," and promises "quality religious thinking, 100% free from dogma" as well as "powerful thought experiments and tools to give you 37% more patience."

"I imagine this is the book Willie Wonka would have written if instead of being passionate about candy, he fixated on compassion, kindness, and love," said Mark Sandlin, pastor at the Presbyterian Church of the Covenant in Greensboro, NC and co-founder of The Christian Left.

**The event is virtual and free.** To receive the Zoom link, register by clicking the link on the Events Calendar at [templeconcord.org](https://templeconcord.org).



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## TAY Represents Jewish Community at the Rosamond Gifford Zoo Holiday Nights

by Phyllis and Noah Mowers



Every year since 2021, Holiday Nights at the Rosamond Gifford Zoo has enchanted families across Central New York with colorful lights and “holiday cheer.” Although the use of the word “holiday” is not meant to exclude, the inclusion of other holidays at this event, such as Hanukkah, was absent. It was time to make a change, and the zoo

embraced it. Since 2023, with the help of Temple Adath Yeshurun, volunteers have been engaging families about the story and traditions of Hanukkah.



There are crafts, books and dreidels to play with and guests are invited by the zoo to say the blessings and light the zoo’s menorah. Dreidels and gelt are also available for guests to bring the traditions of Hanukkah into their homes. Jewish guests attending Holiday Nights have expressed appreciation for the representation of Hanukkah, as it makes them feel included, noting that, aside from the zoo’s menorah, the holiday is lacking at the event. Those who do not observe Hanukkah or lack knowledge about it are interested in learning about it. Most enlightening is learning from the younger guests that they are being educated about Hanukkah in the public schools.

Participation in the event would not be possible without volunteers, who include congregants of Temple Adath Yeshurun and students of the Rabbi Jacob H. Epstein School, creating community engagement. It is hoped that Hanukkah can continue to be part of Holiday Nights for many years to come, and with further engagement from the Jewish community of the greater Central New York area.

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# Jewish Day Schools in 2026 and Beyond

by Shira Boschan

In his *Commentary* article, “The Future of American Jewry After October 7,” columnist Dan Senor makes a strong case for Jewish day schools. He argues that “increasingly, day schools offer answers to some of this age’s most vexing challenges.” He points to Jonathan Haidt, who has praised Jewish day schools as leaders in the phone-free schools movement. Haidt calls them one of the best examples of collective action, citing “the way Jewish day schools banded together to go phone-free and restore play, book-reading, learning, and fun.” Senor says he’s personally seen how these schools respond in tough moments. After October 7th, he writes, there was no hesitation, no confusion about core values. At his own kids’ school, hanging hostage posters wasn’t up for debate—it was simply what you do when your extended family is hurting. To him, these schools showed exactly what Jewish resilience looks like in real time.

Talking about his own family’s experience, Senor puts it even more bluntly: “Day schools strive to be living, breathing Jewish communities where students absorb Judaism through every sense—where they learn not just Jewish ideas, but how to think, how to argue respectfully across differences, how we build community. They learn Hebrew and how to pray, they learn how to be a mensch. At Jewish day schools, practicing Judaism is normative. Studying Jewish texts, caring about Israel—it’s all the norm. It’s not weird. There’s no baggage, no connotations, and no apologizing for it. Day schools build Jewish confidence and pride.”

But despite all this, Senor acknowledges some tough realities. Citing Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks’ line that “To defend a country, you need an army. But to defend an identity, you need a school,” he admits what keeps him up at night: “Only about 5 percent of non-Orthodox Jewish children in America attend Jewish day schools. For the Orthodox, Judaism is the center of their lives, as much a part of their moment-to-moment existences as breathing. For the non-Orthodox, living a Jewish life is a moment-to-moment choice. And it should be easier to choose.”

Jewish day schools really are at a pivotal moment. Orthodox communities have long recognized just how critical these schools are for shaping strong Jewish identity. Increasingly, non-Orthodox families are realizing the same thing: that day schools can serve as powerful engines of continuity, connection, and confidence—places where Jewish life is lived deeply.

The challenges facing non-Orthodox Jewish life aren’t new. A lot of young Jews feel disconnected from the texts, history, and language that once grounded Jewish identity. Day schools offer something unique and special: a fully immersive environment where Judaism becomes part of the everyday. Research shows how transformative this can be for young children. Graduates of day schools are more likely to embrace



Jewish values proudly, build Jewish homes, step into community leadership, travel to Israel, and pass their Jewish knowledge to the next generation. They come out with the confidence and background to make thoughtful, intentional choices about their Jewish lives based on their years of Jewish study and immersive experience in school.

What makes day schools so effective is that Jewish life isn’t an occasional subject—it’s the air students breathe. They gain Hebrew language skills, study classical texts firsthand, celebrate holidays with their classmates, and dig into ethics through a Jewish lens. They build friendships grounded in shared identity.

Day schools make Jewish practice feel normal. When kids grow up with peers who keep Shabbat, celebrate holidays, and feel at home in synagogue, Jewish rituals become natural, joyful, and communal. Community day schools like the Syracuse Hebrew Day School show how you can embrace both tradition and modern life. Students study the Torah and science in the same day, appreciate Jewish distinctiveness while embracing universal ethics, and honor tradition without shutting down critical thinking. Students also have the opportunity to unpack the realities of being Jewish in the world today.

Of course, there are real challenges, especially financial ones. For many families, tuition can feel out of reach, especially when public schools are free and often excellent. But there are hopeful signs. More philanthropists and Jewish federations now recognize that day schools are one of the most effective tools we have for ensuring Jewish continuity. Communities are stepping up with scholarships, tuition caps, and major subsidies.

Day schools like SHDS continue to deliver rigorous programs in math, science, literacy, the arts—everything parents expect from top-tier schools. At our local Syracuse Hebrew Day School, general academics are known for being rigorous, with high expectations set across all core subjects, from advanced math to inquiry-based science units that culminate in projects like an annual science fair. Students are challenged to think critically, write thoughtfully, and take ownership of their learning, while also developing creativity through a strong arts program that includes a school play. This culture of academic excellence and well-rounded enrichment

fosters confidence, curiosity, and a lifelong commitment to learning.

Inclusivity is another key area that requires thoughtfulness at a school level. Community day schools often serve wonderfully diverse populations, including interfaith families, LGBTQ+ students, and families representing a wide spectrum of Jewish practice and identity. Navigating questions of identity, boundaries, and openness with honesty and compassion not only strengthens the school community but also becomes a powerful, lived expression of core Jewish values.

Ultimately, the best day schools succeed because they offer a compelling, contemporary vision of why Jewish life matters. They show families that Judaism provides something real and valuable: an ethical framework, a way to make meaning, a sense of belonging in an age of loneliness, and a connection to something bigger than oneself.

With creativity, strong philanthropic support, and bold communal leadership, Jewish day schools like SHDS can move from being seen as niche to becoming engines of Jewish renewal—places where kids and families rediscover the joy, meaning, and richness of Jewish life. At SHDS, our leaders and teachers strive to create this type of environment each and every day. We are deeply thankful for the ongoing support of our local community which makes it possible for SHDS to remain a vibrant pillar of Jewish life in Central New York.

*Shira Boschan is vice president of the Syracuse Hebrew Day School board*

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JCC

## JCC's Purim Carnival Promises to be Queen Esther Worthy

by Ashley Schmitz



On Sunday, March 1, from noon to 3:30 pm, the community will once again be invited to gather in the JCC's Schayes Family Gymnasium for the annual Purim Carnival, a colorful celebration of Jewish culture, joy, and togetherness. "We are thrilled to host this year's Purim Carnival for our community," says Children's Programming Director, Pamela Ranieri. "It's a joyful celebration filled with games, delicious food, inflatables, and strolling magic—something fun for every age. Bringing families together to share in the excitement and spirit of Purim is one of the highlights of our year."

In honor of Queen Esther's legendary bravery, the JCC will transform into a vivid, joy-filled backdrop where every corner glows with color. The festivities include bounce houses, face painting, and popular carnival games such as leapfrog and slots-o-fun, all designed to keep the celebration lively. Guests can nosh at the concession stands on quick bites such as popcorn, pretzels, and cotton candy or sit down to a kosher meal from Esther's Café, featuring favorites like corned beef and hamantaschen.



Guests of all ages are also invited to dress in costume (a prize ticket awaits those that participate), enjoy traditional Jewish bites at Esther's Café, and try their hand at carnival games to earn tickets redeemable for prizes. Another beloved part of the celebration to look forward to is the Community Passport. Each child receives a Passport upon arrival and can collect stamps as they visit participating organizations placed throughout the carnival. Once the pages are filled, young attendees can head to the prize room to claim a special reward.



The magic of the Purim Carnival is powered by volunteers, whose energy and support ensure every attendee has a joyous experience. **Anyone interested in volunteering or learning more about the event can contact Amy Bisnett at 315-445-2360 or visit [jccsy.org](http://jccsy.org).**

With costumes, cotton candy, community connections, and a whole lot of fun, this year's Purim Carnival promises to be a celebration worthy of Esther herself.

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ALZHEIMER'S ASSOCIATION

# JCC Announces Honorees for 163rd Annual Meeting & Gala

by Ashley Schmitz and Erin Hart



The Sam Pomeranz Jewish Community Center of Syracuse is hard at work preparing for its 163rd Annual Meeting & Gala. On Sunday, June 7, 2026, the community will return to the beautiful Palladian Hall to recognize and celebrate the many individuals whose dedication has shaped the JCC's growth and success. Proudly presented once again by the Wladis Family, this year's event is poised to be another memorable and meaningful afternoon.

As the JCC's largest and most vital annual fundraiser, the Annual Meeting & Gala plays an essential role in supporting the Center's mission. Proceeds directly fund scholarships for participants in the Early Childhood, After School, Summer Camp, and Senior Programs, as well as resources to help integrate children with special needs into these programs. This signature celebration unites members of the Central New York Jewish community all while honoring those who have generously contributed to its continued strength and service.

"This year's group of recipients have played vital roles for several different agencies across our community. We honor them not only for their commitment to the JCC but for their commitment to the community" said JCC Executive Director, Marci Erlebacher. Like their predecessors, the 2026 Gala Honorees once again reflect the many forms of dedication and support that continue to move the JCC forward. The Kovod Award, which signifies honor and importance, will be presented to JCC Board Secretary Michael Klein. Michael has been a long-time member of the JCC Board of Directors and has played a prominent role on the JCC Executive Committee for years.

JCC Board President and long-time supporter of the Syracuse Jewish community, Phillip Rubenstein, will be honored with the the Kovod Gadol Award. This award is given each year to recognize an individual or couple whose longstanding commitment, energy, and loyalty have greatly strengthened the JCC and the wider community. "Phil is and always will be a supporter of the JCC and the community at large. He has strong ties to Syracuse and his commitment to the Jewish community is unwavering" says Erlebacher.

Cheryl Schotz, a successful real estate broker known as the Manlius Specialist who "makes all the best things happen," will be presented with the JCC's Hall of Fame Award. The Hall of Fame was established in 2009 with the intention of honoring lifelong members of the Jewish Community who have shown an irreplaceable level of commitment to bettering not only the JCC but the entire community. These individuals have shown leadership and dedication in their service to the community as a whole.

Introduced in 2016 in honor of Leslie London Neulander and her selfless commitment to the community, the Leslie Award recognizes young, up-and-coming professionals for their outstanding commitment and service. The eighth Leslie Award will be presented this year to Syracuse native and Syracuse Hebrew Day School board president, Ross Greenky.

**For more information about the JCC's upcoming Annual Meeting & Gala, including ticket and sponsorship opportunities, please visit [www.jccsy.org/gala](http://www.jccsy.org/gala).**

## Senior Fun at the JCC

by Ashley Schmitz

The JCC of Syracuse is dealing out good times in 2026 with open play for three community favorites: **Rummikub: Mondays from 1-3 pm, Mah Jongg: Thursdays from 12-2:30 pm and Bridge: Fridays from 1-3 pm.** Whether a seasoned strategist or just learning the ropes (or tiles), all levels are welcome to join the table! **Register by contacting Raven DiSalvo-Hess at [rdisalvo-hess@jccsy.org](mailto:rdisalvo-hess@jccsy.org) or sign up during Senior lunch.**



## The Jewish Immigrants Who Scored Hollywood at the JCC



by Ashley Schmitz

The community is invited to the JCC on Tuesday, March 10 for a melodic trip through Hollywood history presented by Adam Fine, host of WCNY's Classic Choices. Fine will use his expert ear and extensive knowledge of composition and conducting to shine a spotlight on the Jewish immigrants that were pioneering composers in early film scores. This event is guaranteed to strike a high note while attendees explore groundbreaking musicians whose stories are as moving as the music they created. **For questions or to register, visit [jccsy.org/cp](http://jccsy.org/cp) or contact Raven at [rdisalvo-hess@jccsy.org](mailto:rdisalvo-hess@jccsy.org).**



This column features businesses owned by members of our community, as well as artists and musical programs and is generously sponsored by RAV Properties.

## Why We Must Gather: Defiant Requiem in a Time That Demands Presence

In today's climate, when antisemitism is louder, more public, and more brazen than it has been in generations, the Jewish community of Central New York is being asked a quiet but urgent question: **WILL WE SHOW UP FOR ONE ANOTHER?** Attending *Defiant Requiem: Verdi at Terezín* this April is one powerful way to answer.

*Defiant Requiem* is not a concert in the conventional sense. It is an act of memory and moral courage. During the Holocaust, Jewish prisoners in the Terezín (Theresienstadt) concentration camp performed Verdi's *Requiem*—a Catholic mass for the dead—again and again, under the direction of conductor Rafael Schächter. They sang it not for their captors, but **at** them: as a declaration of humanity, dignity, and defiance in the face of annihilation. To hear this work today is to encounter Jewish resistance in its most profound form: spiritual, artistic, and unbroken.

For the Jewish community of Central New York, this moment carries particular weight. Our community is not anonymous or abstract; it is deeply woven into our region's civic, cultural, and philanthropic life. We know one another. Our children attend the same schools. Our institutions, synagogues, agencies, arts organizations, have long believed in dialogue, partnership, and openness. Yet the current moment has shaken that sense of safety. Many feel more visible and more vulnerable at the same time. Attending *Defiant*



*Requiem* together is a way of reclaiming public space with purpose. It says that Jewish history will not be reduced to statistics or slogans, and that Jewish suffering will not be ignored or relativized. It insists that remembrance is not passive. Memory, when shared aloud, becomes a form of protection.

Importantly, *Defiant Requiem* also invites our non-Jewish neighbors into this story as well. Central New York has always been strongest when culture opens doors to empathy. By attending, we are not retreating inward; we are extending an invitation to understand Jewish history on Jewish terms—through truth, art, and lived experience.

April's performance is not simply about the past. It is about who we choose to be now. In a time when silence can feel easier, presence matters. Filling the seats matters. Attention matters. Showing our children that we stand up for memory, for culture, and for one another matters. To attend *Defiant Requiem* is to say: We are still here. We are listening. And we will not forget.

The program will take place at 7 pm on April 16 in the Crouse Hinds auditorium of the Onondaga County Civic Center. It will be performed by the Syracuse Orchestra and the Syracuse University Oratorio Society. Tickets are \$36; under 18 are free when accompanied by an adult. Use the QR code to order tickets. **For further information, contact [bdavis@jewishfederationcny.org](mailto:bdavis@jewishfederationcny.org).**

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**CHARLOTTE  
"CHUCKIE" HOLSTEIN**  
December 2, 2025



Charlotte "Chuckie" Holstein, 100, passed away in the comfort of her home on December 2, 2025. Born on September 1, 1925 to Morris and Esther Garelick in Rochester, she had been a resident of Syracuse since June of 1946 when she and her late husband Alex were married.

She was a graduate of SUNY Brockport and received the Hall of Heritage Award from the Brockport Alumni Association in 2024. Chuckie taught at Salem Hyde and tutored students after she left formal teaching. In 1998 she received an honorary degree, Doctor of Humane Letters, from LeMoyne College and in 2015 was awarded a Doctor of Letters Honoris Causa honorary degree from Syracuse University.

Chuckie was a "Citizen Trustee." It was a title that she not only earned but lived her life by through activism, volunteerism and devotion to making her community a better place for all citizens locally and globally. She was honored locally, by New York State, and nationally as well.

She served as an honorary VP of the American Jewish Committee where she chaired the national committee on the role of women, served on the board of the Jacob Blaustein Institute for Human Rights, and chaired the Jewish Communal Affairs Commission.

Her awards and accolades are vast and widespread. She was particularly proud to have been a co-founder of "Leadership Greater Syracuse," and F.O.C.U.S. Greater Syracuse. She spoke with pride of her hundreds of graduates of the programs.

Chuckie was pre-deceased by her beloved husband Alex in 2020, daughter-in-law Barbara in 2003, and son Philip in 2016.

Her family includes her children Carol (Ron) Killian, David (Jeanne), Alyse, and Liz (Lou); grandchildren Shoshana (Howie), Ben (Amy), Mark (Ana Laura), Erin (Mike), Dan (Sarah), Greg (Stephanie), Chelsea (Chris), Erin (Eric), Sam (Esther), Amara (Bjorn), and Dan; great-grandchildren Ben, Josh, Arthur, Hannah, Alex, Winnie, Jack, Birdie, Isla, Thatcher, and Parker.

Contributions to perpetuate her memory may be made to Temple Concord, F.O.C.U.S. Greater Syracuse, Leadership Greater Syracuse, Loretto, Meals on Wheels, The Holstein Citizen Engagement Fund at The CNY Community Foundation, The Jewish Community Foundation of CNY, or The Syracuse University Library Special Collections which is the home of the Charlotte Holstein Papers.

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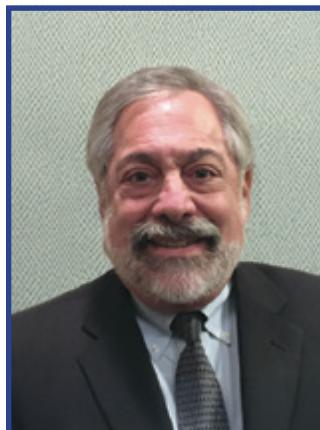
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FOR SOME, FEELING

# LEFT OUT

LASTS MORE THAN A MOMENT.

WE CAN CHANGE THAT.

We've all had moments where we've felt we didn't belong. But for people who moved to this country, that feeling lasts more than a moment. Together, we can build a better community. Learn how at [BelongingBeginsWithUs.org](http://BelongingBeginsWithUs.org)

BELONGING  
BEGINS WITH  
US

ad  
COUNCIL



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