Yiddish Café serves up good times and great memories

Arrive a few minutes before 2 p.m. on any given Thursday at Viva Thornhill Woods Retirement Community and odds are you’ll find a hive of activity. No, community members aren’t lining up to watch the Toronto Blue Jays game. They’re gathering together for Yiddish Café — a celebration of all things Yiddishkeit, featuring a rotation of guest speakers and musical performers.

The idea for Yiddish Café came from Viva Thornhill Woods’ community members Sarah Brickman and Henry Krausman soon after they moved in.

“I felt we needed something here to remind people of their early years,” Brickman recalls. “Most of us spoke Yiddish in our homes. My father was a Yiddishist, so I learned Yiddish when I was very young. I still read, write and speak Yiddish today. Plus, I used to perform Yiddish music at Baycrest a few times a week, and now I play here once a month and we all sing together.”

“With so many Jewish community members here, I felt it was important to have something Yiddishkeit to keep the language and culture alive,” Krausman adds.

“We typically have around 40 to 50 community members and guests attend Yiddish Café,” says Wendy Teperman, Viva Thornhill Woods’ community relations manager. “And for some performances, we’ve hosted over 70 people. Friends and family often attend, too. It really generates a buzz in the community.”

Previous performers include Arkadi Tulchinsky, Yitzhak Argaman, Isaac Musziansky of Muzika Klez, and Klezkonnection. The late Rabbi Chezi Zionce, Cantor David Edwards, Rabbi Yechezkel Deren, Jocelyn and Jerry Cooper and Col. Meir Rottem (a Viva community member who served more than 40 years in the Israel Defence Forces) have also been featured as guest speakers.

“Our community members make suggestions for guest speakers and performers,” says Krausman. Merav Jacobson, community director at Viva Thornhill Woods, along with many of the community team members, are also actively involved in the scheduling and logistics. “Without them, we would never have such a great program,” says Brickman with a smile.

The next Yiddish Café will feature pianist, vocalist and entertainer Klara Bagley as she performs Hebrew, Yiddish and English songs on Aug. 22 at 2 p.m. To reserve your seat, please contact Wendy at 905-417-8585 or thornhillwoods@vivalife.ca.
Education builds community – community builds education

ORA SHULMAN, HEAD OF SCHOOL, ASSOCIATED HEBREWS SCHOOLS

Studies show that partnerships between schools and their communities are necessary for strengthening a school’s position and involvement of teachers and students in the community, and reinforcing students’ social values, identities, academic achievements and social growth.

At Associated Hebrew Schools of Toronto, our work is composed of many details that make up who we are: a community!

We believe our students will become community leaders. We encourage them to believe in themselves and to take initiative and responsibility on personal, social and communal levels within our school, as well as outside of our school.

A school’s students, parents, teachers and administration are all partners in education. By strengthening feelings of belonging for all who enter our school, we make meaningful and fruitful learning possible.

We are a community

Two components define community: personal connection and consistency. When one of those two is missing, the community is correspondingly weakened. Some groups meet consistently but lack that personal dimension – they don’t have warm greetings, they don’t notice new arrivals, they don’t feel a member’s absence. Others have warmth but lack the consistency of people living in the same place, meeting regularly and frequently.

Our sages understood this when they gave their reminder about the value of learning: “Early arrival at the bet midrash (study hall) morning and evening.” The emphasis is not on learning, but on the set location for the learning and consistent presence amongst a community of learners.

We accomplish this through:
• Creating dialogue patterns
• Integrating community events
• Internalizing moral values
• Hosting activities for all ages
• Fostering communal leadership
• Taking maximum advantage of school and community resources to cultivate programming that benefits all

We are an open Jewish community

We are a community whose heritage of Israel, Torah and Jewish culture sets the direction for our educational journey: learning and action.

We are an inclusive Jewish community

At Associated, everyone is welcome. For us, joining the community is not an ideological decision, but rather a Jewish human act. We offer a wonderful opportunity for students to learn about important traditional Jewish practices while recognizing that there is a broad spectrum of personal religious practice within the school community.

A community is built from many homes.

Our students have five homes: school (beit sefer), shul (beit knesset), the bet midrash, their personal home and their national home.

At Associated, we incorporate all five homes: our students learn reading and writing, math, Torah, robotics and more; we incorporate shul and spirituality through prayer; students learn bet midrash methodology, havruta learning, with analysis, interpretation and debate; we give prominence to the personal home; and we plant the understanding that the State of Israel is a national home for us all.

All these homes are found in every student in our school.

Our students complete their studies at Associated with a strong foundation of Jewish knowledge and experience, proud of their heritage.

Parents are key members of our Associated community and their perceptions and actions greatly influence their children’s developing identities. Listening to parents – and making their voices heard – adds to our knowledge and understanding, and influences us in our work.

We invite you to discover the richness of our Associated community.

Give Your Child A SMART START

Discover the richness of our community and our classrooms. Visit us at one of our two ELEMENTARY SCHOOL OPEN HOUSES

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9:30AM
NURSERY – GRADE 8

TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 24, 2019
9:30AM
KINDERGARTEN – GRADE 5

To RSVP or to book a personal tour, please contact Tova Sabeti, Admissions Manager at tsabeti@ahschools.com or 416-494-7666 x 575
Hunger is a global problem and Canada is not immune. Rising poverty and food costs make it harder to eat enough and to eat well, forcing more than four million people across Canada – including one in six children under 18 – to choose between healthy food and other critical expenses. As new people fall below the poverty line for the first time each year, food organizations struggle to keep up with this increased demand and turn to Jewish non-profit Mazon Canada for help.

Healthy food is a basic human right and Mazon Canada, “the Jewish response to hunger,” knows that there is no community that is free from food insecurity. That is why Mazon partners with both Jewish and non-Jewish organizations, supporting about 130 food projects all across the country, including food banks, school nutrition programs, hot meals at shelters, community gardens and more. Guided by the principles of chesed and tikun olam, Mazon is a strong grassroots network of Jews that comes together to provide more than 400 meals a day to those in need all over Canada, no matter their religion.

The field of non-profit food programs has changed since 1986, when Mazon was founded – and Mazon is responding. “It’s not all about soup kitchens anymore,” says Mazon director Izzy Waxman. “In 2019, our partners are growing community gardens and running cooking classes that teach people with low food skills how to budget for, shop for and prepare healthy meals. When they come to us and say, ‘We don’t just need funds for groceries anymore. We need a new fridge to accept donated vegetables. We need seeds and soil for our garden so we can teach people to grow food for themselves,’ at Mazon Canada, we want to listen to that need and to help them serve better, healthier food.”

That’s why Mazon created two brand-new pilot grants. The new garden grant supports community garden projects, and the new gear grant provides items such as freezers to feed fresher, healthier food to more people. Most of Mazon’s budget will still provide grocery grants to purchase food directly.

Mazon’s model prioritizes regional volunteer-driven organizations. “Local organizations can make amazing change for their neighbours, but only if they get the resources,” Waxman says. “And lower-income regions and demographics often struggle to find funding and support.” Because these programs are often run by peers of their clients, they can serve vulnerable populations in the most respectful ways possible: culturally sensitive meals, access to healthy alternatives and safe, non-judgemental spaces.

“Mazon has been helping our small food bank for many years,” says Tish Whitfield, president of Mazon partner Madawaska Valley Food Bank. “Their grant money allows us to buy healthy food, like milk and meat, for our clients. We really appreciate the difference they’ve made in our community.”

To donate or find out how you can help feed the hungry, please visit MazonCanada.ca, or follow @MazonCanada on Facebook.

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To order 100 cards, call 1.866.MAZON.22 (1.866.629.6622) or email info@mazoncanada.ca.

Mazon is a member of the Feeding America network and is approved by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) organization. Contributions to Mazon are income-tax deductible to the fullest extent of the law.
Weizmann Canada – Celebrating our Canadian footprint

For more than 80 years, researchers at the Weizmann Institute of Science have been daring to dream of a better world. They are finding new treatments for cancer, discovering new uses for plants, investigating climate change and even sending a spacecraft to the moon. But dreaming big is only the beginning, and in order to keep research moving forward and to find the next breakthrough, help is needed.

In addition to government and research grants, the Weizmann Institute relies on philanthropy to help fund its tripartite focus on research, graduate education and science outreach. Since 1964, Weizmann Canada has worked with philanthropic partners across Canada to give scientists the time, space and resources they need. In 2018, Weizmann Canada’s philanthropic partners invested more than $14.5 million in support of the life-changing work happening at the institute. Gifts made have helped recruit the world’s brightest minds, advanced science literacy in schools and supported master’s and doctoral candidates.

No matter the size of gift, Weizmann’s philanthropic partners all share a common goal: helping to make the world a better place by supporting science for the benefit of humanity. The philanthropic partnership at Weizmann Canada is customized, allowing gifts to specific research areas close to a donor’s heart.

The children of Apotex founder Barry Sherman recently made a major gift in his honour to support development of optimal treatment regimens that are of universal importance to human health. The gift establishes the Dr. Barry Sherman Institute for Medicinal Chemistry, which will be officially dedicated this November at the Weizmann Institute’s international board meeting.

While some of our partners choose to focus on one area of research, others, like Reggie and Sidney Greenberg, choose to support the advancement of science education across all areas through educational programs, scholarships and endowments. The Greenbergs, who support the Sparks of Science youth program, were attracted to the idea of supporting something that would ignite a passion for science in communities who may not otherwise have the opportunity.

“I came out very proud to be involved with such an organization” says Reggie, who was able to visit the Weizmann Institute campus and read the letters of appreciation from participants of the program.

For others, supporting Weizmann has become a family tradition. Gary Spira and Rochelle Bowmile were first introduced to the Weizmann Institute by Spira’s parents, Jeannie and the late Harold Tanenbaum, who had been involved with Weizmann Canada since its founding.

“I know that our gift will make an impact where it’s needed most,” says Spira. After joining Weizmann Canada’s Toronto chapter in 2018, he established a PhD scholarship with his wife that will support a student every year for the next 10 years.

Whether it’s a one-time, monthly, annual or legacy gift, the donations made to Weizmann Canada by philanthropic partners are an investment in a better future for generations to come.

Join us for an inspirational evening celebrating philanthropy and empowering women in science!

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Donor walls, like this one at the International Plaza of the Weizmann Institute of Science, are used to recognize the contributions of Canadian philanthropic partners.

If you would like to learn more about Weizmann Canada and how you can take an active role in empowering cutting-edge research with global impact, please visit Weizmann.ca.

ARLENE DICKINSON
Canadian businesswoman, author, investor, and member of CBC’s Dragons’ Den

With special guest
Speaker Sponsor: Dr. Dan Andreae
What a difference a year makes! Only 12 months ago, Temple Sinai was beginning its educational renewal efforts thanks to the visionary philanthropic support of Bev and Laurie Fein. With another new year almost upon us, the leading minds of religious education in North America and Temple Sinai families are all celebrating how far we’ve come!

Through its innovative and flexible approach to Jewish education, Temple Sinai welcomes and supports today’s diverse families – a practice that has caught the attention of community leaders across North America.

Evie Rotstein, PhD, director of the New York School of Education at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, leads the training of future liberal Jewish educators. In her words, “This project emerged from Temple Sinai’s ongoing desire to provide Jewish educational experiences that are high-quality, exciting and engaging.

As the lead designer, Carrie Swartz (Temple Sinai’s director of congregational learning) brings her vast knowledge and experience in interactive education and an honest approach to serving both the learners’ developmental needs with the ultimate goal of creating a vibrant Jewish community.”

Our innovative Hebrew immersion day camp and Jewish learning programs were also visited by Rabbi Josh Weinberg, vice-president of the Union for Reform Judaism for Israel and Reform Zionism, and by Bill Magaliff, national director of Kayitz Kef/Hebrew at Camp, a project out of New York.

However, the greatest excitement about Temple Sinai’s new approach to Jewish education is right here in Toronto. Sinai member Carolyn Singer shared the following: “My three children really enjoy the diversity of activities. We like that while learning about Judaism in creative, interactive environments, they are also making connections with friends, clergy and educators. We have also taken advantage of the new after-school Hebrew program offered at our local TDSB school. It is extremely convenient and my son has a chance to learn Hebrew in the company of his friends from school.”

New ideas are infectious! While the changes started in our summer and after-school programs, they have created a wonderful, warm environment throughout the Sinai family, whether in youth group or b’nai mitzvah training or our amazing community preschool, led by director Andrea Zecharia.

Tali Eliav-Magen and Jasmine Eliav have chosen to begin their children’s Jewish experience at Sinai. As they shared, “Our family is incredibly grateful to Temple Sinai Community Preschool for creating a phenomenal preschool program that has instilled a genuine love of learning in our children. There is a special energy in the school that you can’t help but feel as soon as you walk in. It is always a place our children are eager to go to and sad to leave.”

By 2021, Temple Sinai plans to have a fully revitalized congregational learning centre using scaffolded, experiential curricula in both Jewish and Hebrew learning. Students will nurture a sense of curiosity through learning and celebrate living Jewishly by embracing Jewish values.

Be a part of this amazing, significant journey led by Temple Sinai. Find out more at templesinai.net.
It takes a village to raise a teen

"Torah High is my partner in education.... It has served as a launching pad toward (my daughter) having a good university education with a foundation of Jewish knowledge and tradition," writes parent Mindy Gold.

MINDY GOLD
TORAH HIGH PARENT

You have to understand the impact that Torah High has had on my daughter. As a single parent, things have not always been easy. I have always strived to expose my child to a strong cultural Jewish environment, enrolling her in a Jewish day school, Israel Scouts and Jewish camps. She also has a strong affinity for Israel, having spent much time there with her cousins who live in the Jewish state. But it has been Torah High that has lit the spark in her loving her heritage.

In spite of my daughter being exposed to Jewish ideas and practice her whole life, she woke up one day and informed me that she wanted to go to her local public high school instead of attending a Jewish private school. I knew better than to resist her and went along with her choice, although I secretly worried that she would get completely cut off from everything Jewish.

I realized that there was only so much I could do to influence her. After all, even though I am not observant, I am a Jewish mom and want her to be healthy and to have something Jewish of lasting value. I had no option but to see how things were to unfold.

Because she is on track to graduate this coming year and has a dream of pursuing a career in law, it turns out that her public high school of choice was the right fit for her, and she thrives there. There is also a large Jewish student population there, NCSY's weekly high school culture club and easy access to Torah High.

So far, she has taken three courses at Torah High. Next year, she will take Grade 12 philosophy, where I'm happy that she will study the topic through both classical and Jewish sources. It's wonderful that the school exposes the students to secular topics through a Jewish lens.

I completely support my daughter being exposed to our faith and traditions. If it comes naturally, then I support that. Torah High has provided a culturally enriched environment that supports my daughter's understanding and choice. Today, my home is full of Torah High kids of all ages, with whom she is building friendships. She is also cultivating her leadership skills, as she will be running for president of her school's NCSY's culture club next year.

Torah High is my partner in education. My daughter has discovered an enhanced purpose through her studies there. It has served as a launching pad toward her having a good university education with a foundation of Jewish knowledge and tradition. I can say with full conviction that Torah High has assisted me in forging an enriched Jewish path for my daughter for which I will be forever grateful.
I grew up in Boca Raton, Fla., a suburb so Jewish that the entire school district of Palm Beach County gets Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah off from school. Yet, even in Boca Raton – the kind of place where you spend each weekend of your middle school life at another bat mitzvah – the principal of a local high school recently wrote in an email to a parent: “I can’t say the Holocaust is a factual, historical event because I am not in a position to do so as a school district employee.”

The principal was later demoted and relegated to an administrative position, and the Palm Beach County School District denounced his commentary as “offensive.” Still, it is not easy to reverse the damage that occurs when an educator validates the opinions of anti-Semitic defenders of basic human rights.

At the public schools I attended, it was quite routine for survivors to visit our classrooms, reliving their traumas again and again in order to teach us to resist injustice and to recognize the signs of an impending Shoah. In Jewish communities, we learn from a young age that humanity has the capacity for destruction. For us, the Holocaust never felt like a distant memory, because survivors were among us. They were our neighbours and the grandparents of our classmates. It felt real, because it was.

Now, as migrants are held in conditions so inhumane that they are compared to concentration camps, we must remind ourselves of how we felt the first time we learned about the Holocaust – how when we were young, we vowed “Never again,” and meant it.

I witnessed a Holocaust survivor give testimony for the first of many times when I was in Grade 4. After, I laid awake at night, imagining what would happen if a Nazi were to wrench me from my home at night, imagining what would happen if a Nazi were to wrench me from my home and sentence me to an unthinkable terror. I begged my parents to let me sleep in their bed, fearful that, in the middle of the night, we could be separated forever.

“It’s in the past,” my parents told me, groggy from being shook awake in the wee hours of the morning. “It won’t happen again.”

Of course, my parents just wanted me to calm down and go to sleep, but what they told me was wrong. Such horrors of humanity are not relics of the past. I can’t help but wonder what parents might say now when their children crawl into their beds in the middle of the night, afraid of separation at the hands of a ruthless regime.

Recently, thousands of Jews have urged for the defunding of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency as part of the grassroots group Never Again Action. Alyssa Rubin, one of its organizers, has said, “We have a responsibility as a people whose history included these kinds of atrocities to identify the signs and prevent them from happening.”

As a scared fourth-grader, wide awake in the middle of the night, I wondered how we allowed the Holocaust to happen – how people could be so cruel to one another. In a college seminar on literary representations of the Holocaust, I continued to wonder. Now, I ask the same questions as we learn more about the conditions of migrant detention centres like that of Clint, Texas, where scabies, shingles and chicken pox are rampant, where sick children are quarantined together in a cell with no toilet, where some migrant children have even died in custody. I ask how it is possible, during a time when the U.S. government is guilty of crimes against humanity, that a high school principal can deny the existence of a political system that killed millions of people just 70 years ago.

Sometimes, even when we know the answers, we continue to ask the same questions again with the hope that, this time, we might understand. But even when we cannot understand why, we can study history to understand how. As Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi writes in The Reawakening, “If understanding is impossible, knowing is imperative, because what happened could happen again.”

Still, U.S. President Donald Trump refers to reports of disease, hunger and abuse at the border as a "hoax." It’s not too different from a high school principal doubting the evidence that the Holocaust is a “factual, historical event.” When women in migrant detention centres tell visiting members of Congress about the psychological warfare deployed against them, their personal testimony isn’t taken seriously. Similarly, despite the wealth of recorded Holocaust testimony, educators can still deny the genocide as historical fact.

Our greatest weapon against injustice is our knowledge of how to fight back. When we learn about genocide, we inevitably ask ourselves difficult questions: What responsibility do we, as individuals, have in protecting each other from injustice? What does it mean to be a bystander, and how do we know when it’s time to intervene?

I mourn the deaths of the Jews, the disabled, the gay men and the others who were killed by the Nazis, knowing that if I lived in Europe in the 1930s, it could have been me. But my Holocaust education taught me that it doesn’t matter that it could have been me. What matters is that it could have been any human being. Even when we are not personally in danger, it remains our responsibility to serve as defenders of basic human rights.

It’s not just the Jewish thing to do. It’s the human thing to do.
What type of Judaism have you been looking for? To provide you with information you need to make the right choice, we enlisted the help of Pekka Sinervo, president of the Canadian Council for Reform Judaism (CCRJ), and a recipient of Canada’s highest honour, the Order of Canada.

How would you describe Reform Judaism?
Reform Judaism is a progressive Jewish movement committed to egalitarian communal worship, study of Torah, social justice and love of Israel. Our congregations are warm, welcoming, vibrant and inclusive.

What makes it unique?
The Reform movement is the world’s largest progressive expression of Judaism, preserving tradition while embracing diversity. Services are meaningful and accessible. Deeply committed to social action, Reform Judaism fights for the rights of disadvantaged members of society. As the largest Zionist religious organization, Reform Judaism has formally adopted principles expressed by the World Zionist Organization.

Reform Judaism, like all streams, has its share of detractors and is often characterized as “Judaism light.” What do you make of that?
This is a common misunderstanding, as the principles and practices of Reform Judaism are deeply committed to Torah and its teachings – Reform Judaism just places lower priority on practices not relevant to our modern existence. Instead, we have a responsibility, as individuals, guided by our rabbis and teachers, to understand the Torah and its teachings and determine what is relevant for us to live ethical lives. Our relationship to God is as complex and varied as in most other denominations.

How is Reform Judaism in Canada different than in other countries?
The Canadian Reform movement has maintained a deep commitment to traditional practices that have shown how one can be committed to a progressive Jewish lifestyle while maintaining a religious practice firmly rooted in Torah, prayer and acts of loving kindness. The Canadian community has a relationship with Israel that is closer and deeper than found in many other liberal Jewish movements.

A recent survey found that those who participated in overnight summer camps through the Reform youth movement were far more likely to be engaged in Jewish life in college and beyond and more committed to “doing good.” Talk about the importance of Reform summer camps in fostering beliefs and lifestyles. Immersive experiences, such as Camp George, the only Canadian overnight camp of the 17 Reform summer camps in North America, are critical to the development of Reform beliefs and strengthening one’s identity as a Reform Jew. There is simply nothing like what a child encounters while at a summer camp where they eat, breathe and sleep progressive Judaism around the clock.

How would you describe the CCRJ and its role?
CCRJ is the national organization whose mandate is to grow and strengthen the Canadian Reform movement by supporting its 25 member congregations and collaborating with affiliate organizations. The CCRJ co-ordinates activities in areas such as social action, youth programming and leadership development.

For more information about Reform Judaism, call the CCRJ at 416-630-0375, visit ccrj.ca or email info@ccrj.ca.
A new helping hand for families affected by autism

BARBARA SILVERSTEIN
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

Risa Golden (a pseudonym), a single mother of one, has a son on the autism spectrum. Although he is high-functioning and could attend public school, he has anger management problems. During the year, the elementary school he attends can manage his disruptive behaviour, but the summer posed a challenge.

Golden’s son was able to attend a day camp three days a week. Since she works full-time, she needed additional support for her son. However, she could not afford the expense of hiring a worker for the remaining two weekdays.

Through word of mouth, Golden heard about Jewish Free Loan Toronto (JFLT), which recently began offering interest-free wellness loans of up to $8,000 to help Jewish families in need of financial assistance access social and psychological services.

“This loan can be used to help cover the costs associated with the treatment and care of autistic children, payments to psychologists and social workers, as well as other related matters, such as marriage counselling,” said JFLT president Sheldon Parker.

Golden applied under this new initiative and was successful in procuring money to support her son during the summer.

Another family recently borrowed money to take their autistic child to Israel for treatment, said Marra Messinger, executive director of JFLT.

Loans over $3,000 require applicants to provide two guarantors who can cover the cost of the loan in the case of a default. Applicants seeking between $1,000 and $3,000 need one guarantor.

However, noted Messinger, “Not everybody can find a co-signer for a loan, and so, in 2015, we removed the guarantor barrier for loans of $1,000 or less,” adding that some of those affected were seniors and new immigrants.

JFLT, which also offers education, business, fertility and other personal loans, currently has about 800 active loans worth about $4.1 million. However, “Everybody who gets the loan must be in need,” stressed Messinger.

The organization only has a one per cent default rate on guaranteed loans, while the rate is 10 to 12 per cent on loans without guarantors.

“A lot of people say we’re like a bridge over water,” said Messinger. “The loan gives them breathing space to get their affairs back in order. It alleviates pressures on them and helps them out of predicaments.”

The new wellness loan category is especially timely in Ontario, given recent proposed changes in services and funding for autism that were introduced by the provincial government. The updated regime may result in a growing need for financial support for families with autistic children.

David Factor, a registered psychologist who specializes in autism and developmental disability, said services for those with autism are in flux right now in Ontario because of modifications being made by the provincial government, which funds many of the public programs for autism, which help socialize people on the autism spectrum and lead them to be more independent.

Earlier this year, Ontario’s Progressive Conservative government announced it was switching to a model that would give money directly to families to purchase services while capping the amounts they could receive.

The move sparked a backlash of criticism, leading the government to appoint an advisory panel to review the proposed changes.

In late July, the government backed off from its plan, saying in a press release that it would seek to implement a “new needs-based and sustainable autism program,” though the details aren’t expected until April 2020. ■

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Remembering Owen Weinstein: A life of love, laughter and bravery

His rabbi remembers him as a “hero,” his father as an “adrenaline junkie” with “no fear.” He was a skateboarder, skier and wakeboarder. But Owen Weinstein was also a mensch, a charismatic boy who loved his family and loved to laugh.

In 2014, at the age of nine, Owen was struck with leukemia. But even this devastating disease didn’t dim his spirit. Owen soldiered through 848 days of chemotherapy and 285 nights in the hospital. He endured four relapses, experimental immunotherapy treatment and a bone marrow transplant.

On Sept. 12, 2018, cancer robbed Owen of his life, but it never stole what made him Owen: his humour, bravery and kindness.

Even at his bar mitzvah, which his mother said could have been a “pity party,” Owen eased the tension of the heavy moment by breaking out into his contagious laughter during his devar Torah. And while he was a patient at SickKids, where he suffered through painful procedures and seemingly endless chemotherapy, Owen was always smiling. He was also a SickKids patient ambassador and member of the SickKids Children’s Council.

In fact, you can see Owen at the end of a SickKids TV commercial from 2018. He’s inside a dark hospital room, looking out, his freckled face illuminated by the neon blue light of the VS sign behind him. It looks as if he’s imagining a new hospital, a place he’ll never see and in which he’ll never set foot – a place where kids like him, kids with cancer, will one day be cured.

One of his last mitzvot was this commercial, and he did it for SickKids.

Cancer robbed Owen of his life, but it never stole what made him Owen: his humour, bravery and kindness.

Honour Owen’s mitzvah with your own. Visit Owen.SickKidsCards.com to buy Owen’s Rosh Hashanah card.
Leaving camp taught me a lot about myself

MADDY ALBERT
ALMA

Going to Jewish sleepaway camp was perhaps the most hyped-up event of my childhood. Camp was a big deal. Not only were many of my family friends already going to camp and having a blast, but my own dad tore it up in the 1970s at the very same place I was about to be shipped off to.

Stories of weird snacks, beautiful sunsets and lifelong friends filled my younger years, making me more excited than ever to start attending sleepaway camp in the summer before Grade 5.

As a hopeful 10-year-old, camp really did live up to my expectations. I made many new friends and had lots of fun making lanyards in the art shack and climbing the adventure tower. I also loved Shabbat services, a time where all of camp sat together to celebrate the end of the week with reflections and songs – and it definitely helped that it was in the only air-conditioned building on site. Even getting sick was OK – after all, sometimes tough things happen at camp! And with many older sister figures around, I felt like I was getting absorbed into a new little summer family, all built on Jewish values of community and caring for one another.

My camp prided itself on its return rate. The familial, utopian feeling comes with a tacit agreement that you won’t leave, and when you have to go back home at the end of summer, you will be heartbroken.

I will never forget my first end of colour war song session. Every kid around me was in tears, sobbing that they could never think of leaving this amazing place and going back to terrible, awful home. I, however, didn’t hate home at all. I was really excited to see my parents again, and to tell my school friends all about the great time I had. But I ended up crying anyway. Peer pressure.

Leaving was bittersweet, but more sweet with the promise of coming back – and I did. And while I had fun, again I didn’t cry quite as hard as the rest of my campmates when it was time to leave. However, things changed a lot my third year at camp.

The summer entering Grade 7 was tough in a lot of ways. In the height of puberty, everyone was becoming insecure about things they never thought about before, and emotions ran high. Some girls from my original bunk started to go to camp for the full summer, and my closer friends began to form cliques, as groups of girls tend to do in middle school. The familiarity turned into inside jokes, ones that I couldn’t keep up with. In groups, I was never the one to talk over others, to make sure my joke was the funniest or the most heard. This wasn’t a problem at school. I had a nice group of friends – a few different groups, really – who appreciated me for who I was.

Continued on next page
Leaving camp taught me a lot about myself and I was at a tough age for any kid. And love. I wasdrawing that staying in an unhappy situation does not serve the people that you love.

Of course, every summer is different, and I was at a tough age for any kid. And of course, I was attached to the sense of place I built at camp. It wouldn't be easy to go, but I made myself a promise: if next year wasn't better, I wasn't coming back. Sadly, that next summer was even worse. In the height of bat mitzvah season, kids were as cliquey as ever, flaunting giveaways from parties they had been to together and carefully securing their future invitations. Yes, 13-year-olds did this. I made an effort to change things for myself, looking to meet new people, but friend groups had solidified and I was solidly on the outside. In the following years, summer always felt like it was missing something. I tried a theatre sleepaway camp for one year, but it was just not the same. I began to get angry at the exclusive girls, angry at myself for letting the bullies win. I wondered what was wrong with me if my sister and friends still loved camp and even went on to become counsellors.

But in recent years, I realized that leaving was not a sign of kids put together – and hey, maybe a little about me. But leaving was not a sign of defeat. It was a moment of strength. I learned the valuable lesson of when to leave when something is not working, despite loyalties or attachments or family expectations. This is something so many of us, especially as women, struggle with as we grow up. To learn this lesson at such a young age is something I do not take for granted. I am very grateful for camp, for everything that it taught me, even in its absence.
When Jewish education becomes a family affair

BEN LIGHT
KVELLER

In the 1980s, my father and I did parent-child Hebrew classes (before it was cool). Every Saturday afternoon after religious school, my father arrived at our temple and we spent 90 minutes studying Hebrew with three other families. One of the most memorable parts of that experience was the fact that my dad and I did this together.

When I asked to quit confirmation class at the beginning of Grade 9, my parents said I could if it was replaced with something else that furthered my Jewish education. My father had a friend who was studying with his son on Sunday mornings at a nearby yeshivah, so we joined them. We started each Sunday by putting on tefillin and saying the morning prayers, followed by Torah study with one of the rabbis at the yeshivah.

My parents believed that Jewish education was extremely important. They made this point to me by making it a family activity. Now my wife and I have tried to make the same point to our daughter.

For most of her school years, our family attended a program called Shabbaton at the local temple. The program’s structure was simple. Instead of dropping our daughter off at religious school on Sunday mornings, we attended as a family on Saturday afternoons. The afternoons began with a brief service or song session, then the children headed off to Hebrew or Judaic studies while the adults had a Torah study session led by the senior rabbi or one of the other members of the clergy. We came back together for parent-child Hebrew (which is now cool) and concluded each afternoon with the Havdalah prayers.

The impact of the Shabbaton program on our family is anything but simple. At the core, it is about building community. We have had the good fortune to develop wonderful friendships throughout our time in the program – friendships with like-minded adults who are also making a bold statement to their children that Jewish education is a family activity.

Each academic year has a unique theme that the children follow with their teachers. The adults also address this theme in the texts we study with the rabbi. One year, we addressed “The Great Questions and Answers in Judaism.” This led to some very thoughtful discussions with the rabbi that continued after the formal study sessions concluded. Another year’s topic was “Standing at Sinai Is an Ongoing Experience.” These are relevant and interesting areas of study, and allow us to relate what we are learning to our daily Jewish lives.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 16
Border security: protecting our Jewish community

RAVBI MICHAEL SKOBA

One of the thorniest issues confronting western nations today is the challenge of managing borders. Balancing concerns for national security with the moral imperative to be welcoming is easier said than done.

The Jewish community in North America faces a similar challenge. This has come to the fore this year with a string of episodes where our warm and welcoming communities were infiltrated by Christian missionaries masquerading as religious Jews.

The most publicized story was of a young couple, David Costello and Rivkah Weber, who dressed as Orthodox Jews and frequented synagogues in Chicago. Costello took a job in a local kosher supermarket and his wife reportedly worked as a babysitter for Jewish families.

Prior to moving to Chicago, the couple was affiliated with the Global Gates missionary organization and had penetrated Hasidic communities in Brooklyn, N.Y., with the goal of influencing people they met to embrace Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. Their masquerade was exposed in Chicago earlier this year when a visitor from Brooklyn recognized Costello in a synagogue and informed the rabbi that he was a stealth missionary.

Just over the past few months, we have experienced a number of similar incidents here in Canada. In Calgary, a Jewish man who had converted to Christianity assumed the identity of a traditional Jew and became an active member at a number of synagogues for several years until he was recently outed.

In Toronto, a non-Jewish man who had been associated with a local messianic congregation started attending Orthodox synagogues about three years ago. He began seeking to convert to Judaism and was studying Talmud with members of the community. After a long investigation, Jews for Judaism confirmed his charade and, in June, informed the synagogues where he was involved and other community institutions of his infiltration.

Today, there are numerous Christian Zionist groups that stand staunchly behind the State of Israel and try to help in various ways. But some of these groups operate with a hidden agenda to leverage their support for Israel as a way to influence Jewish people spiritually. Jews for Judaism assists Jewish communities in Canada and worldwide to determine whether these organizations pose a potential danger.

A number of years ago, the Jewish federation of a large community began to partner with an organization called Friends of Israel and travelled to Israel several times with them. We informed this community that the name of the organization is actually Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry and it is deeply involved with Christian conversionary programs in Israel and North America.

Of course, in an open society with widespread access to the Internet, it is virtually impossible to prevent all intrusions. The most important work of Jews for Judaism is to help inoculate Jews against the missionary threat through our vital educational programs. Each year, over a million people view our impactful YouTube video lectures and visit our website (jewsforjudaism.ca), designed to connect Jewish people to the spiritual depth, beauty and wisdom of Judaism and to keep Jews Jewish.

Rabbi Michael Skobac is the director of education and counselling for Jews for Judaism.
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In addition to learning from the rabbi, we learn from each other. We share parenting lessons, family traditions, perspectives on current events and spend time deepening our relationships with other members of our community.

We learn through art, music, drama and other non-traditional methods. We focus on the importance of tzedakah and giving back to our community as well as those who are less fortunate. We support other families in our community who are struggling with illness or loss.

And we do it all as a family.

I have watched my daughter develop meaningful relationships with children of all ages, as well as with other adults who participate in the program. She has been mentored by many of the older children and she has mentored those who follow her. She has served as a madrichah (teacher’s aid) at Shabbaton, working with the younger children and helping them on their journey to become more active members of the temple and Jewish community.

My daughter truly feels that the temple is a second home. Her experience is an example of part-time Jewish education that works well. Like many others, my wife and I turned to our congregation to deliver an educational experience with personal meaning and impact. We have not been disappointed. We found that our congregation offers much more than a traditional “sit-behind-the-desk” education – indicative of a change in other communities, too. Increasingly, part-time Jewish education offers innovative, dynamic educational opportunities that inspire Jewish life and build community.

So how does this all play out with the kids? When our temple’s main facility was undergoing renovations, and as we began planning our daughter’s bat mitzvah, there was some question of where her service would take place. But in her mind, there was never a question. The temple was the only place she could imagine going through her formal transition into Jewish adulthood. Shabbaton is the primary reason why she felt this way.

When my wife and I made the decision to join the Shabbaton community, we did so with the hope that it would clearly demonstrate to our daughter how much we value her Jewish education. We value it so much that we were willing to pay with our most precious commodity: our time.

The outcome of this investment has been greater than we ever could have imagined.

Kveller.com
Kayla’s Children Centre: Programs, support and friends all under one roof

Kayla’s Children Centre (KCC) opened its doors in June 2017 and is nothing less than a dream come true for families of infants, children and teens with special needs. That’s because, unlike any other organization of its kind in Ontario, KCC provides educational, therapeutic and respite programs all under one roof, year-round, in a state-of-the-art facility located in Thornhill, Ont.

The centre offers early intervention programming designed for babies who have shown a delay in one or more areas of development, such as motor skills, feeding or cognitive development. Under the guidance of a multidisciplinary clinical team, parents are taught how to interact with their babies and implement techniques and skills to achieve therapeutic goals.

Families are encouraged to consult KCC in the early stages of development, even before receiving a diagnosis for their babies, to help address their concerns in a stimulating and supportive environment. “We encourage parents who may be concerned about their infants’ development to reach out,” said Yaffi Scheinberg, executive director and head of school at KCC. “Running from therapy to therapy can be very tiring and overwhelming for young parents. All of these services are provided and subsidized at Kayla’s Children Centre.”

KCC offers families a variety of programs to fit their needs, from classes for children in the Ontario Autism Program to elementary classes for students with learning, social and emotional challenges.

“We’re the only Jewish day school specifically for kids with special education requirements, and community is very important to our families,” said Scheinberg. “Our day school system is struggling to provide for special education students, and resources are few and far between. It takes open-mindedness and accept-

ance for parents to be able to make the call, and it is the responsibility of school administrators to identify children as early as possible and refer them.”

Whether families are looking for academic programs or a safe and inviting space for children to play on Sunday afternoons or summer camp, KCC offers opportunities that all children deserve.

KaylasChildrenCentre.org

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- Respite

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- Winter Camp (December-January)
- Overnight Camp (August)
One first-born son? That’ll be five silver shekels

ALECSANDRA KAKON
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

There are only a few common Torah-mandated rituals relating to a Jewish boy, two of which take place within the first month of his life. The more widely known of the two is the brit milah, a ceremony whereby every Jewish boy is welcomed into the religion by way of circumcision, ideally when he’s eight days old. However, the second ceremony, the pidyon ha-ben (redemption of the first-born son) – perhaps less famous because it applies to a more select group – is of equal validity and significance. The rite has a long history, as well as various rituals and prayers that must be observed. Here is a rundown of the event:

Who requires a pidyon ha-ben?

There are strict rules to follow in order to know if your son requires a pidyon ha-ben. First, the boy must be the first child to exit the mother’s womb, meaning the delivery of the child must be natural, and the mother must not have experienced a miscarriage any later than 40 days after conception.

When is a pidyon ha-ben held?

The ceremony is held 30 full days after the child is born. According to the Sephardic tradition, the event is held on the night preceding the 31st day, whereas Ashkenazic tradition customarily celebrates the redemption on the afternoon of the 31st day.

What are the traditions?

The child must be redeemed for five silver shekels. Some families pay the Kohen outright, while others have adopted the custom of passing the child around on a silver tray, so that any guest who would like to contribute can place their jewelry alongside the boy. Given that currency rates fluctuate, many people choose to place as much jewelry as they like, so as to symbolize the customary amount that must be paid to the Kohen. Others pay the Kohen the exact amount in shekels. Either way, the child will be returned to his parents only if the Kohen is paid.

“IT IS A VERY PHYSICAL EVENT,” said Gabrielle Delouya. “THE KOHEN HOLDS YOUR BABY AND WON’T GIVE HIM BACK UNLESS YOU PAY.”

Describing the event as a veritable transaction, Delouya explains that the exchange felt very real for her as she formalized it with silver coins and jewelry so that her son was returned. As with most Jewish celebrations, once the ceremony is over, guests are invited to enjoy a traditional meal.

A pidyon ha-ben is a celebration, and the event is marked by happiness.

“I have yet to encounter a family who says ‘no thank you’ when I ask if they would like to redeem their son for five silver shekels,” jokes Rabbi Alan Bright, explaining that while the transaction is symbolic, it is still joyously celebrated with clapping and a sigh of relief as the boy is returned to his parents.

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THE CANADIAN JEWISH NEWS
AUGUST 22, 2019
Interfaith marriage is a fact of contemporary Jewish life. Jews often mingle with non-Jews in their professional and social lives, and many relationships lead to interfaith marriages. Such unions raise all kinds of issues in Jewish lifecycle events, including burial rites, as gentiles cannot be buried in most Jewish cemeteries.

An interfaith couple wishing to be buried together may choose a non-denominational cemetery as their final resting place. However, there is now another option available to them.

Beit Olam, a new Jewish interfaith burial section, is located within the non-denominational Glenview Memorial Gardens in Woodbridge, Ont. Glenview, a tranquil cemetery with serene, manicured landscapes, is now providing the Jewish community with an identifiably Jewish burial section.

Beit Olam is intended for people of Jewish faith, interfaith families and those with Jewish connections. Burial there is in accordance with Jewish customs and protocol. Only Jewish clergy or their designates officiate at the burials at Beit Olam.

Glenview is part of a group of cemeteries run by Arbor Memorial, which operates funeral homes and cemeteries across Canada.

“We found a section in the cemetery that is away from the rest of the cemetery,” says Tanis Floom, family service director for Beit Olam, explaining that the new Jewish burial area is separated from the larger cemetery by trees, shrubbery and other landscaping details.

Floom’s background includes similar work for the Shaarey Zedek and Rosh Pina cemeteries in Winnipeg. (Shaarey Zedek, which is Conservative, opened its own interfaith cemetery in 2012, after she moved away.)

“I’ve been doing this kind of work for almost 30 years,” says Floom, who worked for Arbor in Edmonton before transferring to the GTA.

In developing Beit Olam, Floom worked very closely with Rabbi Yael Splansky, senior rabbi at Holy Blossom Temple.

The experience helped her understand “the dynamics of Toronto.”

“There’s a huge need within the (Greater Toronto Area) for an interfaith cemetery like Beit Olam,” says Floom.

Monuments at Beit Olam can only contain Jewish or non-denominational symbols, and all burials and monuments must be respectful of the Jewish nature of the gardens. A rabbinic advisory group oversees Beit Olam to ensure that established standards of ritual and practice are honoured and upheld, Floom says, adding that she had to get special permission from Arbor for Sunday funerals.

Beit Olam is closed on Shabbat and Jewish holidays. Jews who are buried there will be accorded the traditional Jewish pre-burial rites like taharah (ritual cleansing) and being dressed in takhrikhim (the traditional burial shroud), which will be provided by Benjamin’s Park Memorial Chapel.

Burial services will include only Jewish or non-denominational prayers. There will be no metal caskets, which are not permitted in Judaism. (Jewish caskets must be made of wood or another organic material.)

So far, 200 plots have been developed and there have already been some interments, Floom says. Beit Olam will eventually accommodate 2,000 burial plots.

For more information, visit arbormemorial.ca/glenview, or contact Tanis Floom at Glenview Memorial Gardens at 647-467-7365.

A Jewish garden for interfaith families

Beit Olam Garden preserves Jewish heritage in the serene landscape of Glenview Memorial Gardens. For individuals or families of Jewish faith, interfaith and those with a Jewish connection, Beit Olam provides the ideal choice.

To find out more about Beit Olam call us at 647-467-7365.

Glenview Memorial Gardens
by Arbor Memorial
7541 Hwy #50, Woodbridge, ON
glenviewmemorial.ca
What makes a play Jewish?

Marilyn Lazar
Special to the C.J.N.

H as anyone not been moved by the mega-hit Fiddler on the Roof? Who could resist Tevye’s heavenward questions, Yente’s pragmatic compromis-es or the touching Sabbath prayer scene? The lead role was brought to life by a host of Jewish actors, including Zero Mostel, Chaim Topol and Paul Michael Glaser (who also played the role of Perchik earlier in his career). The historical and geographic contexts make it a uniquely Jewish story, but its humour and human-ity are universal. It’s not just great Jewish theatre, but just great theatre.

So what constitutes Jewish theatre? Does it have a specific anatomy? What drives professionals to focus on this niche? How do they define Jewish theatre and its role in the community? What motivates philanthropists to support Jewish theatre rather than myriad other causes?

While all theatre endeavours to engage the audience, Jewish theatre may also reflect, or challenge, Jewish tradition with contemporary views. For example, the Harold Green Jewish Theatre Company’s production of Mikveh and Gesher Theatre’s production of The Dybbuk were both recent provocative conversation starters.

In Dirty Dancing, Jerry Orbach portrays Jennifer Grey’s onscreen father, a Jewish doctor who saves the day. But few would classify that film as a Jewish story.

On the other hand, Toronto’s Tarragon Theatre recently presented a production called Old Stock: A Refugee Love Story, a “genre-bending music-theatre hybrid” featuring klezmer music performed by Ben Caplan, and inspired by the true story of playwright Hannah Moscovitch’s Romanian great-grandparents. The Tarragon is not a Jewish theatre, but a play can’t get more Jewish than that.

Jews figure prominently on the Canadian theatre scene. Business, philanthropy and impresario couple Aubrey and Marla Dan gave an endowment to Queen’s University’s School of Drama and Music after their daughter graduated, and have also founded Dancap Productions. There’s also the Mirvish theatre empire in Toronto. But these aren’t strictly Jewish theatre.

Meanwhile, in 2006, the Harold Green Jewish Theatre (HGJT) was born when Avery Saltzman and David Eisner, the company’s co-artistic directors, approached Greenwin executives Cary and Kevin Green with the idea for a Jewish theatre. In a time-honoured, heartfelt Jewish tradition, the brothers decided to hon-our their late father’s vitality and love of culture by creating a theatre in his name. Their mother, Miriam, has served on the board since its inception. HGJT boasts a well-thought-out mandate, as well as vision and mission state-ments. It has a system in place to sift through the offerings that come its way, allowing it to curate the productions it stages.

“I really don’t think I devote my life to a cause,” says Saltzman. “What I devote my time and passion to is great theatre that tells a Jewish story. It’s an honour to pro-duce works that resonate with our heri-tage, work that asks of ourselves who we are and what in life can we identify with and embrace.”

Saltzman feels that HGJT has grown tre-mendously. “Our work ethic and produc-tions have always been exemplary, but what I’ve learned as we approach our bar mitzvah year is that our audience is our biggest ally. Having this growing family stay with us year after year is a continued testament to the theatre that David and I continue to be proud of.”

Eisner refers to the late Theodore Bikel, who graced the HGJT stage twice over the years. Bikel said: “In the world of theatre, there are others who from time to time do Jewish-themed plays; they may even do it well. But this is us, our turf, our theatre. We do it because it is who we were en-trusted with its guardianship.”

Eisner says, “It’s been a wonderful jour-ney, discovering with our audience en-tertaining, challenging, sometimes pro-found Jewish stories.

These stories have connected us all and enriched our lives as only great theatre can. It’s been an honour and privilege to have a part in it.”

Phyllis Feldman, artistic director and executive producer of Teatron Toronto Jewish Theatre, says “Choosing a play is like giving a gift – I have to love it if I ex-pect others to.”

“My goal is to create a complete the-atre experience for our audiences by pre-senting stories that will resonate either by personal experience or thematically in a Jewish context,” she says. “I also think that there are no degrees of separation among local or global Jewish communi-ties, as depicted in our production of Arthur Miller’s Broken Glass, and the on-going debate, nearly 70 years later, over The Story of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg.”
Remembering your loved ones at joyous occasions

ALECSANDRA KAKON
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

Celebrating anything from a new baby to a new marriage calls for a party to mark the occasion. It is at these times that families come together with joy and happiness, ready to toast the moment and dance the night away.

However, it is often in these moments of celebration, as love and laughter fill the air, that the absence of family members who have passed on is most deeply felt. Whether at a brit milah, a wedding or anything in between, honouring the deceased threads its way into the night in both symbolic and explicit ways so that their memory is honoured and family members can pay tribute to their dearly departed.

When it comes to honouring the deceased during a holiday, there are traditions and laws that are widely observed. Saying a prayer and lighting a yahrzeit candle are customs that are deeply ingrained in Jewish life. Similarly, on celebratory occasions, there are a few widespread traditions to honour the life of those who have passed.

The names of the deceased are included on invitations to events as a way to mark their eternal presence in the minds and hearts of the family. At bar/bat mitzvahs, it has become a tradition to devote a candle in the candle lighting ceremony to those who have passed, accompanied by a song or a minute of silence to mark their absence. Giving a newborn child the deceased’s Hebrew name is a custom that lives strong in some communities, as their name preserves their memory, cherishing their place in the family and marking the cycle of life. “We honoured my late mother by using her name for my son’s middle name,” explains Leanne Dascal.

However, for most celebratory occasions, the opportunity to make the memorial more personal allows families to choose how and when they would like to keep their loved one’s memory alive.

Variations on the theme of honouring a loved one at a wedding is highly dependent on who has passed. The intention, however, is always the same: feeling the presence of the departed is a source of comfort for those afflicted by the loss. By weaving nostalgic items into her wedding day, Tamar Labow described how her grandmother’s memory brought her comfort on her day of joy.

“Getting married without my grandparents was very difficult. I remember seeing my bouquet and crying because I instantly felt the presence of my bubbe and zayde,” she said.

“I had put my zayde’s handkerchief and bubbe’s watch in my bouquet because they constantly felt the presence of my bubbe and zayde,” said Labow.

There was a moment at the beginning of the ceremony when I was taking it all in. I looked up and almost felt as if my zayde was wrapping me in his arms. Having his tallit on the huppah made it feel like home.”

Another couple chose to sprinkle in a playful touch in honouring their late grandparents: “We had a box of candies on each chair with a note that said ‘Something sweet in memory of our grandparents who aren’t here with us to celebrate today,’ explains Steph Zucker. No matter how the family chooses to evoke the memory of the departed, the idea is that their presence is felt.

Each family is unique in their display of affection for those that have passed. Some set up memorials adorned with photos, candles and flowers, while others drink from a passed-down Kiddush cup or sew something borrowed into their dress. Celebrating an occasion is often difficult when the absence of a loved one is so great, but getting creative in how one chooses to honour their memory provides the opportunity to spend some time thinking about how this celebration would have been experienced by him or her had they been there.

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Tell us a little about your family background.” This was a phrase that became all too familiar to me as I tried to get involved with Jewish organizations. Whoever was in charge of vetting me would begin the interrogation with this question, and I would immediately feel the dread set in.

I would always start with my father’s side. I would say how my dad grew up in various cities in Canada and the United States, moving every time his father, a rabbi, started with a new congregation. This part of my family’s history always went down easy, but then came my mom.

I would always try to breeze past it, mumbling something like “and my mom converted before I was born,” hoping they wouldn’t think quickly enough to catch it, but they always did.

I feel a bit sick admitting it, but for a while, my mom’s conversion was my dirty little secret. Inevitably, that salacious detail would elicit a reaction from whichever recruiter, director or principal interviewing me. Once, after divulging that information, a representative for a Jewish summer program coolly remarked that I wasn’t Jewish. While that is both untrue and unprofessional, it pinched a nerve somewhere deep.

When I first started to get this kind of denigration, I used to joke that my mom made sure that some necessary new blood was introduced to the Jewish gene pool – a convert a day keeps the Tay-Sachs away, after all. I now know this kind of light-hearted pushback was a coping mechanism for a phenomenon that really gnawed at me.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE
At some point after my transition from Jewish day school to a public high school, where I was almost certainly the only Jew within the student body, my Jewish identity became far more important to me than it ever had been. The result of my tenure as the “token Jew” was a heightened curiosity that asserted itself suddenly and compelling me to go to Israel upon graduation.

I spent 10 months after high school at a religious institution in Jerusalem, and to put it succinctly, my time there was complicated. My mother’s conversion was a point of contention on more than one occasion that year. I felt a sort of covert inferiority throughout my entire time there, like at any moment I would be exposed as a fraud. That said, my experience in Israel was also revealing. I credit those months in Jerusalem with helping me define in specific terms why Judaism is so important to me, and it was only once I had defined those terms that I realized how much I relate to the Jewish practice of deeply engaging with texts and reveling in the written word.

Suddenly everything clicked. These central beliefs that drew me close to my Jewish faith were sown in me from a young age by – who else? – my mother. At the end of every day throughout grade school, my mom would not ask me how my day was, asking instead to tell her about an instance where I asked a good question. My mother was always the person with whom I would talk through my feelings whenever I learned about a difficult subject in history. From Holocaust education to the Rwandan genocide to the atrocities of residential schools in Canada, my mother always spoke to me with sensitivity and wisdom, underscoring how important it was that I conform from the stereotype of organized religion as a rigid dogma whose followers are made to obey blindly and not make any waves. Judaism, contrastingly, seemed like high tide. I revelled in this idea that not only was I allowed to question the core texts and practices of traditional Judaism, but I was encouraged to question it.

I was also drawn to the way Jewish communities everywhere strive to preserve the history, as well as hold society at large accountable for learning from it. My most significant discovery about myself was how much I relate to the Jewish practice of questioning – it seemed antithetical to my natural inclination. I was encouraged to question it.

Both my mother’s conversion and years spent as a Jewess, and I’m prouder to give all the credit to my mother. Take it from me, you don’t have to be born Jewish to have a Yid-dish kop, but I’m glad to have inherited mine from a convert.

HeyAlma.com

These central beliefs that drew me close to my Jewish faith were sown in me from a young age by – who else? – my mother.

There is a very real contingent in this community that still harbour skepticism towards Jews who have undergone conversion. People glance sideways at converts. Converts often have their motives questioned, their practice scrutinized, and many are told to hide the fact that they converted when dating so as to avoid an outright rejection. Our tradition speaks of a number of biblical converts, including Ruth, whose story is told in her own megillah that is read on Shavuot. Our sages tell us that it is Ruth’s bloodline from which the Messiah will eventually descend.

It seems to me that there is a codified precedent to love and embrace those who choose, of their own volition, to become a member of the Tribe. I’m no longer bitter or angry about the way I was made to feel in regards to my mother’s conversion, but I am ashamed. I’m ashamed that I ever allowed myself to feel less than because of it. I am so proud to have been brought up to be an inquisitive, feisty, smart-ass of a Jewess, and I’m prouder to give all the credit to my mother. Take it from me, you don’t have to be born Jewish to have a Yid-dish kop, but I’m glad to have inherited mine from a convert.
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“You doing [this] for me is more than just help with money. It makes 3 years of fighting worthwhile - to know that somebody cares - that somebody knows and appreciates - that means the world to me. That's why I'm gonna make my best to deserve it. I'll never stop working hard. I'm gonna live up to your support and what it stands for.”

Eli S.
(Scholarship Recipient)

The Association for the Soldiers of Israel - Canada (ASI-Canada) is the only organization in Canada authorized by the IDF to raise funds for IDF soldiers. Projects include: rest & recreation weeks for combat and combat support soldiers, flights home for lone soldiers and emergency kits during times of crisis and conflict. ASI-Canada also builds facilities on bases such as: medical centres & physiotherapy rooms, fitness centres & spinning rooms, kitchens & dining facilities, classrooms, libraries, auditoriums, clubrooms and outdoor leisure areas.

“I would like to say thank you so very much for giving me this opportunity to go back home. I am beyond excited since this is the first time in 6 years. If it wasn’t for the donors I don’t know how long I would go without seeing my friends and family.”

Joshua L.
Lone soldier from South Africa
(Flight for Lone Soldiers Program)

Their job is to look after Israel.
Our job is to look after them and their families.

DINNER CO-CHAIRS
Richard Borchiver • Katy Korman • Judy Naiberg

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