

# On Your Doorposts Fall 1999

## And Beyond Your Gates

## Creating Life-Long Learners

### Family Involvement in the Bar Mitzvah Experience

When Andy and Danny Kichura chanted Torah on May 8, it signified to them not an end to years of preparation, but the beginning of a life-long journey in Jewish education.

Perhaps the boys are wise beyond their 13 years. Or perhaps they had learned from their parents' example. After all, over the past four years, Michelle and George Kichura had joined their twin sons in several Torah study classes and intergenerational education programs to help prepare for the boys' b'nai mitzvah.

Their active participation in their sons' religious training reflects the national renaissance of family education. In ever-increasing numbers, parents are looking for programs that might answer their own questions about Judaism and help them to answer the questions of their children. "They look at

their own religious education and feel cheated," says Jeffrey Lasday, executive vice-president of Central Agency for Jewish Education. "They'll say, 'Here I am, a professional and competent adult, but I have a first grade education about what it means to be Jewish!'"

So when their children begin to prepare for their bar or bat mitzvah, parents see an opportunity to provide them with a more meaningful experience and to enrich their own Jewish education at the same time. Adults take Hebrew lessons, study prayer, perhaps even read Torah for the first time with their children. The result is a paradigm shift, a change in focus from car pools and caterers to ritual and religious significance.

### Finding the Answers

In response to this thirst for knowledge and to the 1990 National Jewish Population Study which presented discouraging predictions about the strength and staying power of the

*(continued inside right)*



**The B'Nai Mitzvah ceremony is just the beginning of Jewish education for life-long learners Ashley, Michelle, Danny, Andy and George Kichura**

## Inside this Issue

Interactions: Programs that Work • 16 New Programs Wear the Crown

Ideas for Tishrei • The Ultimate Family Classroom

## Interactions: Programs that Work

For more than 5,000 years, the Jewish family has perpetuated our traditions. And in recent years, area synagogues and temples have made Jewish family education a priority. Each issue of *Doorposts* features family education programs that have successfully promoted intergenerational interactions in the St. Louis Jewish community.

### Jewish Reading is FUNdamental

Before Havdalah services, 20 children and their parents curled up to read with blankets, pillows and a favorite doll or two. The books they read were Jewish, though you would never have guessed by their covers. And their “slumber party” – which took place in a library – was part of Jewish Reading is FUNdamental, a collaboration between Central Reform Congregation and B’nai Amoona, which taught parents and their eight-, nine- and ten-year-olds how to look for secular books with Jewish content and characters. The synagogues worked together to select books for the program’s lending library, create corresponding workbooks and other educational materials, and plan exciting programs that attracted participating families for crafts, storytelling and quality reading time. In the end, both generations agreed that Jewish reading could be quite FUNdamental. **Check out Jewish reading for your organization. Call Rabbi Lynn Liberman, (314) 576-9990; or Virginia Horowitz, (314) 361-3919.**



### Project Impact

Families from Sha’arei Chesed Shul have made quite an impact on the residents at the Jewish Center for Aged. In fact, some even have adopted the residents as “zaidys and bubbes.” They never may have met were it not for Project Impact, a program organized by Sha’arei Chesed Shul, which brought families together three times during the year to fulfill the mitzvah of “bikur cholim” – visiting the

sick and elderly. More than 30 families participated in the project, providing hand-made gifts and companionship to the elderly during Rosh Hashanah, Chanukah and Passover. And the impact of those visits not only brightened the lives of nursing-home residents, but provided invaluable emotional rewards to the families who bonded through their gifts of lovingkindness. **To learn more about Project Impact, call Rabbi Elazar Grunberger, (314) 863-7485.**

### Jewish Life Institute

Hundreds of casually clad congregants fill the rows of Temple Israel’s chapel each month, engaging in Torah study. Even the rabbi wears khakis and a button-down shirt as he facilitates the discussion to include interpretations from children, their parents and grandparents. This intergenerational approach to Shabbat worship – appropriately named Casual Shabbat – was the brainchild of the Dr. Fred and Vida Fabric Jewish Life Institute, a think tank of congregation members. Hand picked to represent a cross-section of temple members, the Institute began its work two years ago with a planning retreat, funded by a Crown Grant. Since that time, it has conducted a demographic study of the congregation, multiple focus groups and one-on-one interviews to identify needs. The result: recommendations for programs like Casual Shabbat and others that help temple members enhance their Jewish identities and enjoy meaningful Jewish lives. **Want to establish a Jewish Life Institute at your organization? Call Gloria Morgenstern, (314) 432-8050. ●**

## The Ultimate Family Classroom

For the first time in her life, 12-year-old Jessica Brandvein saw her father cry. His sobs interrupted his prayers, and he could hardly speak. Even he was surprised by his reaction.

“All I could think was, ‘Here I am in Israel. I made it,’” says Harvey Brandvein. “And while I was standing there at the Wall with my wife and three children, nothing else mattered in the world.”

The Brandveins were among dozens of St. Louis families who participated in family trips to Israel this summer. In the process, each gained new insights into a country they only thought they knew. “Israel is no longer photos in a textbook or articles in a newspaper,” says Harvey. “My kids had a chance to live what they’ve been learning at school, at youth group and at camp.”

For families looking to learn and grow together, Israel is the ultimate family education experience. From sun-drenched beaches to bustling cities, from religious shrines to nature reserves, Israel has something for everyone. Together, parents, children and grandparents can learn about heritage and history using Israel as a classroom. And while they retrace the paths of Abraham, Moses and David, they connect with all that preceded them, all that defines them as Jews.

“You’re 13 years old, and you’re visiting the Kotel or Masada or some other place you learned about in Sunday School,” explains Marcia Mermelstein, director of the Israel Experience Center at Central Agency for Jewish Education. “And suddenly something goes, ‘click, click, click,’ and you realize that this is really quite fascinating after all.”



Teri, Adam, Jessica, Rachel and Harvey Brandvein tour the ultimate family classroom

And whether it’s a parent’s first or fifth visit to Israel, family missions are eye opening for them as well. “You find yourself doing things you wouldn’t otherwise do because your kids are there,” says Sheila Greenbaum of the excursion through the narrow caves of Beit Guvrin she took this summer with her husband, daughter and her own parents. “Even the things you’ve done before seem fresh and new because you’re seeing them from your child’s perspective.”

That perspective is ripe and impressionable. Just ask Jessica Brandvein, who is planning an Israel theme for her bat mitzvah next year. She’ll wear the tallit and kephah she bought in Sefat. And, says her father, “because of experiences like our trip to Israel, I am confident that she and her brother and sister will always choose to make Judaism a part of their daily life.”

**To learn about opportunities for family Israel experiences, call Marcia Mermelstein, (314) 432-0020; Mindee Fredman, (314) 432-0020; or your rabbi. ●**

## Creating Life-Long Learners

(continued from cover)

Jewish family, temples and synagogues are offering a new role for parents in the bar/bat mitzvah experience. Some, like Central Reform Congregation and Shaare Emeth, encourage parents to work with their children on the design of a creative service, replacing literal translations with relevant poems, meditations, even Raffi song lyrics if they so choose. Other congregations engage families in the creation of ritual objects, like the tallit worn by b’nai mitzvah at B’nai Amoona. New Hebrew schools, like the Family Hebrew School program to be piloted in 2000 by CAJE, are bringing adults and children together for intergenerational instruction. And throughout the area, families are participating in retreats, mitzvah projects and study sessions – many of them funded by grants from the Jewish Federation of St. Louis’

Henry and Gladys Crown Charitable Income Trust – that will make the bar/bat mitzvah experience more meaningful for the entire family.

“I think it works,” says Rabbi Janine Schloss, associate rabbi at Congregation Shaare Emeth. “Parents leave the programs saying, ‘This is clearer to me than it used to be,’ or ‘Now I understand how I can help my child.’ We’re seeing light bulbs glow over the heads of both parents and children.”

### Strengthening Ties

While they’re learning together, families are strengthening their relations at a time when children are exploring their independence. “Parents often say that working together in preparation for a bar or bat mitzvah is the best way to maintain a good relationship with children during their early teen years,” says Virginia Horowitz, director of education at Central Reform Congregation.

What’s more, Andy, Danny and most of their peers appreciate their parents’ involvement. “I could see that they were very supportive, and that my becoming a bar mitzvah was important to them,” Danny says. And his thoughts don’t surprise his rabbi. “That kind of role modeling – studying with your children, asking questions, allowing your children to see you as life-long learners – is incredibly powerful,” says Rabbi Schloss.

Certainly Andy and Danny recognize their parents as life-long learners. And they’ve already committed themselves to continuing their own Jewish educations. Both are entering junior youth group this fall, and will continue with religious school until confirmation. But their Jewish educations won’t end there. Without even realizing it, they have committed themselves to Jewish continuity, to preserving the chain of Jewish tradition in their family. Explains Andy, “When my kids have their bar or bat mitzvah, I want to be involved just like my parents were.” ●



## Ideas for Tishrei

# Apples, Honey and More

This Rosh Hashanah, let the apples and honey you share with your family welcome a sweet new year...and a succession of holidays that provide opportunities for meaningful family interactions. After all, the month of Tishrei, which begins with the Jewish New Year, also brings the introspection of Yom Kippur, the harvest holiday of Sukkot, the celebration of faith called Shemini Atzeret, and the jubilation of Simchat Torah.

But understanding the festivals and planning family celebrations for each of them need not be overwhelming. To make things easy, St. Louis Jewish educators have suggested the following activities to add meaning and memories to your Tishrei.

### On Rosh Hashanah... take a Tashlich walk with your family.

During the first afternoon of Rosh Hashanah, gather some bread crumbs and walk to the nearest river, brook, pond or creek. An age-old tradition suggests that tossing the crumbs into the water allows you to symbolically cast off the burden of past wrongs. Give each family member an opportunity mention ways they might improve themselves during the coming year. **Ken Schwartz, program director, United Hebrew Congregation**

### On Yom Kippur... make decisions about your tzedakah box.

The beginning of the Jewish year is an ideal time to count the money in your family tzedakah box and discuss where it should be distributed. Give each family member an opportunity to suggest a charity. You also can make a list of foods your family did not eat because of Yom Kippur, and donate those foods or their financial value to a local organization that feeds the hungry. **Ellen Polsky, education director, Temple Emanuel**



### On Shemini Atzeret... let it rain.

Like ancient Israelis whose harvests depended on winter rains, we pray and recite a tefilat ha'geshem for a rainy season in Israel on Shemini Atzeret. Make a rain gauge out of a plastic or glass jar with a wide mouth. Using a ruler and a permanent marker, make lines every quarter inch. Our ancestors were always conscious of the amount of rainfall that nourished their land. Now you can be, too. **Dana Mano, executive director, Tpheris Israel Chevra Kadisha**

For information about projects, games and activities that can enhance your family celebrations, ask your congregation's family educator or call **Joan Wolchansky, (314) 432-0020.**

## 16 New Programs

# Wear the Crown

Four years ago, St. Louis-area congregations were invited to be adventurous with their family education programming – to try new approaches or adapt proven success stories from other organizations. Since that time, 20 congregations have accepted the challenge, launching 40 family education programs. And this fall, an additional 16 programs will debut.

All of the programs have been made possible by the Jewish Federation of St. Louis' Crown Grants Program, which provides seed money for congregation-based family education. "The Crown Grants program stimulates our thought process and encourages us to be innovative," says Rabbi Ze'ev Smason of Nusach Hari B'nai Zion. Such sentiments were echoed widely by rabbis and family educators who were interviewed recently as part of a formal evaluation of the Crown Grants Program. Many of them credited the grants for the increased participation in family education that their congregations have enjoyed over the past few years...which is exactly what the founders of the Crown Grant Program hoped for.

"Our intention is to meaningfully engage the family, and promote lasting Jewish identification and affiliation," says Randy Green, co-trustee of the Henry and Gladys Crown Charitable Income Trust honoring the memory of Shirlee Green, which to date has contributed \$200,000 for the project. "And when I hear that the grants are filling a need within families and congregations, I know we have made a good investment." For more information about Crown Grants, call **Susan Witte, (314) 432-0020.**

### 1999 Crown Grants

**Bais Abraham Congregation — Shalom Shabbat: A Jewish Family Experience**  
**B'nai El Congregation — Family Weekend Spectacular: Sof Shvuaah Mishpacha**  
**B'nai El Congregation — Chadar HaMishpacha: The Family Room**  
**Brith Sholom Kneseth Israel — Shabbat Basket Initiative**  
**Brith Sholom Kneseth Israel — BSKI Historical Study**  
**Central Reform Congregation — My Jewish Friend**  
**Central Reform Congregation — Make and Take Holidays**  
**Jewish Family Educators' Network — Family Education Central**  
**Jewish Family Educators' Network — Our Jewish Home: Congregational Model**  
**Kol Am Congregation — Connecting to Israel**  
**Kol Am Congregation — Family-Tute**  
**Shaare Emeth — Family Mitzvah Program**  
**Temple Emanuel — Sing a Song of Shabbat**  
**Tpheris Israel Chevra Kadisha — Jewish Encounters of the First Kind**  
**Tpheris Israel Chevra Kadisha — Put "Mitzvah Power" Back in Your Life**  
**United Hebrew Congregation — Step-by-Step: A Walk Through Holiday Museum II**



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For additional copies of Doorposts, or to add your name to the mailing list, call Joan Wolchansky, (314) 432-0020, or email <jwolchansky@cajestl.org>

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## What's New with

# You?

What innovative family education programs are taking place within your doorposts and beyond your gates? Send us your success stories, and we'll publish as many as possible in future issues of *Doorposts*.

Fax or email your success story to

**Joan Wolchansky: fax (314) 432-6150**

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