

# On Your Doorposts Fall 2000 And Beyond Your Gates

## Making Mitzvah Memories

*Tikkun Olam* recently took on concrete meaning as families at area congregations learned – and shared – the joys of “mending the world” during special mitzvah days.

### Tpheris Israel Chevra Kadisha (TICK) Mitzvah Power

More than 100 people “put mitzvah power back in their lives” after a recent Saturday morning service. Rabbi Avi Feldman engaged adults in a discussion about the concept of *chesed*, acts of loving kindness. “He explained how the dynamic of living is *chesed*, which begins at home and then branches out,” says Dana Mano, TICK education director. The children also talked about doing *chesed* in terms of, “What would you do if...?” Over dessert, families discussed what they had learned.

“The response to this first of six ‘Mitzvah Power’ sessions has been amazing,” Mano says. “When families work separately and then come together, things really make an impression, especially for the kids.” The program’s

finale will feature a mitzvah project to benefit the community.

### United Hebrew Congregation Mitzvah Day

“A few years ago we contacted several United Way agencies and asked if they needed help in any way,” says Ken Schwartz, membership director. “Our Mitzvah Day has just grown since then.” There’s no religious school on Mitzvah



Day. “Instead, it’s a real family day,” Schwartz says. “What better way is there for kids to understand how fortunate they are than to spend some time with their families helping others?” More than 400 participants worked on 18 different projects, each benefiting a

community agency. Families bagged rice and bean soup for a food pantry, sewed pillows for nursing homes, planted the Temple garden, took old towels to an animal shelter, packed camp supplies for inner city kids, and even gave 28 units of blood.

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Making casseroles for Jewish Food Pantry and other agencies

## Inside this Issue

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## 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.

### Family History Project

On a recent Sunday morning, a busload of families from Brith Sholom Kneseth Israel viewed some familiar St. Louis sites from a different perspective – as Jews. They learned what was Jewish about Keiner Plaza, Famous-Barr, the Arch, the Old Court House, even the Cathedral Basilica. They visited historic Jewish cemeteries and former synagogues. And as the hours flew by, tour guide Linda Meckfessel revealed the city's impressive Jewish heritage, connecting families – especially teens – with their roots.

The tour kicked off a BSKI centennial project, funded by a Crown grant, that aims to produce an Internet site based on the Jewish history of St. Louis, BSKI and BSKI families. The site will feature a weekly d'var Torah, photos of babies and bar/bat mitzvahs, memories, recipes, documents and more. "A historian will teach families how to take oral histories from older members of the congregation," project organizer Rhona Lyons says. "The result will be a living document." For more information, contact Rhona Lyons, Brith Sholom Kneseth Israel, (314) 432-4360.

### The Family Room

"Historically we've been a drop-off school," says Jennifer Houser of B'nai El. "We'd like our building to become a center for family study and involvement." One step toward that goal is the *Chadar Hamishpacha*, or Family Room, a program that prepares the whole family for the bar/bat mitzvah experience.

Made possible by a Crown grant, the Family Room "provides a place to

explore contemporary Jewish spiritual, political and emotional issues," says Houser, who taught the program last year. The two-year program begins with a day-long retreat to jump-start a dialogue between sixth- and seventh-grade students and their parents. Then families meet once a month as part of the child's religious school instruction, studying

Torah through lectures, discussions, hands-on activities and self-guided study. Last year, the group studied a variety of mitzvot, prompting several participants to integrate service projects into their b'nai mitzvah.

Josh Baseley and his dad Rick during a trip to the Humane Society to make marketing signs to help dogs get adopted.

For more information, contact B'nai El, (314) 432-6393.

### Family-tute

Friday night means Shabbat – but what does Shabbat mean? Thanks to a Crown grant, the Family-tute at Kol Am looked into that question in four sessions that focused on making Shabbat more meaningful to families.

Two of the programs featured traditional Shabbat meals, a learner's service, workshops and Shabbat songs.

The third session engaged participants in Torah study. And at the last session, the group fulfilled the mitzvah of Shabbat in various ways.

The Family-tute has had an excellent response from the congregation, inspiring many members to make a deeper connection with Shabbat in their own homes. For more information, contact Kol Am Congregation, (636) 227-7574. ●



## Whizin Wisdom



Jewish Family Educators from St. Louis congregations and agencies participating in the Whizin Institute for Jewish Family Life include: (top row, l. to r.): Cheryl Whatley, Jennifer Houser, Jodi Miller, Theresa Ellis, Rabbi Janine Schloss; and (bottom row l. to r.): Joan Wolchansky, Trudy Sudin, Sonia Dobinsky, Rabbi Holly Levin Cohn, Ronnie Brockman, Ellyn Polsky. (photo by Jules Porter)

The Shirley and Arthur Whizin Institute for Jewish Family Life is dedicated to teaching Jewish professionals, lay persons and others the concept of Jewish family education. It is located at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles.

Recently, 11 St. Louis-area Whizin Institute participants convened to reminisce and discuss what they learned at the four-day professional development program they had attended this past summer. Here are some of their thoughts:

**Rabbi Holly Levin Cohn, Kol Am:** "This was a conference of action, not simply theory-talk. I was exposed to texts that served to highlight my interest in intergenerational learning. I found support and encouragement from the many educators I met from around the country."

**Cheryl Whatley, United Hebrew Congregation:** "It is important to me that our congregation has Family Education and that we involve families in the planning, as well as in the learning. I appreciated talking with the lay

leaders about what will help our families become and stay invested in the process as well as the program."

**Jodi Miller, Shaare Emeth:** "Whizin made me sensitive to the various needs and interests of our congregants. Everyone wants to participate at a level they're comfortable with, and it's our job to find out those levels. At Whizin I learned that the focus is involving membership, keeping them involved and helping them take what they learn from the programs into their homes."

**Ellyn Polsky, Temple Emanuel, Solomon Schechter Day School:** "Whizin is an invaluable experience. All types of people come together for an intensive seminar that focuses on family education. We encourage anyone involved in Jewish family education to attend Whizin." For more information, contact CAJE at (314) 432-0020. ●

## Making Mitzvah Memories

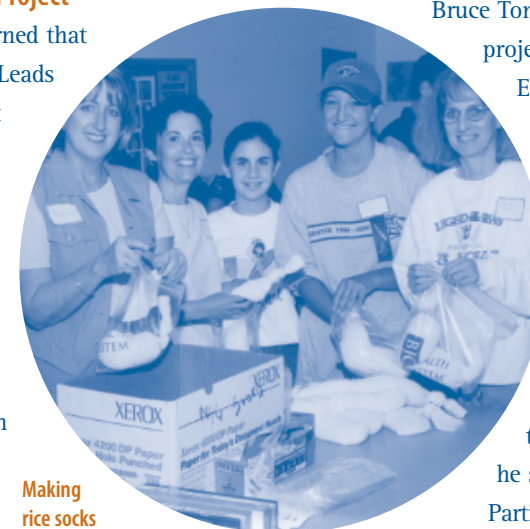
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"It's inspiring to see preschoolers, teens, parents and seniors all working together to do mitzvot," Schwartz says.

### Shaare Emeth/B'nai Amoona Joint Mitzvah Project

Volunteers learned that "One Mitzvah Leads To Another" at Shaare Emeth and B'nai Amoona. Each congregation held its own mitzvah day, and shared a special mitzvah on behalf of Henry, a four-year-old boy who has a rare

Making rice socks for maternity patients at BJC Hospital



genetic disease that can only be arrested by a bone marrow transplant.

At the "Hope for Henry" Mitzvah Day drive, co-sponsored by the two congregations, "The goal was to test the bone marrow of 300 blood donors," says Ronnie Brockman, director of family education at Shaare Emeth. Amazingly, nearly 200 people showed up there, and more than 250 at B'nai Amoona. "This was a stunning moment for our congregations," says Rabbi Lynn Liberman of B'nai Amoona. "It's not often two synagogues come together like ours did. We hope our joint effort with Shaare Emeth on Mitzvah Day will make a statement to the Jewish community that through cooperation, *Tikkun Olam* can become a reality."

Besides the "Hope For Henry" drive, Shaare Emeth's third annual Mitzvah Day saw more than 700 volunteers work on 60 diverse projects in various

categories, including: "Building A Better World," "Feeding The Hungry," "Making Gifts for Others," "Visiting Others," "Performing Acts of Kindness" and "Improving Our Environment."

Bruce Tons led spruce-up projects at Shaare Emeth's Camp Emeth and Camp Kattan. "It's wonderful for families to spend time working together, not just carpooling to activities," he says.

Participants in B'nai

Amoona's Mitzvah Day also savored the pleasure of doing good deeds for others. The event began as three separate projects, Rabbi Liberman explains. "Different groups in the congregation wanted to do something in the area of *Tikkun Olam*, and they all independently asked for the same date. I wondered if it was a potential conflict or an incredible coincidence?"

During the day, the Women's League made "Baskets of Love," filled with toiletries for women's shelters. The Social Action Committee sponsored hands-on activities for children, including assembling pet items for the Humane Society and making joke books for kids in the hospital. Others worked on the "Mitzvah Garden."

"It was such an uplifting experience, with so many groups of our synagogue coming together," Rabbi Liberman concludes. ●

# Whole-Family Hebrew

## Family Hebrew School Attracts Interest and Students

This fall, parents and children are learning the aleph-bet together through the Family Hebrew School pilot program coordinated by CAJE with the help of a grant from the Jewish Federation of St. Louis. “We can no longer offer only traditional Hebrew school,” says Jeffrey Lasday, executive vice president of Central Agency for Jewish Education (CAJE). “Hebrew schools must be sensitive to the needs of today’s Jewish families. We must work toward greater family involvement in our schools.”

The program, offered at Congregation Kol Am and CAJE Reform Hebrew School, grew from a series of focus groups held with interested families. The Family Hebrew

School is unique in several ways. First, its non-traditional students will include adults who never had the chance to study Hebrew, or who forgot the Hebrew they learned when they were younger. Second, the curriculum focuses on prayer book Hebrew, enabling adults and children to “pick up a Hebrew prayer book, read the prayers and participate in services,” Lasday says. Students also will learn some basic household and classroom words in modern Hebrew.

In another departure from the norm, the Family Hebrew School may not meet during the typical 4-6 p.m. time period. One of the sites meets at 6 p.m. for pizza dinner, followed by Hebrew class at 6:30 p.m. “It depends on what

is most convenient for the families,” Lasday says.

Children attend class with their parents once each week, and by themselves a second day. The program also organizes family activities, such as Shabbat dinners and Havdalah happenings. “This gives families a chance to get together and practice what they’ve learned,” says Joan Wolchansky, CAJE director of Family Education.

Besides textbooks, the school provides a variety of resources for families, including taped songs and blessings, and computer software that reinforces what students learn in class. The Family Hebrew School concept is generating a lot of excitement. At

Kol Am, several parents see Family Hebrew School as an opportunity to go through bar or bat mitzvah along with their children.

“The program represents a paradigm shift in Hebrew School education,” says Wolchansky. “It creates a new model that involves the entire family in a positive way. What’s more, it carves out time for busy families to spend together, and they can spend it learning the language of their ancestors.” **For more information, contact: Rabbi Holly Levin Cohn, Kol Am, (636) 227-7574; Jan Goldman or Joan Wolchansky, CAJE, (314) 432-0020.** ●



# A Conversation with Randy Green

Randy Green is the co-trustee of the Henry and Gladys Crown Charitable Income Trust. The trust has provided funds for a grants program it organized in 1996. The program, honoring the memory of Randy’s mother, Shirlee Green, has funded 58 innovative family education programs at 18 different St. Louis-area congregations. Administrative support for the grants program is provided by the Jewish Federation of St. Louis.

**Doorposts:** What inspired you to establish the Crown grants?

**Green:** Like many Jews, I am concerned about the continuity of our faith. It doesn’t matter how many beautiful temples, synagogues or community centers we build, if there are no Jews to use them. I hoped to develop a program that might have a positive impact. Based upon my own family, I believe that intergenerational Jewish learning experiences as a child molded my desire to be Jewish throughout my life, as well as marry and raise my children in the Jewish faith. I saw congregation-based family education as a tool, as one way of dealing with the Jewish community’s concern for continuity. Our program is structured in a manner that allows the community to unite its dealing with the concerns for Jewish continuity.

**Doorposts:** What are some key aspects of the grants?

**Green:** The grants go directly to congregations. Some temples and synagogues have had family educators for a long time. Others may be planning their first family education

program. We require that the programs be intergenerational and that, if they are successful, the congregation has some means of continuing them after the seed money expires.

**Doorposts:** What is the Crown Grants committee working on now?

**Green:** We have just completed our fifth year of reviewing grant requests, which is a thorough process. Some congregations ask for less than \$500, others request more than \$10,000. Interestingly, we get as much positive feedback on the low-cost programs as the more elaborate ones. We don’t pre-judge, we simply consider what’s right for each congregation. The point is to do something, no matter how small, to promote Jewish continuity throughout the community, using Jewish family education as the vehicle at the congregational level. The fact that we continue to receive community-wide support speaks to our success. The program is serving its purpose.

**Doorposts:** And so is Doorposts.

**Green:** Yes. The publication celebrates the successes the St. Louis community has had, with all congregations working together in the same spirit. It’s truly a great achievement for these independent congregations, which haven’t in the past exchanged ideas so freely, to come together and benefit from each other. We hope Doorposts also might strike a chord and encourage Jewish communities in other parts of the country to establish programs like ours. ●

On Your  
**Doorposts**  
And Beyond Your Gates

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