



CONGREGATION ETZ CHAIM

BIDDEFORD, MAINE

Congregation Etz Chaim

York County Jewish Community News

www.etzchaimme.org

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Cantor's Corner: My Guide for Moving Forward in the October 8th World

Cantor Beth Strassler

Yes, my world changed drastically after October 7, 2023. I stand face to face with global antisemitism as I never have before.

I came into the world with Israel a reality. I never dreamed that during my lifetime such unbridled antisemitism would be expressed in our country, and around the world.

I have cried a lot. I have cried out of shock at events, fear for my family in Israel, anger that anyone could carry out such a monstrous attack inside Israel's borders, grief for ALL of the lives lost, anger that only Israel seems to be asked to be accountable for the violence, and deep, deep sorrow for the polarizing divisiveness in our country.

I limit my exposure to media. Certain visuals simply make me physically ill. I am a daily fan of Wordle, Octordle, Spelling Bee, and online trivia quizzes as ways to engage my brain without politics. And classic movies.

Yet I am uncomfortable looking away and merely "hoping" things don't get worse. I want to DO something to tip the balance of the world into a peaceful direction. I have struggled with what to do since October 7. Today, I put together a "To-Do" list for myself. Actually, it is more like a guide for both the personal and professional aspects of my life:

MINGLE: Get out of the house and get together. Hug each other.

RESPOND: Speak up for ALL minority groups. Support other peoples.

LEARN: Take a class. Read history books and historical novels. Strive to broaden personal perspectives.

MAKE MUSIC: Sing a meaningful song with others. Feel the strength in community singing and dancing

PLAN: Organize events that will bring the Jewish community (large and small) together. Let's find strength together. Go back to MINGLE.

AND

Organize events that will bring the interfaith community together. Let's bring light to each other. Go back to Hug each other.

I will never stop hoping for miracles. They are the core of the Exodus story, which we are about to celebrate at Passover.

Chag Sameach,
Beth

Sustainability as a Jewish Value

Ethan Davis

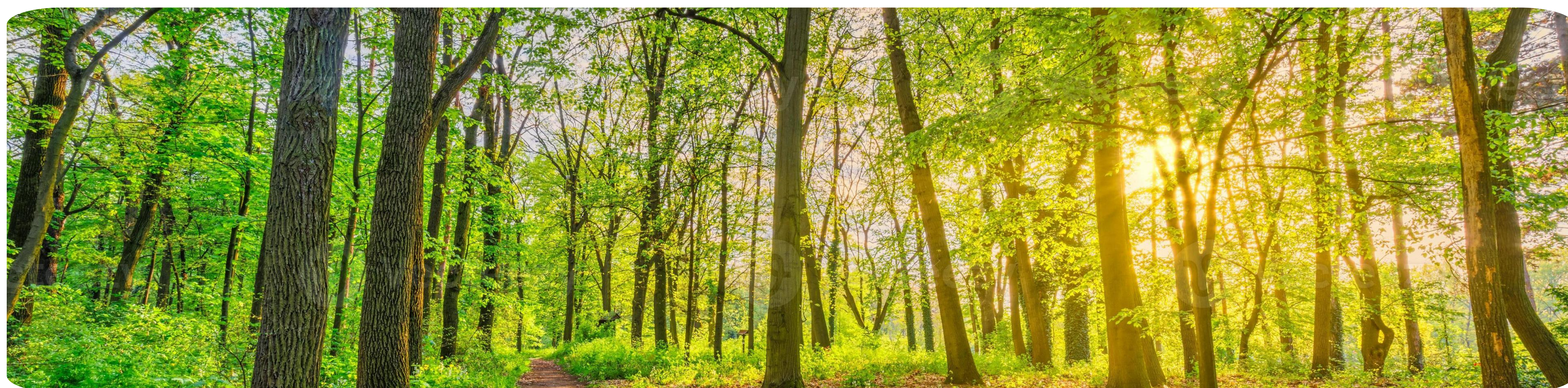
I'd like to start by defining sustainability. The clearest explanation that I've heard so far defines it as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Describing it this way can be helpful when considering our own actions.

In my association with Congregation Etz Chaim, which goes back to sometime around 2008 or so, two recurring themes that are potentially connected with sustainability spring to mind: discussions of Tikkun Olam (healing of the world) and annual celebrations of Tu B'shevat, the festival of the trees, which is focused on the harvest.

Fiddler on the Roof's Tevya was a character who represented many Jews and their way of life in the old country. He was a farmer who presumably lived close to the land, although he did not seem very excited about it. On the other hand, the descriptions I have heard of life on kibbutzim and moshavim give impressions of a dynamic way of living close to the land that is distinctly Jewish. I take these things as an indication that a concern with sustainability and connection with the land and the environment that supports us all can be a Jewish value.

We are fortunate to live in Maine, which has a much lower population than many other parts of the country and is still in relatively good shape, environmentally speaking. An awareness that our way of life and the decisions we make is one of the main things that will keep it that way is of great importance if it is to remain relatively unspoiled. When it comes to wider issues such as climate change, Maine has a comparatively small climate footprint, as well as a small footprint when it comes to general resource use. However, we can still do our part to minimize our impact, individually. We can also do what we can to mitigate those issues on a state, regional, and national level by taking direct personal action and by voting wisely.

My hope is that by starting the conversation with this article, readers in our community will be inspired to be proactive and take sustainability into account when considering our actions on a personal and household level, and as a congregation. I think we would all agree that compromising the ability of our kids, grandkids, and the generations that follow to feed, clothe, and house themselves while meeting our own needs is the last thing we would want. That level of morality – being a light to the world – seems to be a key Jewish value that we should aspire to.



Community Outreach Services at Congregation Etz Chaim

Denise Hammond

This month we had the pleasure of supporting one of our own! The outreach committee got word that one of our community members had to have an unexpected surgery. After all her loved ones had to go home, our Community Outreach team was able to help with some healthy meals, a sweet treat, and a visit to keep her company. The feedback was positive, mentioning how touched she was to be thought of and how appreciative she was to have a little support.

We are here to support in any way we can, through the hard times and the celebrations! Know of a community member who will be celebrating an upcoming event or who needs someone to make a meal? Send us an email at communityoutreach@etzchaimme.org.

We look forward to hearing from you!

Antisemitism Presentation by Rabbi Sandmel

Sam Hammond, 8th grade — Kennebunk Middle School

On February 25, I was lucky enough to attend the presentation on antisemitism by Rabbi David Fox Sandmel. He shared how antisemitism has been on the rise since the inhumane attacks of October 7th. Antisemitism has been around for a long time and has shown itself in many different forms. One of these ways now is social media. Recently, hate on social media has been higher than in the past, with platforms like Twitter (X) allowing antisemitic posts and not taking them down. Rabbi Sandmel also showed slides about antisemitic acts in Maine. These slides included antisemitic graffiti in Portland, as well as an incident that occurred in Harpswell.

He also showed the results of polls on how people feel about antisemitism. They reveal that more people are experiencing negative experiences as a result of the present-day negative climate due to the Israel-Gaza war and partisan politics. This problem is occurring in colleges where students are feeling more scared and worried about sharing their religion.

Rabbi Sandmel also explained what we can do to prevent antisemitism. One of these ways is to report if we see an antisemitic act. He mentioned that a good site to report to would be the Anti-Defamation League or the police. Another two ways to prevent antisemitism is to share your experience with others and treat others fairly. Also, Rabbi Sandmel said "If we want allies, we need to be an ally."

Overall, I enjoyed the presentation and had a good experience learning about antisemitism. This presentation taught me that antisemitism is still a big problem in today's society and that we need to address the problem.

Deja Vu All Over Again

David Strassler

In 1912, my father, Joseph Strassler, was born in Southwest Poland (the Galicia region), the second youngest of eight children. In 1929, at the age of 17, he came over on the boat, the *Lithuania*, to Ellis Island, before he joined up with other family members in Brooklyn.

In 1917 (or 1915, which is another story), my mother, Goldie Strassler, was born in a different town in Southwest Poland (the Galicia region), the youngest of 10 children. In 1939, at age 22 (or 24), she came over on the boat, the *Boatery*, to Ellis Island, before she joined up with her family members in Brooklyn. When her sister Bliema decided at the last moment not to leave Poland, she gave her travel visa to my mother.

All my father's family made it to the United States, unharmed by the Shoah (Holocaust). Only my Uncle Sam had difficulty coming directly here, having to first go to Argentina for a year.

My mother's family was not so fortunate. My mother and two of her sisters came to the United States. Six of her siblings went to Argentina. Their mother had died in 1938 of a medical problem.

My grandfather Fischel Freum Berger, my aunt Bliema Berger Popper, and my cousin Rhoda Popper (at age 2), may their memory be a blessing, were killed in the Shoah, probably at a concentration camp. Aunt Bliema's husband, my Uncle Morris, survived and came to the United States in 1947. He lived to be 101, may his memory be a blessing.

My parents did not talk about their life in Poland. They would sidestep questions. My parents, three older brothers, and I moved from Brooklyn to East Meadow on Long Island when I was 2 years old. My parents wanted to live the American suburban dream. They worked hard so their children could get a good education as first-generation Americans and assimilate. But not assimilate too much, as they made sure that we lived in a Jewish neighborhood and were part of a synagogue community. I remember that at least a third of my public-school class was Jewish, and that school was closed for the High Holidays and Sukkot.

That is a brief history of my family's story. My mother never wanted to talk about the Holocaust. "What's in the past, stays in the past," she would say. My parents never told me not be friends with non-Jews, but it was clear that all their friends were Jewish. There was an undercurrent that the only people you could really trust and count on were other Jews.

Fast forward to the present. A member of our Jewish community recently shared an article from *The Atlantic*: "The Golden Age of American Jews is Ending." I truly hope this is not true. But I also do not want to have "my head in the sand." I do know that if my mother were alive, she would be very upset that there are Jews in America who are participating in pro-Palestinian protests. For her, this would bring back terrible memories.

When we moved to Maine, a local Jewish physician told me: "I left my home in Germany when I was unable to go to medical school because I was Jewish. There were many Jews who did not leave because they did not believe anything would happen to them because they were German citizens first, and just happened to be Jewish. Most of them died in the Holocaust."

I am keeping my "eyes wide open" to the possibilities of where our country is headed. It is sad for me to see American citizens unabashedly displaying their antisemitism. What is more disturbing is that others who have not spoken out may also becoming unintentionally antisemitic as the hate rhetoric grows louder.

I am proud to live in Maine, especially with our laws against hate crime. We must keep speaking up when we see hate against anyone.

If you missed Rabbi Sandmel's presentation on antisemitism, I recommend you watch the recording on Congregation Etz Chaim's website. We were heartened to see several local church members attending as a show of support and eagerness to learn.

It is important to pay attention to the Israel-Hamas War, but this is also the time for educating ourselves and others about the long history of Jews and Palestinians and how we got to this point. It is complicated.

Do you know your family's story? Personalizing the direct impact that antisemitism has had on you and/or your family may help others understand how hurtful their words and actions are to you and other Jewish people.



Poland, 1939.
Gravestone of David Strassler's
Grandma Malka. Present are
Uncle Morris, Aunt Bliema, and
Cousin Rhoda.

Introducing Our Newest Board Member: Shona Workman

Jeff Levy

I am pleased to welcome our newest Congregation Etz Chaim board member, Shona Workman. It is rare to have known one of our board members for most of their life. Shona was a youngster when my family first joined the synagogue, about 24 years ago. The first time I met her, I was struck by Shona's ability to connect with my children, and she made them feel very special. She is a creative and talented addition to our board, and I look forward to working with her. Shona has a passion and commitment to Congregation Etz Chaim, as you can read from her response below:

I am thrilled and honored to have been chosen for a position on the board of our esteemed synagogue. Reflecting on this journey fills me with a profound sense of gratitude and humility, as I reflect on the opportunity to contribute to our community's growth while upholding its enduring values.

My relationship with our synagogue spans back to my earliest memories, shaping my Jewish identity in profound ways. From the formative years of Sunday and Hebrew School to the whirlwind preparations for my Bat Mitzvah and the unforgettable experiences of our Teen Class, including the memorable New York trip, I've found a sense of belonging and warmth within the embrace of our Etz Chaim community. The lifelong support and guidance I've received have instilled in me a deep-seated desire to give back and ensure the continued vibrancy of our institution.

As a member of the board, my aim is to champion inclusivity, foster community outreach, and cultivate a spirit of belonging among all our members. I'm committed to drawing from my experiences and insights to serve our community with dedication and compassion. I will work hard to ensure that the bonds of fellowship and support that have enriched my life continue to flourish for generations to come.



Sameach Pesach!

The Board of Directors and Cantor Strassler would like to wish you and your family a very **Happy Passover!**



Women's Book Club Update

Maureen King

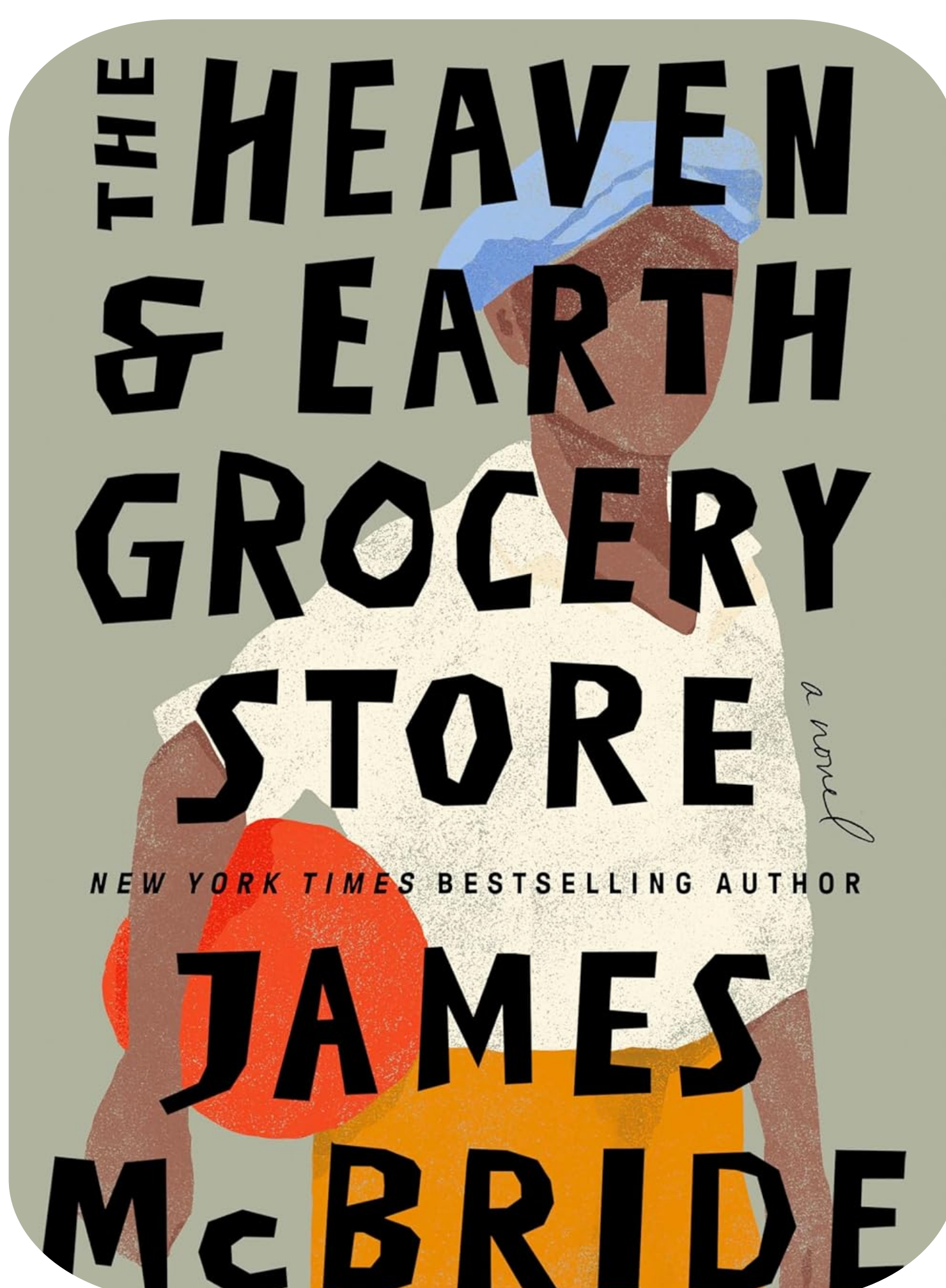
To offer up a little variety to the Congregation Etz Chaim Women's Book Club meetings, Susan Pierce hosted last July's gathering in her wonderful barn, where we enjoyed afternoon tea and the club's discussion of *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow* by Gabrielle Zevin.

In February, the club discussed *The Postcard* by Anne Berest, and it was universally loved; the group unanimously agreed that this was the best book we have read. The discussion went on much longer than usual, and everyone attending was passionate about the impact and brilliance of this book about one family's experiences of their Judaism pre-, post-, and during the Holocaust.

Our March book will be *The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store* by James McBride. (We do make rare exceptions for compelling books by male authors.) In April, we will be discussing *The Dovekeepers* by Alice Hoffman. Our spring and summer books will be voted on between March and April, so stay in touch for more information about upcoming reads.

Congregation Etz Chaim's Women's Book Club has been meeting since December of 2017 and has a total of 10 regular attendees. We continue to meet monthly to read and discuss books written about and by Jewish women, including authors Anita Diamant, Dara Horn, Alice Hoffman, local author Sandell Morse, and many more. Genres range from memoirs to historical fiction to social history to contemporary novels. The discussions are lively, informed, and enlightening. We have learned so much from each other.

For more information about the club, please contact somlibraryme@gmail.com or spierce1115@gmail.com for more information.



Our Visit to Mikve Israel-Emanuel Synagogue in the Caribbean

Cantor Beth Strassler



For a long time, David and I have hoped to visit one of the historic synagogues in the Caribbean. The timing this past November was perfect for us to get out of the cold weather and to get some R & R from a busy fall.

We decided on Curacao, in the southwest corner of the Caribbean and 40 miles from the coast of Venezuela, South America. The daily temperature averaged 85 degrees with the humidity at 85%. We spent a lot of time at the beach floating in a saltwater infinity pool. We also ate a lot of ceviche and other delicious local foods.

Curacao was colonized by the Dutch, with buildings in the capitol city of Willemstad that are colorfully painted. The culture is a mix of Dutch, Portuguese, and African. As you would expect, water is everywhere and accounts for the scenic bridges that abound for both automobile and foot traffic.

Willemstad is home to one of the two Sephardic synagogues in the Caribbean whose floors are covered with white sand. Mikve Israel-Emanuel Synagogue was built in 1730, although the congregation formed in the 1650s. It was reassuring to see a synagogue community that has been continuously active for such a long time.

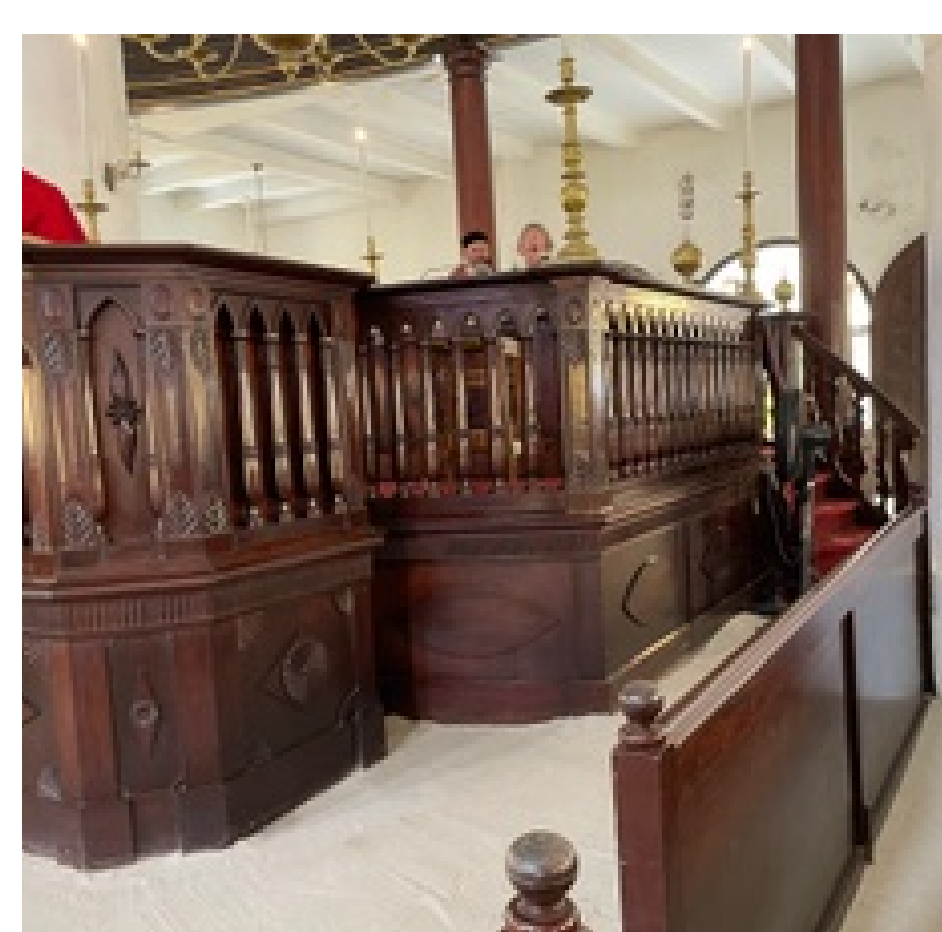
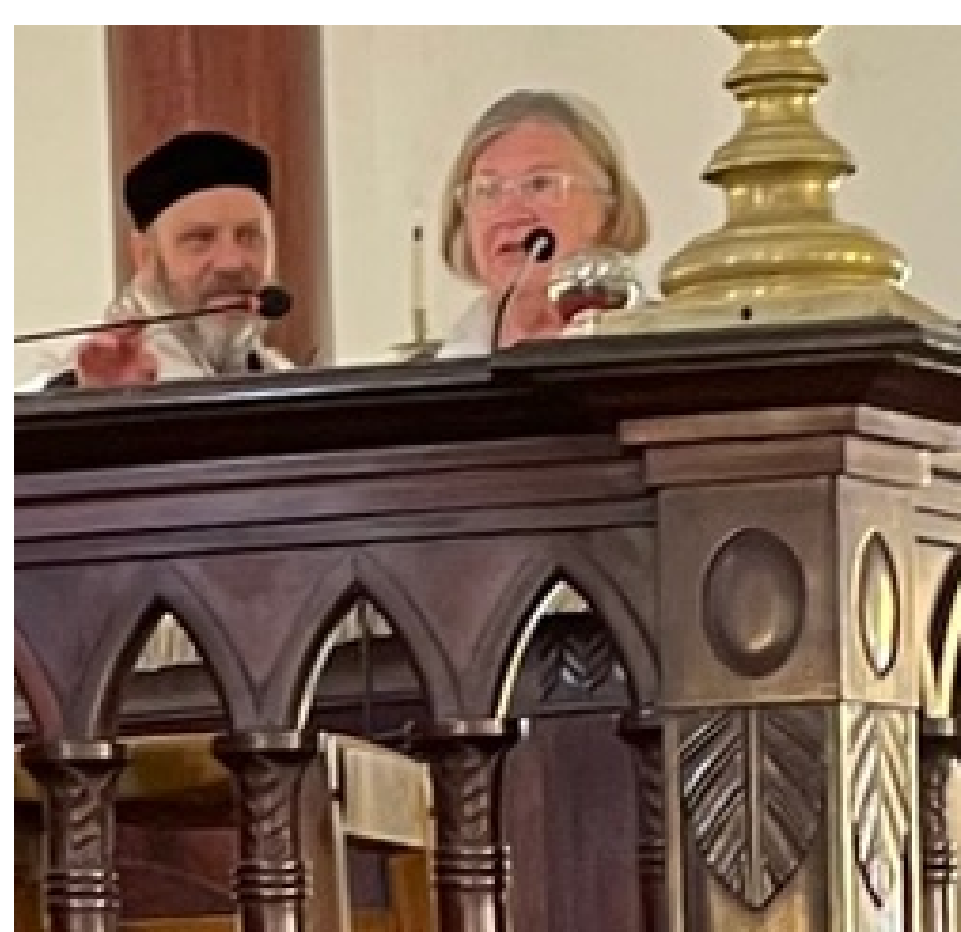
In the Sephardic style, the entrance from the street opens into an open courtyard with the sanctuary, museum, social hall, and rabbi's office arranged in separate buildings around it. The beautiful sanctuary is lit with the original candelabras on special occasions but also uses electric lights on a daily basis. The carved mahogany wood is stunning! Several of the decorative items were borrowed from ships: Four ship masts are the main supports for the ceiling. Brass lamps adorn the perimeter.

As part of the synagogue complex, there is a museum to preserve the history of the Jewish community. Several Jewish ritual objects are in the synagogue shop. I was especially drawn to the traditional blue and white Delft ceramicware from Holland.

Why a sand floor? Well, in Judaism there is never just one answer. Some believe the custom evolved for keeping the footsteps of those inside quiet from whomever was walking by outside. Others believe that it is a reminder of the time in the desert following the Exodus from Egypt.

We attended both Friday night and Saturday morning Shabbat services while visiting. We were warmly welcomed by the rabbi and the locals and met several other visitors who had also chosen Curacao as their destination because of the synagogue.

On Shabbat morning, we were honored to participate in the service. Most of the music was familiar, and the prayers were accompanied by an impressive pipe organ. David was taught the Sephardic customs to carry the Torah during the processions. I offered prayers for Israel and the world during the Torah service. One of the prayers I sang was "O Make an End," composed by our own Dr. Morton Gold. The acoustics were amazing, the challah delicious, and the experience inspiring.



Israel-Gaza War Teen Class Fundraiser

Emilee Davis, 9th grade — Thornton Academy

In a time of crisis, the most common response is to want to hide. To get away. But what about when you are witnessing a crisis? What if you see the horrors on the news: peoples' pain displayed on article headlines everywhere you look? I am sure many of us have experienced this frequently since October 7, 2023. We have all been affected by these tragic and scary events happening in Israel and Palestine. In this time of chaos, confusion, and fear, it is easy to feel helpless, like there is nothing we can do for those people on the news. But there are still things we can do, however, to assist those people in this time of need.

There are many nonprofit organizations that have been requesting donations to help those affected by the Israel-Gaza War. Some examples include Doctors Without Borders, Magen David Adom, ActionAid, UNICEF, and many more that are helping to get food, medical help, and supplies to those whose lives have been affected and are in need of aid. Donating to these organizations will allow them to assist those in need – because in this situation, it is not a matter of who hurts worse. Everyone is hurting, and everyone deserves help.

In our Teen Class here at Congregation Etz Chaim, we set a goal to raise \$1,000 for Doctors Without Borders and Magen David Adom. We are proud to say we exceeded our goal by raising \$1,794.50! This was quite inspiring. We are thankful to our community for helping by sending us money or participating in the silent auction at the Chanukah Party.

It shows that people care. People are doing things to help others, and, as grim as this situation is, we will get through it. Things will be lost, people will be hurt, but humanity has a way of making it through the most difficult of situations. If people continue to care and continue to help each other out in our times of need, we will persevere. Do not lose hope.

Synagogue Contacts

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Community Outreach: Denise Hammond, communityoutreach@etzchaimme.org

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Memorial Plaques: David Strassler, president@etzchaimme.org

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Family Education: Anthony and Jessica Allen, familyed@etzchaimme.org

Communications and Press/Media: Jennie Aranovitch, communications@etzchaimme.org

About Congregation Etz Chaim

Congregation Etz Chaim, founded in 1906, is a full-service synagogue located in Biddeford that serves the York County community. A non-denominational congregation, it promotes Jewish cultural, social, educational, and religious activities in an exceptionally welcoming and inclusive environment, making available a range of activities that facilitate the expression of what each individual finds valuable in the Jewish experience. We embrace people along the entire spectrum of Jewish practice and theology and welcome all who are interested in our congregation, regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, gender expression, sexual orientation, or formal religious affiliation.

For more information, visit www.etzchaimme.org

About YCJC News

The *York County Jewish Community News* is published twice yearly by the Congregation Etz Chaim Communications Committee. All issues — current and past— may be accessed at www.etzchaimme.org/newsletter/. Congregation Etz Chaim reserves the right to edit articles for length, clarity, grammar, and style.

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Save Our Trees: Go Green!

You can help to save our natural resources and to reduce our costs by receiving your newsletter — and all CEC community announcements — electronically. Just email us at mail@etzchaimme.org or write to us at PO Box 1473 Biddeford, Maine 04005 and ask to “Go Green.”