



CONGREGATION ETZ CHAIM

BIDDEFORD, MAINE

Congregation Etz Chaim

York County Jewish Community News

www.etzchaimme.org

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Join Us at the Seder Table!

Congregation Etz Chaim is hosting two model seders this year!

• **Children's Model Seder**

A lively, hands-on Passover experience for families with children aged 4-11

Sunday, March 22 | 10:00 a.m. - 12 p.m.

• **Adult Community Seder**

A welcoming seder including a full Passover dinner

Thursday, March 26 | 5:00 - 7:00 p.m.

Pre-registration is required for both events.

Learn more and register at etzchaimme.org/upcoming-special-events/

"Pop-Up" Hebrew School: Who Knew??

Cantor Beth Strassler

In September, if you had told me or David or anyone on our synagogue board that we would be beginning a new year of Hebrew School in January 2026, we would not have believed it.

But we began a new year of Hebrew School in January 2026!

The group had met sporadically over the past couple of years for Jewish holiday celebrations, family Shabbat dinners, and community outings. Attendance varied. Slowly, people got to know each other better while the children grew older.

This year's Sukkot celebration was held under the sukkah in our Jewish neighborhood, and the whole group came. There was a wonderful excitement in getting together to celebrate Sukkot and learn about its traditions. It was a definite turning point for the families: their children were now old enough and interest was high enough to begin to talk about meeting regularly. We narrowed down the choices for getting together to Sunday mornings.

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You're a Lucky Torah

Fred Forman

My family had a tradition of visiting the gravesites of our departed family members in September of each year between the High Holidays. Several years ago, I was visiting the cemetery in Everett, Massachusetts, when I saw in the distance a much older version of the rabbi from my childhood shul in Revere, Massachusetts, Rabbi Abraham Teitel. He was saying prayers over the stones of the departed members of his congregation.

I approached Rabbi Teitel and introduced myself, reminding him that he performed my Bar Mitzvah. He asked where I was living at the time. I told him that I was then living in Southern New Hampshire. He



responded, "Are there any Jews there?" I told him ironically that I was involved in a fledgling start-up synagogue in Southern New Hampshire with a nucleus of about 120 families. His eyes lit up, and he asked several questions in rapid succession... "Are there many young families? Are there many children? Do you have a Hebrew school? Do you have a full-time rabbi?" When I responded "yes" to all these things, he grasped my hand and exclaimed, "Mazel tov!"

I told him that our short-term goal was to raise enough money for our first Torah, but, given the cost, it may take a while. He excitedly responded in his Eastern European shtetl accent, "I may have something for you. I want you to bring your rabbi to see me."

Rabbi Diamond and I drove the 45 minutes from Southern New Hampshire to see Rabbi Teitel at his shul in Revere. On the ride down, I recounted my memories of a vibrant Jewish community, replete with kosher butcher shops, delis, bakeries, and a high concentration of Jewish tradespeople and professionals — in short, a vibrant majority Jewish neighborhood. I remembered a bustling synagogue with over a thousand families and a rush for High Holiday tickets. I recollected the streets filled with people in their new outfits heading to services or just hoping to use the shul as a place to kibbitz. Excited children would meet their classmates and sit together, and families would embrace with a warmth that I can still feel.

As we drove down the main avenue adjacent to the shul, it was obvious that my recollections were of a distant past before economic downturns and migration to more affluent suburbs. We were greeted with boarded up shops and graffiti. Assimilation and social stratification had rendered my memories quaint reminders of what was no more. We pulled up to the once grand synagogue entrance to discover that it was roped off and in disrepair. (I learned that they could not afford to fix it.) We had to use a side entrance. The shul could no longer garner a weekday minyan and was only open during the High Holidays and, even then, was on life support.

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Community Spotlight on ... Jessica Allen

Jennie Aranovitch

Community Spotlight is a new YCJC News feature designed to help us get to know the people who make our community what it is — one conversation at a time.



If you've attended an event at Congregation Etz Chaim in recent months, you may have noticed that the Shapiro Room feels a little different. The stage and backstage areas are newly cleaned and organized. The once-cluttered coat closet now keeps winter coats warm and out of the unheated foyer. From seasonal touches to table décor, events carry a renewed sense of care and coordination. Behind many of these thoughtful improvements is Jessica Allen, the synagogue's new part-time events coordinator. *YCJC News* recently sat down with Jessica to learn more about how she found her way to the congregation, how she sees her role, and what she hopes members feel when they walk through the doors.

***YCJC News:* Tell us a little about yourself: how you came to be a part of our community and what drew you to the role of part-time events coordinator?**

Jessica: [My husband] Anthony had originally been studying with Chabad, but when COVID hit, they weren't doing remote services on Shabbat, and he found that Congregation Etz Chaim was. After connecting with Beth, he planned to take her conversion class, and he asked me if I would be interested. And I said, "Yeah, you know what, it's COVID. We have nothing to do. So why not?"

And you know Beth, she's just literally the most inviting human being of all time, so you just kind of immediately feel at home with her. And the way that she teaches is also really beautiful, and I feel like that's a skill that not everyone has — to teach such a really interesting topic like religion to someone who really wasn't overly religious. She did it with care, and she did it very intentionally, and I think it was that that really drew me in.

And then obviously the religion itself kind of drew me in. I love to be in nature, I love to be outside and learning about how many of our holidays are really centered on the environment, the seasons, the planet, and being stewards of the Earth. I was just blown away by how beautiful all of that was. That was the turning point where I said, "I love these traditions."

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Rabbi Sandmel on Antisemitism and the Future of Jewish-Christian Dialogue

David Strassler



On Jan. 11, 2026, Rabbi David Fox Sandmel, Ph.D., gave his fourth presentation at Congregation Etz Chaim (CEC) on antisemitism. "Post-Shoah Jewish-Christian Relations: A Text Study" was presented to CEC members along with others from local churches.

Rabbi Sandmel is presently chair emeritus of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations, the consortium of Jewish organizations that is the official Jewish dialogue partner of the Vatican, the World Council of Churches, and the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Orthodox churches.

The recognition that Christian anti-Judaism helped create the conditions that enabled Nazi antisemitism and the Shoah (Holocaust) led to a profound reckoning within the Christian world. In the decades that followed, Christian theologians and Jewish scholars engaged in transformative dialogue — work that continues to shape interreligious understanding today.

Rabbi Sandmel guided us through two milestone documents that emerged from this post-Holocaust theological shift:

- ***Nostra Aetate*** (1965): The groundbreaking Vatican declaration that reshaped Christian teachings about Jews and Judaism
- ***Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity*** (2000): The first major Jewish response to the significant changes that had been taking place within Christian theology

Rabbi Sandmel's presentation made clear that confronting the theological roots of anti-Judaism is essential to understanding how antisemitism developed and how it can be challenged today. By studying these landmark texts together, we gained not only historical insight but also practical tools for recognizing prejudice, deepening interfaith respect, and standing more thoughtfully against antisemitism in our own time.

In conclusion, Rabbi Sandmel described a book he edited that connects closely to *Dabru Emet* called *Irreconcilable Differences? A Learning Resource for Jews and Christians*. The book invites Jews and Christians to sit down together and talk honestly about important questions: Who is G-d? How do we read the Bible? What do we believe about suffering, salvation, and how we should live? This approach does not pretend that our differences do not exist. Instead, it encourages open, respectful conversation about both what we share and where we disagree. With insights from both Jewish and Christian voices, we are reminded that learning from one another can strengthen faith and deepen relationships between our communities. This book is well written, provocative, and now available in our library.

- View a recording of Rabbi Sandmel's presentation: <https://etzchaimme.org/video-archives/>
- Read *Nostra Aetate* and *Dabru Emet*: <https://etzchaimme.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Post-Shoah-Jewish-Christian-Relations-packet.pdf>

Cantor's Corner: What DO We Teach in Hebrew School?

Cantor Beth Strassler

I can only begin to tell you how wonderful it is to be teaching Hebrew School again. AND to be teaching it to families who are excited to learn. To see a new generation of families come through our door and down the stairs is very exciting.

So, why do we think Hebrew School is important? What do we strive to teach young children? What are we modeling for them? David and I (present Hebrew School teachers) made a list of topics. I decided to expand on each one.

1. Community is important: Our Hebrew School community realizes its shared heritage, interests, and goals. The result is a sense of belonging and support, which reduces feelings of isolation. *Real life experience: "We are not the only Jewish family in Biddeford!"*

2. Learning is important: We all learn through experience, study, modeling, or being taught. We use all of these techniques to help students acquire important skills for Jewish life. *Real Life Experience: Hands-on projects help our young students to further understand the words and concepts in our stories and prayer.*

3. Each person deserves our respect: The person next to each one of us was also made in G-d's image and deserving of our polite attention. Each person in our school is valued for their unique contributions and encouraged to share them. *Real life experience: "I really want to say something, but right now I will listen to what Shoshana is saying and wait my turn."*

Words of Wisdom

* "And it is still true, no matter how old you are: When you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together."

** "It is also important to have someone standing next to you to receive the hand you put out."

*Fulghum, Robert. *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten: Uncommon Thoughts on Common Things*. Villard Books, 1988.

** Cantor Strassler

4. Sharing is an important part of life:

There are many people around us. Our lives are full of opportunities to use, enjoy, or occupy the space respectfully with other people. *Real Life Experience: "Sure! I will pass you the glue. You need it also."*

5. We value our heritage: Our history, stories, values, and customs come from lessons in the Torah, Jewish holidays, and the Hebrew language. We recognize these as the foundations of who we are as Jews. *Real Life Experience: We have the opportunity to take a break at the end of each week to observe Shabbat.*

6. We recognize a higher power: As teachers, we believe there is a G-d who made the world and tries to guide us in living a moral life. G-d is with us and available. *Real life experience: "I say the Shema before going to sleep."*

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Echoes From the Archives: The Model Seder Tradition

Jennie Aranovitch

As Passover approaches each year, many synagogues — including our own Congregation Etz Chaim — hold a model seder to help prepare the community for the holiday. These gatherings offer a guided walk through the rituals, symbols, and stories of the seder, giving participants a chance to learn and ask questions before celebrating at home with family and friends.

While the Passover seder itself is an ancient tradition, dating back more than two thousand years, the idea of a model seder held in a synagogue or religious school is much more recent. For most of Jewish history, the seder was primarily a home-centered ritual, fulfilling the commandment to tell the story of the Exodus to one's children around the family table using the Haggadah.

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Congregants gathered around tables set up in the synagogue sanctuary during what appears to be a communal or model seder in the early to mid-1940s.

Things To Know and Do

Two Community Model Seders at Congregation Etz Chaim Families with children aged 4–11 are welcome at CEC's Children's Model Seder, Sunday, March 22, 10 a.m. to 12 p.m., where we will learn about the story and traditions of Passover in an engaging, interactive way (no cost). We are also offering an Adult Community Seder With Dinner on Thursday, March 26, 5–7 p.m., which includes a full seder with dinner. \$10/person or \$25 maximum per family. We will offer several haggadahs for free from our library collection. Editions vary and quantities are limited.

Registration for both events is required. Visit etzchaimme.org/upcoming-special-events/

Burial Plots Plots are available for purchase in the Congregation Etz Chaim's interfaith section of Mount Sinai Cemetery in Portland, providing an opportunity for Jews to be buried next to non-Jewish spouses/partners/family members. For more information, contact David Strassler at president@etzchaimme.org.

National Council of Jewish Women Scholarship Opportunity

The Southern Maine section of the National Council of Jewish Women awards college scholarships to young Jewish students from Maine. Scholarships are awarded to high school seniors and undergraduate college students on the basis of financial need. Academic achievement and Jewish — as well as general community — involvement are also taken into consideration. The Selma Gleit Memorial Scholarship for Women in STEM is an additional scholarship presented to a Jewish female high school senior or college student who has demonstrated excellence and commitment in the fields of science, technology, engineering and/or math, without consideration of need. Deadline: April 24, 2026.

Learn more at ncjwmaine.org.

Dismantling Democracy: 53 Days in Nazi Germany at the Kennebunk Free Library; April 21, 6:30 p.m. This Maine Holocaust and Human Rights Center program explores the critical weeks following Hitler's appointment as chancellor in 1933, when the Nazi Party legally and systematically dismantled the democratic foundations of the Weimar Republic. Grounded in primary sources and historical context, the program offers an opportunity to learn about this pivotal moment in history — one that reminds us how quickly democratic institutions can erode.

Learn more at hhrcmaine.org.

Women Who Inspire at the Morgan Gallery, Kittery Community Center Created by local artist and Congregation Etz Chaim community member Caren Klein, this exhibit features portraits and brief histories of Nobel Peace Prize-winning women and notable Maine women, including a few Jewish women. Klein is an accomplished painter who captures the stories of her community and her environment. Her current artwork is focused on portraits of women who have contributed to society for the betterment of humanity. Exhibit runs until April 24.

Learn more at kitterycommunitycenter.org/arts/page/current-exhibit.

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Samuel Osher Memorial Library Update

Phyllis Turtle

Albert Einstein said, "The only thing you absolutely have to know is the location of the library."

The Samuel Osher Memorial Library here at CEC is getting a makeover! The Library Committee has been hard at work making this gem of a Jewish library the best it can be, and we encourage you to experience the changes for yourself.

As you know, the collection is online and easy to search. The shelves are being reorganized to make them more navigable and browser friendly. The room is being newly furnished so that it will be a more welcoming and comfortable space to read or socialize.

At the heart of the library is a resource collection that is both diverse and unique. From spiritual and religious texts to history, cookbooks, children's books and young adult offerings, classic and contemporary fiction, folklore, and biography, there is a book you absolutely need to read waiting there on the shelf. The collection is frequently updated, and we try to highlight new titles.

Among our new literary arrivals available for circulation:

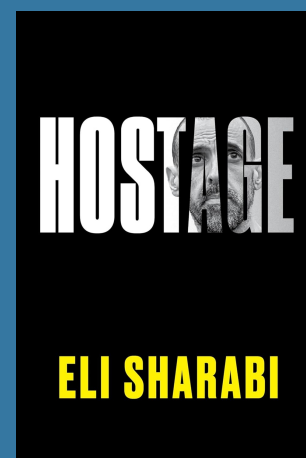
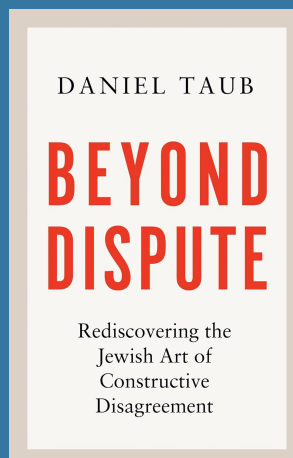
- ***Hostage* by Eli Sharabi**

A memoir that recounts Sharabi's 491 days as a Hamas hostage after being kidnapped from Kibbutz Be'eri during the October 7, 2023, attacks in Israel. Sharabi lost his family in the attacks and poignantly describes his harrowing captivity. *Hostage* is the bestselling book in Israeli publishing history.

- ***Queen Esther* by John Irving**

A return to the fictional world of *The Cider House Rules*, Young Esther Nacht is the only Jewish orphan at St. Cloud's after losing her father on route from Vienna and her mother to an antisemitic act in Portland, Maine. Never adopted, her life experience takes her on a journey to family and belonging.

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Strassler Family Chanukah in Jamaica

Cantor Beth Strassler

Kingston, Jamaica: In the crowded downtown business area, narrow streets crisscross the main thoroughfare. As the sun lowers in the sky on a Friday night in December 2025, our family turns down one to find the Kahal Kadosh Sha'are Shalom (Holy Congregation of the Gates of Peace), also known as the United Congregation of Israelites. It is a magnificent building with an outside courtyard and a guarded parking area.

Our reception is hearty, as we begin to talk with those milling about in the courtyard. We had already introduced ourselves through email conversations a month before our arrival. Security comes first.

I am invited to sing the blessings as David participates in the lighting of the Chanukah candles. I light the Shabbat candles from the bimah, lead the blessings, and offer Dr. Gold's "Oseh Shalom" to begin the service.

There seems to be a group of people about our age who "keep the fires burning" daily. They grew up and remained in Kingston after their European ancestors migrated here. In fact, the lay leader and the president are first cousins. Their practice began in the Sephardic tradition and continues today with their affiliation with Reform Judaism.

The white sand floor is perfectly manicured. Several Torah scrolls are kept in the mahogany Ark, inherited from five other congregations that have now closed their doors and consolidated. About 35 people are scattered throughout the sprawling space: some families, some singles, and a few couples. The music is full because there is a small choir, a booming cantor, and a pipe organ that all blend together beautifully. Their knowledgeable service leader is there for each and every service.

After Shabbat prayers, we all head to the social hall next door for latkes! Conversation is lively, and we feel warmly welcomed by all.

This was the third of our visits to the three white-sand-floor synagogues in the Caribbean. (The first is in Curacao, the second in St. Thomas.) There is another white-sand-floor synagogue in Amsterdam. We hear that the spring is a good time to visit there.

See more photos on page 16

בית הכנסת דקק שער יוש
 יסד בשנת תקמ"ח לפ"ק
 ונבנה שנית בשנת ג'רל"א והיה כבוד הבית הזה האחרון בין הראשון לפ"ק
 SYNAGOGUE OF ENGLISH ISRAELITES
FOUNDED A.M. 5548.
REBUILT A.M. 5597.
REBUILT A.M. 5671.

Translation of words on the stone at the Kahal Kadosh Sha'are Shalom (United Congregation of Israelites) in Kingston, Jamaica:

Synagogue Named Gates of Peace
 Great will be this Holy House of Aaron
 from the beginning to end.

The Board of Directors and Cantor Strassler wish you and yours a Happy Passover!



Cantor's Corner: What DO We Teach in Hebrew School? (Continued from page 6)

7. Recognizing Hebrew is important: Hebrew is the sacred language of the Jewish people. More recently, it has become a modern, spoken language, especially in Israel. *Real life experience: "We are able to chant the Shema with everyone else at our cousins' b-mitzvahs!"*

Hoping you have a meaningful, joyous Passover holiday shared with loved ones.

— Beth

Echoes From the Archives: The Model Seder Tradition

(Continued from page 7)

In the United States, the growth of synagogue religious schools in the early and mid-20th century led rabbis and Jewish educators to develop new ways to teach Jewish traditions to younger generations. By the 1940s and 1950s, many congregations had begun holding model seders so students could learn the order of the ritual, understand the meaning of the symbolic foods on the seder plate, and practice asking the Four Questions.

Photographs from our congregation's archives suggest that Congregation Etz Chaim may have embraced this tradition early. One image from the 1940s shows congregants seated at long tables set up in the sanctuary, with matzah visible on the tables, suggesting a communal or educational seder. The photo was likely taken before 1948, when the synagogue's basement was renovated to create what was then called the vestry — later known as the social hall and today the Shapiro Room. Prior to that renovation, large communal gatherings such as this appear to have taken place in the sanctuary, as it was the only suitable location in the building.

A newspaper clipping from the early 1950s, also shown here, documents a model seder for the Hebrew school students held at the synagogue several years later. Families gathered then much as they do now: learning the blessings, tasting the ritual foods, and exploring the story of freedom that stands at the heart of Passover.

Participate In Passover Festival



The Passover festival was held at the Etz Chaim synagogue here Sunday and the picture depicts the ceremonial part of it. In the photo, first row, left to right: Morton Rosenfeld, Herbert Sandler, Sharon Sneider, Lynn Carp. Second row, usual order: Bruce Simensky, Cedric Minkin, Allen Misseph, Gregoire Shapiro. Third row, usual order: Stuart Ruben, Jeffrey Sneider, Linda Spill, Ellen Haas, Leah Aar...

A Biddeford Daily Journal clipping from the 1950s documents a model seder at Congregation Etz Chaim, reflecting a mid-20th-century tradition.

More than half a century later, the purpose of the model seder remains the same. By learning the rituals together as a community, we ensure that when Passover arrives, each household can approach its own seder table with confidence — ready not only to follow the traditions but also to understand the story they tell.

As we look forward to our upcoming [children's model seder](https://etzchaimme.org/upcoming-special-events/) and [adult community seder](https://etzchaimme.org/upcoming-special-events/) (etzchaimme.org/upcoming-special-events/) — to be held on March 22 and March 26, respectively — and prepare to celebrate Passover once again, we are reminded that teaching and learning these traditions together is itself part of the enduring story of Jewish life at Congregation Etz Chaim.

You're a Lucky Torah

Continued from page 3

The two rabbis spoke at some length in Hebrew and Yiddish and then read from a Torah that Rabbi Teitel had open. Rabbi Teitel then told us that he was "loaning our synagogue a Torah for life."

He then walked us to the exit and said, "I want to say goodbye to the Torah." I reminded him that it was still his Torah and he yelled "No, you must never bring that back here ... There is no future for it. A Torah is meant to be read and studied!"

He then kissed the Torah and said the following words which will stay with me forever: "You are a lucky Torah. You will have children learning from you; you will have people studying you; you will have children become bar mitzvah with you. You will have the kind of life that I can no longer give you!" He then kissed the Torah again and yelled at us both to "take the Torah and leave!"

We left the shul in silence with goosebumps, and didn't speak most of the ride home.

Samuel Osher Memorial Library Update

(Continued from page 9)

- ***Beyond Dispute: Rediscovering the Jewish Art of Constructive Disagreement* by Daniel Taub**

A former diplomat and peace negotiator, Taub explores the Jewish concept of dispute and argument as a pathway to consensus and truth.

The library is available whenever the synagogue is open. Material may be checked out to take home and enjoy.

Let us know what you think and how we can improve, or if you want to make a separate appointment to visit the library and take out a book. Email us at library@etzchaimme.org.

Explore our online catalog: librarycat.org/lib/CECLibrary1.

Community Spotlight on Jessica Allen (Continued from page 4)

Anthony and I were talking about having a family and how we would want to raise them and the traditions that we would want to raise them in, and that kind of sealed it for me.

In terms of the position, I knew that this would be my opportunity to take the years and decades of experience that Beth and David had and transplant it into my brain and get a taste for the inner workings of the synagogue — knowing the full ins and outs of how every single event is run. It's been wildly eye-opening.

In my mind, my goal is to make us even more community-driven, more involved in the community, and have people understand that we're there, and we are there to help in whatever capacity that could look like.

YCJC News: How would you describe your role in your own words?

Jessica: The event coordinator title is a good start in terms of an explanation, but the way I look at it is a way to organize the congregation as a whole — to kind of overhaul the synagogue and get it so that everything is organized to where I could not be there in the event that there was something going on, and it would be so easy for someone to go in and say, "OK, well, this is where our Purim decorations are, this is where our Hanukkah decorations are."

I want it to get that streamlined, where the kitchen is always fully stocked and we're not in an event situation where we have to scramble.

I'm also excited about doing some updates to the synagogue. There's so much potential in the building, and there's so much potential in our community as well. It's that "if you build it, they will come" type situation. If we're involved in the community and getting more people to come in, there's just so much opportunity there.

In my mind, that's my goal — to make us even more community-driven, involved in the community, and have people understand that we're there.

YCJC News: How do you see synagogue events helping people feel more connected to each other, to synagogue life, or to their own Jewishness?

Jessica: I think that even the smallest of events are important. Like, the kiddushes are so fantastic for just a much more intimate setting, where maybe you're overwhelmed when there are large groups, but you come to a kiddish and you realize, wow, this is just kind of like having a meal with your family. It's way less pressure. It's just a nice, quiet event where we sit and get to talk about our week and have services.

Every time that we have any type of kids' events, I always talk to the parents because I know how daunting it can be to go to the Hanukkah party, or one of Passover events, or High Holidays, for example, because you're worried about your kids running around, causing a ruckus, and being a distraction. I always tell them, "There's no pressure here, and if you're worried about your kids being loud, I promise you that everyone loves the kids being here. And they're never an annoyance."

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“Pop-Up” Hebrew School: Who Knew??

(Continued from page 2)

Each week, nine students ages 5 through 10 years and a parent from each family meet for Hebrew School. In the middle of the session, David and I each teach a 40-minute class. His is a higher level of discussion; mine involves hands-on projects. Together, we all work on Hebrew letters and basic Hebrew word recognition, discuss a story about the weekly parsha, have a short service, and, of course, EAT! Families take turns bringing in a snack. There is ALWAYS challah.

Once a month, six younger students join in: four 4-year-olds and two toddlers. Jessica and Anthony Allen are organizing this program with us.

The interest and excitement are palpable. It is family education at its finest! Students and parents coming together to learn, share experiences, and explore their heritage.

Please spread the word!! After a three-year hiatus, our Hebrew School is fully back in action!!

Any questions may be directed to cantor@etzchaimme.org.

Below left: Wyatt Marom; below right: Elyana Reynolds



Strassler Family Chanukah in Jamaica

(Continued from page 10)



Left: Cantor Beth Strassler leads the blessings at Kahal Kadosh Sha'are Shalom as the congregation's prayer leader looks on.

Community Spotlight on Jessica Allen

(Continued from page 14)

The way that we are, which I love so much, is that you come as you are. You come wherever you are in your Judaism, and there's no pressure.

My new goal is to sit with someone new every time we have an event and engage as much as my children will allow in the moment.

YCJC News: What is the one thing that you hope congregants will feel when they attend events that you help coordinate?

Jessica: I hope they feel welcome, and I hope that they don't feel intimidated by lack of knowledge or lack of understanding of Judaism. I hope that they understand that it's OK for them to not know everything about being a Jew. It's OK for them to not know everything about the holiday. We're all forever learning together, right? It's always a continuing cycle of education. That was one of the things that Beth said when we were first learning, is that Judaism is like a big spiral, right? Like, you read the same book all the time, but at certain points of your life, something in that book is going to hit you and resonate differently because of where you are in life.

And I think that that's the thing that people tend to not understand as much. They think that it has to be a certain way, like, you have to have done this, you have to have done that. Nope. Just come as you are. It's really OK!

Things To Know and Do

(Continued from page 8)

***There Is Always an &* at the Maine Jewish Museum:** The signature photography exhibition of the Ampersand Project, this first-of-its-kind documentation initiative explores the layered identities of Jews across Maine. Israeli photographer Hedva Rokach traveled throughout the state, visually documenting members of the diverse Jewish communities that span coastal towns, inland villages, urban neighborhoods, and rural backroads. The exhibition features almost 200 photographic portraits, each accompanied by a brief narrative. A number of portraits also include QR links to video interviews, allowing visitors to hear directly from participants in their own words and adding voice, movement, memory, and emotional texture to the still images on the wall. The exhibit runs until May 3.

A companion publication, *Faces & Facets of Jewish Life in Maine*, presents more than 300 of Rokach's portraits of Jewish Mainers. It is available for purchase through the Maine Jewish Museum Shop (<https://mainejewishmuseum.org/shop/>) and is available for loan at Congregation Etz Chaim's Samuel Osher Memorial Library.

Learn more at mainejewishmuseum.org/exhibits/there-is-always-an/.

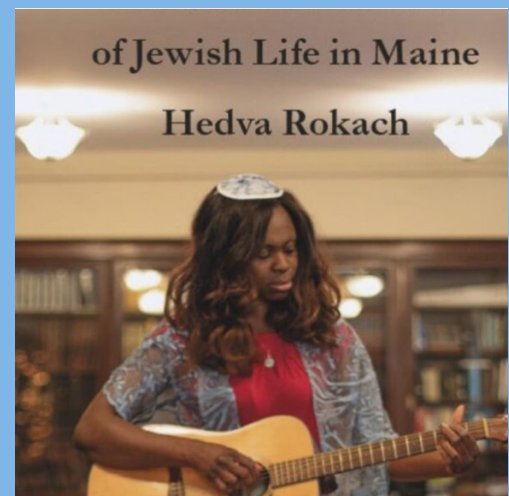
Behind the Scenes: Joe Strassler Adds Interactive Element to Exhibit

Congregation Etz Chaim (CEC) was honored to be one of the many stops Hedva Rokach made during her travels throughout Maine — and our community is well represented in the *There is Always an &* exhibit and the companion book. Portraits of multiple CEC members are featured in the display, and even more appear in the publication.

But that is not the extent of CEC's involvement. Our own member and IT service provider Joe Strassler played an integral role in bringing the digital component of the exhibit to life. After he was approached by Maine Jewish Museum Executive Director Dawn LaRochelle, who wished to add an interactive element to the display, Joe took on the task of creating QR codes for select portraits that take exhibit viewers to both short- and long-form interviews with the subjects.

Joe also created a mini-website, accessed via QR code at the entrance of the exhibit, that provides a preview of the 200 photos featured. "The idea was to give people an overview of all the photos before they even started looking at the exhibit," he explains.

Joe's impression of the exhibit? "What's really cool about Hedva is that she has an amazing gift of being able to capture peoples' likeness in a way that is semi-posed but incredibly natural," he marvels. "It never looks fake. I don't know how she does it."



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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

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