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January-February 2024 / 5784

Welcome to Kesher

Connection is the force that binds members and clergy to Judaism and to The Village Temple.

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FROM RABBI FERSKO

To The Village Temple family,

Within these pages you'll hear about some of the many ways The Village Temple has responded to these days of intense difficulty following the attacks of October 7. We've raised money for UJA Federation and Magen David Adom. We've marched in New York and in DC. We learned from high-level thinkers and reconnected with our sister school in Hadera, Israel. We hosted a community vigil, a community dialogue, and several small group meetings. We've sung together, we've prayed together, we've cried together. We've been there for each other, processing each other's pain and holding each other close. We've listened to each other, allowing for nuance, enjoying unity and peoplehood and also respecting difference and disagreement. What strikes me most of all, is that we've been together.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov taught — *kol ha'olam kulo gesher tzar m'od* — All the world is a narrow bridge, and the key, the key is not to be afraid. We are feeling that fragility of the world with each passing day, but together we are moving forward unafraid, step by step.

Lshalom,
Rabbi Diana Fersko

KESHER

The Newsletter of
The Village Temple

*Congregation B'nai Israel
of New York*

SENIOR RABBI
Diana Fersko
rabbifersko@villagetemple.org

CANTOR
Emma Maier
emaier@villagetemple.org

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Sandy Albert
salbert@villagetemple.org

DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION
Alex Tansky, RJE
atansky@villagetemple.org

DIRECTOR, CHILDREN'S
CHOIR
Anita Hollander
anitahollander@hotmail.com

DIRECTOR OF
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
Liotte Greenbaum, RJE
lgreenbaum@villagetemple.org

CO-PRESIDENTS
Jill Wilkinson
wilkinson9753@gmail.com
Katherine Lipton
katherine.lipton@gmail.com

EDITOR
Elyse Grusky
egrusky@gmail.com

PHOTOGRAPHER
Susan Rosenberg Jones

We invite all who wish to join us to enter our doors: Jews by birth, Jews by choice, interfaith families. Inside you will find a community of people who are on a quest to reshape Shabbat and holiday worship, reinvigorate Jewish learning, and renew our commitment to tikkun olam through social action and justice.



When Terrorism Strikes: A Personal Reflection from the Klinghoffer Sisters

As many of you know, we are victims of terrorism. Thirty-eight years ago on October 7, 1985 our parents were taken hostage by Palestinian terrorists who hijacked their cruise ship while it was docked in Alexandria, Egypt. The terrorists later brutally murdered our father, Leon Klinghoffer, and threw him overboard.



Like everyone else, we were horrified by the events of October 7, 2023, when Hamas launched a terrorist attack on Israel, slaughtering more than 1,200 innocent men, women, and children and taking another 240 people as hostages. We especially felt the pain of the families of the hostages as, like us

before them, they were completely in the dark about the fate of their loved ones.



As we said in our letter below, in the aftermath of the hijacking and our father's murder, we took great comfort in the hundreds of letters of sympathy and support we received from people around the world. We wrote the letter below in the hope we could provide a little source of comfort to the families of the hostages, and to let them know we support them as fellow victims.

Ilsa Klinghoffer
Lisa Klinghoffer

From lsklinghofferart.com

Our letter to the hostage families

Dear Hostage Family, (personal name)

I'm sorry it has taken me so long to reach out to you, as I've wanted to do so since Oct. 8, 2023.

Thirty-eight years ago, on Oct. 7, 1985, while aboard the cruise ship Achille Lauro, our father, Leon Klinghoffer, was taken hostage by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), along with our mother, Marilyn Klinghoffer, and dozens of other passengers who stayed on board in the Port of Alexandria, Egypt, while most of the ship's passengers were on an excursion to the Pyramids. Our parents were aboard the Achille Lauro to celebrate several happy occasions with friends when the ship was hijacked. They were determined to take the trip even though our father was in a wheelchair (before there were any accommodations for disabled people) and our mother was in remission from colon cancer.

Upon learning of the news of the hijacking, we did exactly as you have done: Beg for information and help from every possible

source, from our government representatives to the president of the U.S. (Ronald Reagan), to other governments and to the media. We made sure to the best of our ability at that time (pre-internet) that the world knew what was happening and who our parents were. All of hostages survived, except for one, our father.

During this horrific time, our family took immense comfort in the hundreds of letters of support we received from people around the world. The mere fact that strangers would take the time to reach out helped us through the frustration, sadness and, at times, despair.

We don't know if this letter will ever get to you or if you'll read it, but please know that our family is with you and your family. We will stand together with you for however long it takes to bring your loved ones home.

In solidarity,
Ilsa Klinghoffer
Lisa Klinghoffer

Israel and the Hostages: March on Washington

Congregant David Friedman travelled to Washington DC to urge our government to do everything in their power to get Hamas to release the hostages they are holding after the horrific attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. *Kesher* asked David to write about that experience.

Q: What made you want to go to the march?

Israel: I am grateful that our family visited Israel in March. I was struck by the vibrancy of life I was observing while walking the streets of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. It was clear that the Israelis understood how precious and precarious life is living in the Middle East. Since we left, I have been reading and learning about the history of the state of Israel, of the Palestinian conflict and of the protests against judicial reform. I was worried about Israel's future, both internally and externally. Then October 7 shook everything up and my worries became magnified.



Photo: David Friedman in the rear, Katherine Kornblau with her daughter Sophia, Josie Sandler, and Bob Gass.

“I wanted to be there for Israel. Through all its imperfections, times like these prove how essential we need a homeland for the Jewish people.”

Antisemitism: Post-October 7, I was even more shocked. Shocked by the actual horror of what happened on that Saturday desert morning. Shocked by the reactions to October 7 I was seeing online. Shocked by how rampant antisemitism is around the world. I was naive. I thought there would be a coming together at a time like this. I could not have been more wrong. We were not even given space to mourn. I wasn't given space to mourn.

The hostages: I am ashamed to say that I was not thinking about the hostages much the first few weeks. I cannot imagine what they and their families are going through. Truly horrible. Also horrible is the ripping down of posters all around the city. Why aren't we hearing louder calls for the hostages to be free?

This is the backdrop. I felt compelled to go to the March in Washington DC. I wanted to be there for the Israelis, they are hurting. They are not alone and we have their back. I wanted to be there for Israel. Through all its imperfections, times like these prove how essential we need a homeland for the Jewish people. I wanted to be there to promote awareness and fight antisemitism. My wish is for my kids and future generations to live in a world where they truly feel safe being Jewish. I wanted to be there for the release of the hostages. May they come home safely and soon.

There was something very cathartic being around such a diverse group of Jewish people all there for one purpose. Gives me hope for the future.

Ruby Namdar Addresses the Village Temple

The VT held its second post-October 7 gathering at the sanctuary on Tuesday, December 5.

Ruby Namdar, an acclaimed prize-winning novelist and literature professor, joined us. Ruby, an Iranian Israeli, born and raised in Jerusalem, has been a U.S. resident for the past 20 years. He teaches literature and Talmud in NYC.

After a brief introduction by the rabbi and his opening remarks, a Q&A ensued. In place of a dry recitation of current events with which everyone is familiar, Ruby brought his novelist's imagination to the issues at hand. The result was a profound examination of submerged, atavistic, subconscious feelings and fears that provided an eye-opening surprise to ponder.

In providing the group with his view of the current state of American diaspora and Israeli Jewry, his focus was that both peoples were suffering from a deep-seated trauma. In Israel, existential; in the U.S., of loss hard-won status and safety.

“In place of a dry recitation of current events with which everyone is familiar, Ruby brought his novelist’s imagination to the issues at hand. The result was a profound examination of submerged, atavistic, subconscious feelings and fears that provided an eye-opening surprise to ponder”

American Jewry grew exponentially, commencing in the 1880s as millions of Eastern European Jews fled ever more violent pogroms. At much the same time, a much smaller contingent made *aliyah* to Palestine, thus commencing the Zionist project. The groups obviously evolved along different paths. Strikingly, he compared the tough-as-nails, martial Israeli Jewry to Esau, the hunter and warrior, in contrast to the millennial Jewish self-image as descendants of Jacob, the gentler soul.

He traced American Jewry's arc as a hard scrabble origin in poverty-stricken immigrant communities, but which rapidly adapted, assimilating and succeeding in America's pluralistic culture. So much so that in current days, in some circles, Jews are regarded as the whitest of white (therefore oppressors) people.

His thesis was that current events have summoned deeply buried but still extant feelings even generations later: both diaspora and Israeli Jewry are experiencing a form of PTSD. Healing this disorder will be difficult.

The group also discussed the rise of antisemitism in the academy and the wider culture. Namdar remains optimistic that with strong-willed advocacy and a deeper immersion in Jewish education, things may still turn around. His ideas and thoughts were learned and provocative and provided the group much to chew on. We look forward to future sessions.

—Sari Scheer



HOW WE CELEBRATED

Ukrainian Cooking for Rosh Hashanah



Simchat Torah



Sukkot



Continued on page 8

RELIGIOUS SCHOOL NEWS



Very often parents share with me their childhood memories of their own religious school experiences. In their recollections, they talk about traditional classrooms, they describe how they would take turns while reading chapters from the textbooks, and about homework assignments and memorization of prayers. And then they tell me how they wish their own Hebrew school was more like that of their children today, at The Village Temple.

I know for certain that all Hebrew schools aim to cultivate appreciation for Jewish culture, language, and history and to instill living Jewish values. All synagogue-based supplementary schools strive to create meaningful programs that provide young learners with a solid knowledge base leading to their *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvah* and beyond.



What makes the Religious School program at The Village Temple so attractive to our learners and their families then? Why do children want to be in class every week with their teachers and peers? What exactly do we do to make our program a success? I think the answer is that in our work we prioritize a holistic experience while focusing on the content and on the skills that enable and empower our students to participate in Jewish communal life. Our priority at The Village Temple is to welcome and embrace every student as they

are and to make them feel a part of something bigger. We inspire students to learn with and from each other and we encourage them to participate in activities that involve sharing, teamwork,

collaboration, and trust. This approach to Jewish education results in deeper connections with peers and teachers, fosters a stronger sense of belonging to their Village Temple community, and ensures better confidence in their Hebrew and Judaic knowledge, and, according to studies, contributes to development of an overall more positive Jewish identity. And in today's climate, in my view, positive Jewish identity is one of the most important components of self-identification that our learners gain as a result of their positive experiences at The Village Temple.



“Our priority at the Village Temple is to welcome and embrace every student as they are and to make them feel a part of something bigger.”

Following the tragic October 7 events in Israel and as a result of astonishing spikes of Jew-hatred and antisemitism in educational institutions and beyond, our children today may experience significant and

lasting effects on their mental, emotional, and social well-being. In a hostile climate or after exposure to antisemitic content on social media, children may develop heightened levels of anxiety and fear, especially in contexts where they feel threatened or unsafe. Persistent exposure to antisemitic content can contribute to feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and depression. Moreover, children may grapple with questions about their identity and struggle to understand why they are targeted based on their religious or ethnic background. At the same time, our students know that at The Village Temple they are safe to be who they are, that they are nurtured by caring

Continued on page 7



MADRICH: TEEN PROGRAMS



At The Village Temple, it's always wonderful to have so many teens continuing to participate in our Jewish community. The temple is their second home, a safe space, and whether they are here for a serious discussion or a fun social gathering, *hinei ma tov*—how good it is to be together! This fall, our teens were teaching assistants in the Hebrew school classrooms,

helped with our social action school supply drive, had a discussion with Rabbi Fersko about the situation in Israel, went to *Back to the Future, The Musical* on Broadway, and had an afternoon of parkour, ninja warrior, and trampolining. The teens also shared many dinners at our lounge nights, played gaga and other games, participated in trivia nights, and baked cookies. We look forward to another semester full of positive Jewish identity building and being together as a VT family.



*Liotte Greenbaum, RJE
Director of Community
Engagement
lgreenbaum@villagetemple.org*



Religious School News *Continued*

and supporting staff and where they are surrounded by peers and madrichim who project positive behaviors and values that emphasize respect, kindness, and cooperation. In mid-October we organized discussions with students in 5th-7th grades to address their questions and included an educational component providing the historical context of the war in Israel. We gave our students a glimpse of ongoing tensions that continue to shape the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, settlement issues, disputes over Jerusalem, and regional dynamics involving Iran, Syria, and other actors who contribute to the complex Middle East situation.

This year we resume our *Yachdav* program – a school partnership initiative that connects our Religious School students in 5th-7th grades with middle school students in Israel through Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism. Our students

created artwork that we shared with our Israeli peers, who were grateful to receive a token of support at this difficult time.

We look forward to continuing to support our students and their families with resources, with helpful content, and, most importantly, with caring and direct human connection that all of us need so much as we remain on our shared Jewish journey at The Village Temple.

*Lshalom,
Alex Tansky
Director of Education
atansky@villagetemple.org*

save the date



JANUARY

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 10

6:00 PM: *Madrich* Teen Meetup
6:30 PM: Jazz Concert with Hila Kulik Trio

FRIDAY, JANUARY 12

6:00 PM: MLK Jr. Family *Shabbat* Service featuring the Children's Choir

FRIDAY, JANUARY 19

6:00 PM: Whiskey tasting *oneg* following services

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 24

6:00 PM: *Madrich* Teen Meetup

FEBRUARY

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 2

6:00 PM: Refugee *Shabbat* Service

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 7

6:00 PM: *Madrich* Teen Meetup

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 9

6:00 PM: Jazz *Shabbat* Service

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 28

6:30 PM: Singo Bingo



How We Celebrated *Continued from page 5*

Hanukkah

