

*Alex Tansky has been the director of The Village Temple religious school for twelve years.. A graduate of the Hebrew Union College School of Education, he has created a learning atmosphere that celebrates Jewish culture, education, worship and music while instilling a sense of community. Born and raised in the former Soviet Union, Alex has had a fascinating journey himself.*

*What is your primary goal as a Jewish educator?*

My goal is to take our students on a journey that develops their knowledge of Jewish holidays and history, Torah and Israel, Hebrew and prayer. I want them to feel a connection to our past and to our future, to give them a sense of belonging to their community through their Village Temple experience. I want students to develop meaningful relationships with our clergy and to feel a genuine connection to the Village Temple as a spiritual home and sanctuary that offers support and respite from their hectic lives. This is not an overnight endeavor. When they join our Religious School as young children, they are surrounded by caring and nurturing teachers who make learning fun through guided play and creative games, holiday stories and music, art and cooking projects. As they grow older, the curricula deepen to address their spiritual and philosophical questions and to provide the skills and knowledge they need for their B'nei Mitzvah ceremonies and beyond.

*How has The Village Temple religious school changed in the past ten years?*

The Village Temple religious school has evolved as teaching practice has changed throughout the Reform movement. The classrooms look and feel totally different, reflecting interactive rather than top-down instruction. Our students work in small groups developing projects that encourage research and presentation rather than rote learning. We like to teach by example and are proud of the large number of post-B'nai Mitzvah High School students involved as *Madrichim*, classroom teacher assistants. As responsible and invested members of their school community, they feel a great pride and sense of accomplishment as they help with instruction but also develop relationships with their younger peers and become their mentors and role models.

*What are your proudest moments at the school? The biggest challenges?*

There are so many proudest moments at the school I would love to mention! But nothing tops the feeling I get when I greet all students and parents at the front door and watch children's faces brighten up with wide smiles as they give their parents a quick good-bye and run to their classrooms. I am very proud of creating this culture of community and belonging among our children and their teachers and crafting Jewish learning that generates such excitement and anticipation. The challenge, of course, is to keep the students engaged as they grow older, which is why it is such a joy to watch how older students interact with their younger peers. We often hold special programs around the holidays when, for instance, 7<sup>th</sup> graders plan learning experiences for 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> graders that center on stories, ritual objects, Torah stories, songs and music. Observing the trust and positive energy between young and older religious school students is truly a rewarding experience.

*Your own Jewish journey is inspiring. Could you tell us a little about your background?*

I was born in the Soviet Union to Jewish parents who tried keeping my roots as a secret for as long as they could. But at the age of 7 I was told by a neighbor that I was Jewish (not in a very nice way) and that I did not belong there. That was quite a shock because I believed I was Russian like everybody else. My grandparents had received a formal Jewish education and were fluent Yiddish speakers. Following this incident, they started telling me stories from the Torah, about Israel and Jewish holidays and about their childhood. During Perestroika, in the 1980s, when we finally received access to printed materials about Judaism and Israel, I fell in love with Hebrew. I self-taught myself at first and then joined underground Hebrew classes where I met like-minded youth who shared my passion. I started teaching Hebrew in a newly opened Israeli Culture Center, where I met Alla, a fellow Hebrew teacher who became my wife. Following the fall of Soviet Union in the early 1990s, more and more Soviet Jews were drawn back to Jewish learning and life. The Israeli Culture Center expanded to overseeing a dozen Jewish Sunday schools in our city of Dnepro. Still, it remained dangerous to be openly Jewish in Ukraine and in 1999 I arrived with my family in the United States as refugees. In 2002, I was accepted in the School of Education at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. I graduated in 2004 with a master's degree in Jewish education and became director of the Religious School at the Village Temple a year later. This past June at the VT college send-off and TA appreciation Shabbat service we honored those students who I met first as 1st graders back in 2005. Seeing these educated and passionate young people standing on the *bimah* and being honored on this special occasion made me grateful for how far I have come.