

Message from Rabbi Greyber:



Faith Should Make Us More Responsible, Not Less

739 Chicagoans above the norm died during the week of July 14, 1995, but it is a mistake to say they died from a heatwave. “Of course forces of nature played a major role. But these deaths were not an act of God,” argues Eric Klinenberg, author of *Heatwave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*.

“Hundreds of Chicago residents died alone, behind locked doors and sealed windows, out of contact with friends, family, and neighbors, unassisted by public agencies or community groups. There’s nothing natural about that. The death toll was the result of distinct dangers in Chicago’s social environment: an increased population of isolated seniors who live and die alone; the culture of fear that makes city dwellers reluctant to trust their neighbors or, sometimes, even leave their houses; the abandonment of neighborhoods by businesses, service providers, and most residents, leaving only the most precarious behind; and the isolation and insecurity of single room occupancy dwellings and other last-ditch low-income housing. None of these common urban conditions show up as causes of death in the medical autopsies or political reports that establish the official record for the heat disaster.”

I write these words on March 24, holed up at home along with so many, not knowing if, by the time this bulletin reaches your home, how many people will have died. But when you read the numbers, beware of blaming coronavirus too much. The French Jewish Existentialist philosopher Emmanuel Levinas wrote, “The adult God is revealed through the void of the child’s heaven,” by which I think he meant that a child holds God responsible for everything, but an adult belief in God makes us more responsible, not less. We discover God as adults when we let go of a childish belief that holds God responsible for everything that happens in the world.

True faith maintains a distinction between God and human beings. Mature religiosity humbly acknowledges viruses which are beyond our control and, on the other hand, unjust societal structures which are not. How many people died not of COVID-19 but because hourly workers lacked paid medical leave, forcing them to work and further spread the virus? It is a lie to blame every death on the virus. It is not more pious to blame God for every death from COVID-19 and, in doing so, to use faith as an excuse for moral societal failures.

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JOIN US!

Annual Meeting

Sunday, May 17, 2020

10:30 am

Virtual

All members are invited and encouraged to attend.

- Review the proposed budget for 2020-2021
- Approve the 2020-2021 Slate of Officers
- Honor the 2019-2020 Volunteer of the Year

You should have received via email the Annual Meeting materials, including information on how to access the meeting. These materials will also be available on the Beth El website.

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Pharaoh says about himself, “The Nile is mine, I made [it] myself” (Ezekiel 29:3). Pharaoh claims that (1) he is a god, and (2) he alone is responsible for the world. Pharaoh makes of himself an idol. Judaism’s battle against idolatry is not some ancient fight against wrong belief in worshipping statues – it is a conflict between human passivity and responsibility. It is a struggle over whether everything is pre-determined by fate or whether human beings have power and responsibility for the world; over whether our actions are meaningless because everything is doomed or whether we can make a difference because there is hope. God says to Pharaoh and every false god that claims lordship for itself, “No, I made the world, and you, human beings, are now My co-creators. You are created in My image. You are responsible, like Me, for creating a world of justice.”

Do not ask about COVID-19, “How can God permit/do/create such a terrible thing?” Ask instead, “What kind of society have we created that lets so many people get sick and die, especially the elderly and vulnerable?” Cry out not “Where is God?!” but “How does our country have so much wealth yet, in the midst of the crisis, lacks masks and gloves and ventilators and adequate testing?”

I believe this will end. Though I don’t know how soon or when, I believe some combination of “the virus will taper off” and/or “we will find a vaccine or medicines” so that normal life will return, if not by the time you read these words, then soon, speedily in our days. But that respite should not excuse our failings or let us breathe too easily a sigh of moral relief. May God bless us to look back both with gratitude that the darkest days are over and with conviction to do more and better as God’s co-creators of the world.

David



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A Note from Executive Director Alan Friedman

Beth El Synagogue has been closed almost seven weeks now and the City of Durham has had a shelter-in-place order in effect for over four weeks. It has been a pretty incredible time trying to navigate COVID-19 during this pandemic. Our community has accomplished a lot over these past seven weeks continuing to come together to program, worship, keep connections alive and support one another.

Right before we made the decision to close our doors, we put together a COVID-19 task force which included Dr. Adam Goldstein, Dr. Susan Kirsch, Dr. Mickey Cohen, Dan Schnitzer, Judy Rodriguez, Jenna Hyland and me. Using the wisdom, experience and guidance of this group, as well as information from the CDC (Center for Disease Control and Prevention), NCDHHS (NC Department of Health and Human Services), and Duke University, we were able to make an informed choice to close our building and move all Beth El programs and worship to a virtual (Zoom, LiveStream and Facebook Live) space.

Now seven weeks later, we are starting to look at what it will be like to reopen to our building. We have reconvened our task force to start the planning for when we return home to Beth El. We know we will follow all of the necessary precautions to keep our community safe once we do return. We will continue to be guided with information from the CDC, NCDHHS, city, county and state governments.

It is clear that what will emerge will be a gradual and phased restarting of physical proximity, based on factors including:

- Declining rates of infection and mortality in specific areas
- Availability, accuracy, and ability to obtain swift results of testing, both for the active virus and immunity, along with contract tracing to contain infection “hot spots”

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- Development and wide availability of treatments that reduce mortality
- Development and wide availability of a vaccine

The timeline for each of these conditions is uncertain, and is also likely to vary among different locations around the globe.

Along with those medical considerations, we will also factor into our decisions the values that have continued to guide us throughout this crisis. These include:

- **Pikuah Nefesh** -- “Safeguarding Life” is a bedrock principle of Jewish law, and supersedes most other obligations or mitzvot. To that end, our institutions must ensure that any steps towards restoring physical proximity place preserving life first and foremost.
- **Sakanat Nefeshot** -- “Endangering Life” -- participants, staff, and clergy should not be in positions where they will be unduly endangering their own lives or the lives of their families due to pressure to restore activities. We must honor the needs of those who lead or participate in our communities when they have individual circumstances requiring the need to reduce risk to themselves or those they live with.
- **She’at Hadehak** -- “Extraordinary Moment” -- Jewish life has always made adjustments in times of emergency and crisis. We will need to come to terms with the fact that this crisis will last for well over a year, and that we will need to continue to change our expectations and operations. We will need continued flexibility in Jewish practice informed by our commitment to authentic modes of interpretation of our tradition.
- **Kol Yisrael Areivim Zeh Bazeh** -- “We Are Responsible for One Another” -- It’s our job to look out for the mental and physical health and safety of one another. Those who have resources need to give tzedakah to help others and to sustain our institutions. Our participants are connected to others outside our community, and our policies and activities affect the broader rate infection. And we must be sure that we act in ways in which clergy, staff, and participants do not feel discriminated against or unduly disadvantaged based on their health needs.
- **Hesed** -- “Profound Love and Kindness” -- Decisions around our operations and the risks involved create uncertainty, grief, and anxiety, and we must act with tremendous love and kindness towards the members of our families, communities, and the world at large.

Our tradition teaches us that there are blessings to be found in every moment. Moreover, our experience as a people shows us that we can exist and maintain spiritual solidarity even when we cannot see one another physically. With positive and inspiring leadership, patience, and tremendous *hesed*, we will persevere during this challenging period and make choices which preserve the wellbeing of our community while honoring the profound need and desire to participate in Jewish life and meet our spiritual and communal needs.

I look forward to continuing to see you virtually and, hopefully, soon back home in our building. Please continue to stay safe and healthy!



Staff

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Rabbi Emeritus: Rabbi Steve Sager
Executive Director: Alan Friedman
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Director of Youth Engagement: Averyl Edwards
Congregational Services Coordinator:
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Communications & Marketing Associate:
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Program & Membership Coordinator:
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Kitchen Manager: Sandy Fangmeier
Head of Building Maintenance: Zachary Marshall
B’nei Mitzvah Coordinator: Rachel Albert

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*From the Desk of Board President
Debbie Goldstein*



This March, our congregation joined the rest of our community in closing its doors and moving online to gather virtually due to COVID-19. At the time that I am writing this, we have been closed for about a month. While it was frightening to make such a huge shift, our community has shown incredible strength and commitment to each other during this time. Our wonderful staff has planned new programs to keep us connected, the number of people attending minyan and Shabbat services has exceeded expectations, many of us celebrated special unique Zoom seders at congregants' homes, volunteers have called fellow congregants to check in and stay in touch, and dozens of people have called into virtual shiva minyans to support their friends through a difficult time of loss. Every time I log into a Beth El event, my spirits are lifted by seeing your faces and connecting in this way.

Today, I am writing my last column as President of the congregation and preparing to hand off the gavel to Leslie Winner in May. This is not quite the farewell I had expected and it will be strange to transition without greeting you all and sharing in lots of hugs and thank-yous in person as we head into May. It has been a great privilege and blessing to serve as President during the last two years— I have really enjoyed getting to know so many more people at Beth El and learned so much about the many talents that people bring to make our community so special. My whole family feels fortunate to be part of such a warm, diverse, and welcoming community dedicated to a rich and meaningful Jewish life. I look forward to our next chapter and especially to seeing all of you in person as soon as we are able to begin gathering again.

Debbie

*Thank you, Debbie,
for serving as a wonderful President for the past two years!*





Talmud Torah

Shalom, Y'all!

It is difficult to express how much life has transformed over the process of writing and crafting this article. I was hoping to be able to write about our wildly successful Purim Carnival, the first one in our brand new social hall. Or perhaps the article would be about the Talmud Torah class Friday night Shabbat services and dinners back in February, which have been such wonderful expressions of t'fillah and community for our Talmud Torah families.

And yet, now, we are faced with a totally different reality, unlike anything any of us have ever seen before. It is often very scary and heartbreaking to confront this virus and the effects that the accompanying isolation have had on our lives. However, I have been devoting my time and energy to figuring out how to continue our Talmud Torah education online. In just one example of the power of Jewish community, I have met and spoken with educators and rabbis across the country in different virtual forums to discuss best practices for teaching online. I also conducted virtual meetings with our awesome faculty, chatted with our Va'ad HaChinuch, and did multiple practice runs using Zoom, every educator's new best friend.

This past Sunday (March 22) was the first time we convened after a couple of weeks to do a virtual Havdallah, followed by separate breakout sessions for each class. I was anxious about the technology working right, about how many families would be able to attend, etc. Imagine my surprise to see the screen filling up with faces, overjoyed to see each other and to be able to do Havdallah together once again, even if it wasn't quite what they were used to. As I led the service using the familiar words that many of our Talmud Torah students know by heart, it was amazing to see so many candles reflecting back at me through the screen, bringing in the new week together with a flood of light and hope.

The students loved reuniting in their individual class sessions as well, getting to discuss Hebrew and Judaics with their teachers as well as just saying hello after weeks apart. It was so heartening to see so many smiles and giggles during these reunions.

As we continue meeting online through the rest of the year, I am deeply invested in making Talmud Torah the best that it can be under the circumstances! I am clinging to the beauty of our Talmud Torah chevre, as a reminder that though we are physically distant now, we are not truly "socially distant" after all.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Alexandra Bicks".

Alexandra Bicks
Interim Education & Youth Director





The Quaranteen Experience

How are teens doing in quarantine? We asked six Beth El teens to find out.

In general, teens are doing okay in the quarantine. They are adjusting to their online schools, which are piling on a lot of work, but many of which are not assigning grades, so it feels like the work they're doing is kind of meaningless. They also are finding themselves bored a lot of the time, but are adept at using technology and social media to stay in close contact with their friends. They've also been logging in weekly for our virtual youth group events, ranging from an Israeli scavenger hunt to a PowerPoint party to a murder mystery movie!

Here are some excerpts from my conversations with them:

"I'm almost done with my first week of school. My school doesn't have APs so I'm good but I'm not sure what graduation will look like. Because I am a Senior it feels like this extremely important time has been taken away from me - kinda like the rug has been pulled out from under me. It makes me very sad and mad. But I am looking each day for what I am grateful for and I am deepening my relationships with my parents and my friends.

I actually have my last 3 [colleges] to hear back [from] tonight. I'm not sure where I'm going next. The decision is definitely harder because I can't visit the schools. I have a lot of options to choose from so that makes it more difficult."

-Gavi Fischer (12th Grade, Carolina Friends School)

"I really miss my friends. It's making me feel really lonely. Online school is interesting, I don't like it much because they're assigning so much work per day, more work than when we go into school. They said they're not gonna penalize the work we do and don't do. But my [English Learning Arts] teacher is getting on us about this big essay that's due tomorrow. I'm showered with work. I'm getting really bored as well..."

Do you feel like social media is helpful in making you feel more connected to people? "Yes. Very.... I can text my friends easily, and I can call them as well."

-Charli Wizwer (8th Grade, Githens Middle School)

"So teen quarantine life is kind of nice actually. With all the madness, we get to stay home and do online classes. The online classes are nice as they don't take up the whole day and they are really flexible with breaks for lunch, snack, bathroom etc. I'm pretty good with tech. Oh and quarantine life is also REALLY boring.

Is social media helping you feel more connected or entertained? "Sort of entertaining. Some Instagram accounts are funny and post comics or memes. Other accounts just post selfies which sometimes are cool, but for me they're kinda boring after seeing 100 of them in a row. For some people though, they like selfies. Snapchat is ok, ish, because all you do is click on everyone's name to see their photo then I go through and snap everyone back something about you with a big 'S' in the middle of the photo for streaks. TikTok is nice. It has a nice variety in its content and it's tapped to who you follow and what you like. [Social media] does connect me with others though... but not as much as in person. I'm not sure why, I just think that when it is in person it has more meaning... there's a lot more small talk than deep conversations over FaceTime. It still is non-superficial but... Also anything you do isn't as important. Can't wait for this thing to be over."

-Jonas Asher (7th Grade, McDougle Middle School)

“I’m ok. It’s like I’m tied to my computer. I usually do work for about 4 hours a day, then I am free to do whatever I want. My teachers are extremely lax in terms of work. All of the work is optional, and there are no grades or tests. I occupy myself with researching computers for next year and online video games such as Rocket League. Rocket League is a game where you play soccer with rocket cars. I try not to spend over three hours outside of my room everyday because my room is where I have everything and it is stressful everywhere else. There are a lot of expectations put on me if I leave my room and if other people notice me, so if I’m not noticed, I don’t have to do any chores I don’t want to.

I’m worried about graduation, but I am not worried about my grades. There is room for improvement in my AP Calc BC class, and the AP test will be easy. I will receive in my Aerospace Engineering class, what a ‘Good Senior student’ would get. There is no final test in that class. I think that the standards are going to be extremely low for everything, so everything will be fine. [AP Exams] are still happening. They will be 45 minute online tests, which will be very easy. All in all I think this year will be ok.”

-Levi Price (12th Grade, Riverside High School)

“I am doing pretty good. I have been outdoors a lot getting a lot of yard and house work done which feels good. I also get to exercise a lot more than during school. I have been doing activities that I haven’t done in a long time like coloring, friendship bracelet making, and baking. I am actually excited and can’t wait to go back to school if we do.

DPS can’t grade anything that was assigned during the hiatus because of equity. This makes school harder. Also they can’t expect all students to have technology at their homes so they can’t require all of the students to use Zoom. Personally I think that Zoom would help me to stay focused on school. The teachers who use it say ‘this is a review,’ because they can’t teach any new content.

Social media and technology have definitely helped me, because I can still call/FaceTime my friends. [I also use] Snapchat and Houseparty.”

-Qiuhu Louie (11th Grade, Riverside High School)

“Quarantine has been okay so far, I am quite bored but there are many things for me to do at home. I am still on break but one of my online classes is still going on and that hasn’t been affected by the quarantine other than me having more time to do it. Not being able to see my friends at Beth El has been a little sad but there are plenty of ways for me to connect with them. Also technology and Beth El have made it easy for me to keep on preparing for my Bat Mitzvah. I stream services on Saturday to get practice, I can learn tunes of prayers on the Beth El website and I FaceTime my tutor for our tutoring sessions. I am lucky and have access to plenty of technology, including a phone and computer so I have not missed out on any online activities. I hope this situation will be over soon but I am able to still be connected to Beth El and the outside world as it is.”

-Aven Schwartz (7th Grade, Rogers-Herr Middle School)



Above: Gavi in her virtual Lit. Class

Averyl Edwards

Averyl Edwards
Director of Youth Engagement



Above: Jonas hard at work!



Finding a Community at Beth El Synagogue

Susan and I are not longtime Durham-ites: we moved here seven years ago, after retirement, seeking a gentler climate than Boston's meteorologically, but just as vibrant educationally and culturally. In Durham-Chapel Hill we found not only those conditions but, to our delight, a thriving Jewish community as well. We found a familiar home at Beth El, were befriended quickly, and welcomed into the *kahal* (community) at every level.

The Jewish Community writ large means a great deal to us: we have worked in it, raised our children in its schools, supported its causes, learned in it. Argued with it, too, *l'shem shamayim* (conflict for the sake of heaven). But always in the community, the paramount expression of Judaism.

Judaism is, above everything else, a communal religion; we live in the plural. That's why Susan and I believe it's so important for Jews to do what they can to help secure our local communities for the future, so that our successors will continue to have places that embrace them, share their history, share their values, teach them, support them, strengthen them, give them identity.

And so we have arranged for a legacy gift for Beth El synagogue in our wills, even though we're relative newcomers to this congregation. Because Beth El is our particular community now, just as others were our particular communities in other places and times. The community has many local expressions, but "now" has precedence; we are delighted to support the particular community we live in now, while remembering the ones we've been part of at other times.

We are very grateful to Susan and Bob Hill for making a bequest to Beth El through the Harold Grinspoon Life & Legacy initiative, as well as the many other members included in the list on page 9. By making a legacy gift, you can share your hopes and dreams with your family, make a statement about the importance of our synagogue in your life, ensure a strong and vibrant Beth El community for generations to come.

For more information about signing a Letter of Intent, please contact Norma Gindes at normagindes@gmail.com or Bob Gutman at ragutman@tbegutmans.net.



Thank you to our Life and Legacy donors!

Beth El Synagogue recognizes and thanks those members who have committed to sustain our Jewish community with a gift in their wills, trusts, retirement accounts, or life insurance policies. We are grateful for their support during the past three years of our Life & Legacy initiative. Also, we acknowledge those members who had the foresight to generously support the creation of the Gladys and Earl Siegel Endowment and initiate the legacy campaign 17 years ago.

Anonymous (4)	Sue and David Klapper
Trudi Abel and Noah Pickus	Harriet and Michael Lakin
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Albert Heyman*	Leslie Winner
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The Kirshner Family	Abby and Gary Zarkin
	Sheva Zucker and Sandy Kessler

*נ"ל - *Of blessed memory*

Names in bold indicate that their Life & Legacy gifts have been formalized.

Meet Your Committee Leadership

Art Committee: Sol Levine

Chevrá Kaddisha: David Klapper

Community of Caring: Karen Burns and Melissa Segal

Development: Norma Gindes

Finance: Syd Miller

House: Dan Schnitzer

Interfaith Working Group: Manny Spira and Lisa Berley

Kol Koloteinu: Krisha Miller

Lifelong Learning: Donna Goldstein and Barton Cobert

Life & Legacy: Bob Gutman and Norma Gindes

Membership: Kim Bardy Langsam

Men of Beth El (MoB): Mike Resnick

Orthodox Kehillah: Phillippe Chemla

Ritual: Randi Smith

Sisterhood: Tal Lewin Wittle

Social Action: Hope Hartman and Rachel Bearman

Synagogue Life: Tal Lewin Wittle

Va'ad HaChinuch: Michael Kornbluth



Social Action

Beth El's Constitution explicitly states that we are "A Beit Tzedek: A house of righteousness. Beth El is committed to observance of the mitzvot, to the principle of Klal Yisrael reaching out to all Jews, to the principle of tikkun olam which seeks to make the world whole through social and political action, and to the support of Eretz Yisrael, the homeland of the Jewish people".

Due to the novel coronavirus, a number of social action events have been postponed. We look forward to their rescheduling once we are back to "business as usual." Our current focus is to track community needs and share those resources with the Beth El community. We will also be donating funds from the Mitzvah Fund on behalf of Beth El Synagogue to support local organizations doing direct service work to meet the growing needs of the larger community during this time. Please consider donating to the Mitzvah Fund so we can be as generous as possible. Join our Google Group to make sure you are up-to-date on the many and varied opportunities to engage in social action and pursue social justice. <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/beth-el-social-action>.

During the past year we have supported the following organizations with participation and funding: Jewish Federation of Durham and Chapel Hill, Crop Hunger Walks of Durham and Chapel Hill-Carrboro, Urban Ministries, Families Moving Forward, Iglesia Hispana Emmanuel Food Bank, Walltown Food Bank, Step Up, Habitat for Humanity, Evacuees of McDougald Terrace, and Partners for Youth Opportunity. In doing so we have: helped people in the Jewish and larger Durham-Chapel Hill communities who are struggling to feed, clothe and house their families; demonstrated the generosity of the Jewish community, and built connections with our Christian and Muslim neighbors.

Our wonderful program for Social Action Shabbat, scheduled in coordination with HIAS's National Refugee Shabbat, the weekend of March 21, was postponed. We hope to be able to reschedule Rabbi Rachel Grant Meyer, HIAS's Rabbi-in-Residence, as well as additional post-service panelists; Marian Abernathy, Judea Reform Congregation & Triangle Interfaith Advocates for Refugees & Immigrants; Kokou Nayo, Church World Service; and Reverent Edgar Vergara, La Semilla Church. These are important voices and perspectives that we look forward to sharing with our community.

Our first (and hope to be annual) Beth El Day of Community Action, April 26, has also been postponed. The Day of Action, planned in conjunction with the River Church, was to be an opportunity for us to join together and actively engage in work to benefit our Durham-Chapel Hill community. Post-virus, this work will be of particular importance and we plan to reschedule to help meet what will be significant needs.

Beth El Social Action committee is actively recruiting new members willing to share their ideas and help develop and implement new and ongoing programs. Interested in learning more about what we do and how you can get engaged? Contact Rachel Bearman at rbearman@mebtel.net. Many projects are supported through the generous donations given to our Mitzvah Fund. Thank you to all donors to the fund. Continued support enables us to engage in new initiatives and offer support throughout the community to those in need.

Hope Hartman and Rachel Bearman

Kol Koloteinu

**Scholar-in-Residence
Pride Shabbat with Rabbi Mike Moskowitz
hosted by Kol Koloteinu
June 5-6, 2020**



**As you are most likely reading this notice mid to late May, please note that I am writing this in late March. I am writing in the midst of ever evolving social distancing measures with hope that we will be able to once again gather in person by June. As we draw nearer, alternative (perhaps digital) modifications will of course need to be made. – Krisha Miller*

Rabbi Greyber has helped Kol Koloteinu arrange a visit by his colleague Rabbi Mike Moskowitz. We are excited to welcome this dynamic scholar to help kick off Pride Month during the first weekend of June. Rabbi Moskowitz currently serves as the Scholar-in-Residence for Trans and Queer Jewish Studies at Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, the world's largest LGBT synagogue. He is a deeply traditional and radically progressive advocate for trans rights and a vocal ally for LGBTQ inclusivity.

“Rabbi Moskowitz was assigned secular, then identified as ultra-orthodox for twenty years, and now embraces a religiously non-conforming identity. He has the cultural competency and language to translate beyond the words of the text and to hear the intentionality in the rabbinic voice speaking for social justice and inclusivity.

Rabbi Moskowitz has three ultra-orthodox rabbinic ordinations. He spent a decade in the largest yeshivas in the world and studied the entire Babylonian Talmud. He founded and headed a kollel - a sacred think tank, served as a rabbi at Columbia University, and of a congregation in Harlem. Rabbi Moskowitz explored academic Talmud at Yale and at Jewish Theological Seminary, where he is currently completing a Doctorate in Hebrew Literature. As one of the leading thinkers at the intersection of trans issues and Jewish thought, he is a sought after lecturer, educator, and researcher.”

In March, Rabbi Moskowitz published a “Times of Israel” blog titled “Homophobia is the Real Abomination”: <http://bit.ly/RMMbToI320>.

Visit <https://www.rabbimikemoskowitz.com> for more of his insightful articles and other resources.

Please contact Krisha Miller (krishasong@gmail.com) if you are interested in helping with weekend logistics and making Rabbi Moskowitz feel as welcome as possible in our community during his visit.

Many thanks to the generous donors who have made this visit possible. If you are able, any donations toward covering Rabbi Moskowitz's travel and lodging expenses are greatly appreciated. If donating by check, please note Kol Koloteinu. If donating online by credit card, direct to the General Fund and note Kol Koloteinu.

Kol Koloteinu/All Our Voices is a Beth El alliance dedicated to the support and inclusion of all sexual orientations and gender identities within our community. We strive to collaborate with synagogue committees & staff to ensure positive LGBTQ+ representation and participation in Beth El programming, membership efforts, ritual life, policies and culture. All are welcome to share ideas on this topic in our Facebook Group: is <https://www.facebook.com/groups/BEDKK/>

On the Death of Phyllis Dworsky

Phyllis Dworsky, age 94, passed away during the night of Shabbos, February 28-29, 2020, at her home in Silver Spring, Maryland. The fact that this news will produce, among the majority of current Beth El members, a response of “Who?” is, perhaps, a tribute to the growth and continuity of the Jewish community that Phyllis and her husband Leon Dworsky helped build in Durham and Chapel Hill. Let me tell you about the two of them.

Solomon Hyman Dworsky (1883-1955), owner of a downtown Durham pawn shop, served as a President of Beth El from 1937 to 1945 and a national board member of the Zionist group Mizrachi. “Mr. S.H.”, as he was called, had trained at the prestigious Mir Yeshiva in Belarus before coming to the United States in 1906. His stern photographic portrait is mounted in the photo gallery of past presidents in the Freedman Center at Beth El. His son Leon (1925-2004) served in World War II in the US Army at a radio relay station in India. After returning from the war, he met and married Phyllis in her home city of Springfield, Massachusetts in 1949. After a few years, the young couple returned to Durham and Leon took charge of the shop. He survived a horrific abdominal gunshot wound during a robbery at the shop. As leader of the Durham Chevra Kaddisha, one of the founders of the Lerner Jewish Day School, one of the founders of the Durham - Chapel Hill Jewish Federation, creator of a Durham-Chapel Hill Jewish youth group, and founder of the Orthodox Kehillah at Beth El with the firm support of Rabbi Sager, Leon was known as a garrulous storyteller, master of Robert’s Rules of Order at Jewish community and synagogue meetings, and the man who, in Jewish travel books of the 1970s and 1980s, when you came to the listing for Durham NC regarding where to find kosher food, a minyan, and a safe haven, it said “Call Leon Dworsky.” Leon died in 2004 at the age of 78. His funeral was an outpouring of communal grief. My eulogy began, “What will we do now? Who will tell us what we’re supposed to do?”

At Leon’s side for over half-a-century was the diminutive figure of Phyllis: Beth El religious school classroom and music teacher, tireless fundraiser for all manner of Jewish and secular causes, Sisterhood president, maintainer of a kosher home via out-of-state meat shipments by bus for decades, leader of the women’s division of the Durham chevra kaddisha as her mother-in-law Dinah Dworsky had been before her, and unflappable hostess of uncountable dinner guests. She and Leon raised three religiously observant children in Durham - a testimony to the home they created.

To me the quintessential Phyllis was to watch her in action after shabbos services at the Orthodox Kehillah. Phyllis was capable of picking out an unfamiliar face in a crowd like a heat-seeking missile. Having spied the stranger she would approach him or her with, “Hello, I’m Phyllis Dworsky and I don’t know who you are.” It was always phrased as a declarative sentence, not as a question. It clearly conveyed the sentiment that “If you are in this synagogue and Phyllis Dworsky doesn’t know who you are, then you must be new here and it is required that Phyllis Dworsky know who you are.” Even though she did not phrase it as a question, it required a tripartite answer from the listener including name, why you were in Durham, and what your plans were for Shabbos lunch and, if the answer to the third topic was deemed unsatisfactory by Phyllis, you were coming to her home to eat.

Phyllis was a religious practice cheerleader. It was impossible to do a Haftorah reading without Phyllis announcing, “Oh, wasn’t that haftorah reading just mahvelous?” (The only hint of a Massachusetts accent I ever heard was the dropped h in marvelous.)

Then, of course, there were the charitable solicitations. I don’t really recall Phyllis soliciting donations for AMIT (American Mizrachi Women). My recollection was that they were closer to command performances. You just wrote the check because Phyllis said it needed to be done.

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She had a phenomenal memory for people and events. She loved her family dearly and was very proud of her children and grandchildren.

A few years after Leon died, she closed up the apartment located up the street from Beth El, and moved to Maryland to be close to one of her daughter's, Joyce. Joyce and her husband Nino were unwavering rocks of support to her. From North Carolina, my wife Sharon spoke to Phyllis on the phone regularly up to the time of her death. Stage III ovarian carcinoma met its match in Phyllis. While I periodically contributed advice long distance, Phyllis survived debulking surgery and chemotherapy and scares of relapses at an age when many people would have crawled up into a ball and given up. She outlived the median survival time for so long, in sustained remission, that I lost count.

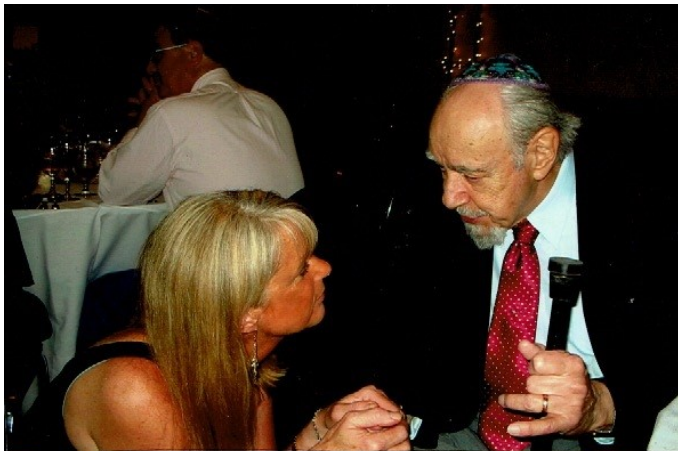
When Phyllis learned I was having spine surgery a few months ago, a book arrived about Sephardim in the Israeli intelligence services during the War of Independence. She thought I could use something to read post-operatively. It was a great book. She knew how to pick them.

Her family brought her home to be buried in the Durham Hebrew Cemetery next to Leon. After I teared up during her daughters' and son-in-law's eulogies, and after my eyes cleared enough to look around at the surrounding headstones, I saw she was back amongst her contemporaries.

For those of you reading these words, who began this small tribute and said to yourself "Who?," you can now say that in the Jewish community of Durham and Chapel Hill you are standing upon a foundation that Phyllis and Leon Dworsky helped build for you.

May her memory be for a blessing. We shall rarely see her like again.

Edward C. Halperin



*Top:
Sharon Halperin with Leon Dworsky*



*Bottom:
Sharon Halperin with Phyllis Dworsky*

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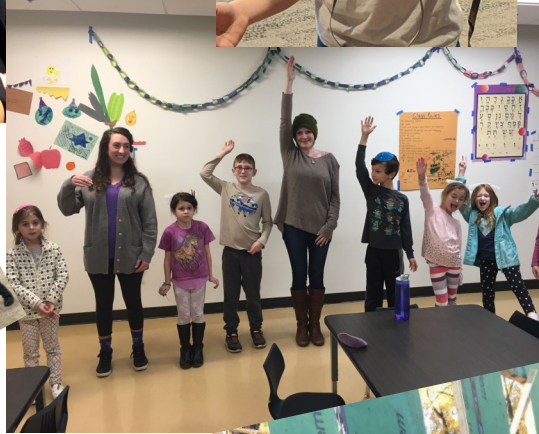
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