



BETH CHAI NEWS

The Greater Washington Jewish Humanist Congregation

Beth Chai Board Votes to Become Independent Congregation

At its December 8 meeting the Beth Chai board voted to discontinue Beth Chai's affiliation with the Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ) as of December 31, 2002. The board wishes to thank all members who contributed their opinions to the deliberations. The board has also made arrangements to allow each Beth Chai member the option of having \$65 of their 2002-2003 dues forwarded to the SHJ as unaffiliated members' dues for the year beginning January 1, 2003. To take advantage of this option, please email Adrienne Schmitz at ASchmitz@uli.org or call her at 703-255-9057 by January 15.

Last May Beth Chai voted to become a member of the National Havurah Committee (www.havurah.org), an organization of independent Jewish congregations of diverse philosophies and practices. Beth Chai will continue to retain this and other connections to the Jewish community at large, although we no longer are affiliated with a specific movement within Judaism.

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Sundays in January:

Veteran Civil Rights Worker to Speak on MLK Day;
More in Torah Text Series; Plus Video on
Humanism and Spirituality

Sundays, January 5 and 12. *Working with Texts.* This adult education series on the meaning of Torah texts continues with Rain Zohav on January 5 and Rabbi Blecher on January 12.

Sunday, January 19. Special Martin Luther King Day program on Jews in the Civil Rights Movement, with Florence Isbell, veteran civil rights worker in Georgia during the 1960's and former associate of Dr. King. (For more information about this day, be sure to read Rain Zohav's School News on page 4.)



Sunday, January 26. *Humanistic Judaism and Spirituality*, a video of a talk given by Rabbi Dan Friedman at the last IISHJ Colloquium. An interesting, thoughtful and entertaining analysis of where spirituality fits within Humanistic Judaism.

All sessions start at 10 AM at Burning Tree School, 7900 Beech Tree Road, Bethesda. Bagels, coffee, and juice are available for \$1/per person.

Shabbat Service & Program: "What Is a Tu B'Shevat Seder?"

Rain Zohav will present a lecture/demonstration on how to hold a Tu B'Shevat seder.

The celebration of Tu B'Shevat (the birthday of the tree) is a newly revived tradition that has grown in importance since the founding of the state of Israel and with our ever-growing awareness of the fragility of our earth. It is difficult to imagine, but by now the almond trees are blossoming in Israel, anemones are blooming on the hillsides, and the sap is rising in the trees. The sap rising in the trees was apparently the reason the 15th of Shevat was chosen as the taxation date for fruit trees in ancient Israel. This taxation date in turn gave rise to the Kabbalistic holiday of Tu B'Shevat, the 115th of Shevat.



In North America, Tu B'Shevat is a wonderful reminder of the coming of spring, the importance of trees, our ancestral ties to the land of Israel, not to mention a good excuse to eat delicious fruits and nuts.

When & where: Friday, Jan. 10. Program starts at 8 pm. (Arrive at 7 PM if you wish to enjoy a deli platter, cost \$10/person; please RSVP to Mark Shmueli - see Directory, p. 2, for contact information.) Fireside Room, 2nd Floor, River Road Unitarian Church, 6301 River Road, Bethesda.

Beth Chai Directory	Position	Telephone	Email
Sheldon Hofferan	Co-President	703-323-1885	koolpaw@hotmail.com
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Rain Zohav	School Principal	301-294-8849	rainzohav@yahoo.com
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Bill Adler	Beth Chai Web Site	202-986-9275	www.bethchai.org
Beth Chai Answering Service/Email		202-521-5457	info@bethchai.org

Financial Need Policy: Beth Chai welcomes anyone to attend services, become a member, or have their children attend our Jewish Family School, regardless of ability to pay. Considerations available include extended payment plans, service exchange, and fee reduction. Financial aid determination will be made on a case by case basis. Please contact Warren Milberg or Gail Gertner Shapkin.

Community News

Births

Congratulations to Lisa and Noah Dropkin on the birth of their daughter, Lily Harper Dropkin on November 27. Her birth weight was 7 pounds, 4.6 ounces and her length was 20.5 inches.

Congratulations to Jeff Gerber and Shannon Rudisill on the birth of their son Alexander Charles Gerber on December 4. Shannon is a Beth Chai board member.

Bar Mitzvah

All members of Beth Chai are invited to the Bar Mitzvah of Gabriel Lee Feldman, son of Steven Feldman and Nam Dayhoff, on Saturday, January 4, 2003 at 10 AM. A Kiddush follows the service.



Calling All Theater-Lovers !

Saturday, February 8, 2003, at 8 PM at

the DC-JCC. Please join us for a group theater outing to see *The Last Seder* at the D.C. Jewish Community Center's Theater J. This play, by Jennifer Maisel, directed by Joseph Megel, was the winner of the 2001 Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays Award.



The story: "A play about reconciliation and saying goodbye. The four Price daughters return home for a last Passover meal, ready to move their memory-addled father into a nursing facility and leave their childhoods behind. But not before a rollicking sisterly rivalry breaks out, and lovers, spouses, partners and strangers show up to turn this heartbreaking family comedy into a frenzied feast."

We need to guarantee a minimum of 10 participants to receive the group rate of \$24 per person, \$21 for seniors and students. Please let us know **by January 15** if you would like to join the group by calling Mary Ellen Petrisko at 410-990-1264 or by sending an email to mpetrisk@ix.netcom.com.

Rabbi's Message

As most of you are probably aware, the basic definition of a Jew is a member of the Jewish People, in other words, someone who is born to Jewish parents. The Jewish People are primarily a nation, an ethnicity; its members are essentially citizens rather than adherents to a creed. On the other hand, someone who is not Jewish can become a member of the Jewish People by the religious process of conversion. This is something akin to being a naturalized citizen, and here the individual's adoption of a creed typically comes into play.



When a child has only one Jewish parent, the criterion of Jewish identity becomes more complicated. This is because the definition of Jewishness in Biblical times was very different from what it is today. In ancient Israel, as in many cultures, women and children automatically assumed the status of the male head of the household. All women who married Israelites, whether or not their families were Israelites, became members of the Jewish People. All children born to Israelite *men* were considered Israelites. For example, Moses married Zipporah, a woman from a Midianite family. Zipporah then became a member of the Nation of Israel, and their son Gershon was fully an Israelite. Zipporah's father Jethro also seems to have become a part of the people. There was no such concept as conversion in Biblical times. Members of Israelite households were Israelites. There appear to have been other ancient examples of Gentile adults becoming part of the Nation of Israel without marrying into the Jewish People.

During the development of Post-Second-Temple Judaism, the Rabbis changed the definition of who is a Jew in order to allow for situations where the paternity of an individual might be in doubt. So in classic Jewish Law, the child's identity followed that of the *mother*. Today, Orthodox and Conservative branches of Judaism follow the Talmudic practice of determining identity by the child's mother. Reform and Reconstructionist authorities also include the Biblical definition of identity through the father. Another practice introduced by Rabbinic (Post-Second-Temple) Judaism is that of religious conversion.

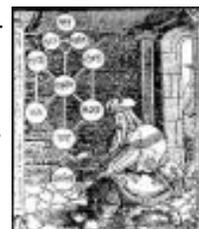
Our practice at Beth Chai is very much like that of Biblical Judaism. We recognize as Jewish anyone who has a Jewish parent, whether by birth, adoption, guardianship or marriage. We consider any household where a Jew resides to be a Jewish household, and we accept as members of Beth Chai any and all members of Jewish households who wish to join our community.

My best wishes to you all for the New Year.

DR. ARTHUR C. BLECHER

A Note from the Program Committee

Beth Chai's Program Committee is working on the development of a number of interesting, informative, and enjoyable programs for January and February of 2003. We will be offering Friday night Shabbat services, including programming on Israeli poetry, Kabbalah, Civil Rights and Immigration to the U.S., and folk music. Sunday morning programming will include a Bar/Bat Mitzvah program, a special remembrance for Martin Luther King day (see front page for details), and a series on Jewish History. And of course we will have our traditional Chinese New Year dinner in Chinatown! Further details and dates will be forthcoming.



Kabbalah

We are also trying to schedule some Friday and Saturday night programs in congregants' homes. If you are willing and able to host a gathering, please contact Mary Ellen Petrisko, 410-990-1264, or send an email to mpetrisk@ix.netcom.com. Please join us!

School News - January 2003

Dear Parents and Members,

Thank you to those who contributed to the Chanukah *tzedakah* project of feeding Ethiopian Jewish children. Because of your generosity, many children will be fed who otherwise would have gone hungry.



Thanks also to the families that made the major effort to do their Beth Chai Family School homework on *tzedakah*. We got some very interesting answers to the question, "If you were going to write a book on *tzedakah*, what would your chapter titles be?" From the parents we received these answers: Shelter; Food; Healthcare; Education and Opportunity; Safety; Feeding the Hungry; Helping the Homeless; Don't Forget Our Animal Friends; Who Do You Want to Help?; What Are Your Resources? (Time, Money, Skills); Helping Hand vs. Handout; and Doing Things That Connect Us to Our Community and Neighbors. The children's chapters were:

What Is *Tzedakah*?; What You Can Do to Help; It's Not Just Money; How To *Tzedakah*; Knowing What you Are Giving; Knowing Who You Are Giving To; Poor Person with Rich Person; How Much Money To Give; Things That Would Be Very Good To Do (*Gimilut Chasadim*); and Helping People When They Are Very Sad and Lonely. For most of us, it proved to be too much to do the homework; however, we can all benefit and learn from those who did take the time to complete this work.

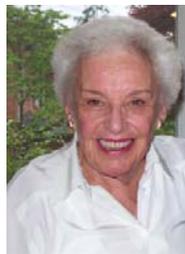
January holds many special opportunities for us this year. On Sunday, January 12, the K - 3rd graders and their parents are invited to a Tu B'Shevat seder and program at Burning Tree Elementary School. Parents of preschoolers are also welcome to attend, but please be advised that the seder may be a bit long for preschoolers — so be prepared to let them leave as they get restless, rather than disrupt the seder for the older students. There will be some self-guiding activities set up for you to do with your children if you chose. Any other parents or congregants who wish to attend are warmly invited to do so. Although this is a seder aimed at elementary children, there is much in it of value and interest for adults as well. Older students this year will be learning about Tu B'Shevat in their classrooms, or continuing with their regular studies.



(Continued at the top of next page)

Martin Luther King Day at Beth Chai Family School

On the Sunday of the Martin Luther King weekend, January 19, we will be having a special program for the entire congregation. We will begin the day at 10 AM with a community sing-a-long of songs from the civil rights era. The youngest students will return to their classrooms. We will then be privileged to hear from Florence Isbell, who worked with Dr. King in



Atlanta during the 1960s. (She is also the mother of member Peggy Robin, our newsletter editor). This is an important piece of oral history that we are lucky to be able to hear. Ms. Isbell is turning eighty this year and has recently been ill, and so this portion of the program is contingent upon her health. She will speak for about half an hour and answer some questions.

The older students will return to their classrooms and the adult education session will continue with the topic of Jewish involvement in the civil rights movement. It is estimated that one half of the white people who participated in the Freedom Rides were Jews, and that two-thirds of the white Mississippi Freedom Summer workers were Jews. As a large part of this significant contribution came from non-affiliated, secular Jews, it is an especially important topic for us as a Humanist congregation to remember.

(Rain Zohav's School News continued from the bottom of previous page)

If that were not enough excitement for one month, on Sunday, January 26, the 5th/6th grade will participate in the Board of Jewish Education's simulation of the Ellis Island experience during the years of mass immigration. Entitled "The Immigrant In Us," this program involves about 900 students and many adult volunteers from the greater metro region. The students do research about an ancestor who made the journey to the U.S. through Ellis Island, or research a real person from archival materials prior to the program. They then take on that identity for the program on January 26 at the Montgomery County Agricultural Center.



Volunteers needed: If you would like to volunteer to play the role of an inspector or other official at this event, please contact Mindy Silverstein at the BJE (Board of Jewish Education) directly, at 301-255-1957, or call me by January 5th. Volunteers for these roles must be at the fairgrounds from 9:00 AM – 1:00 PM, as the program is staggered to accommodate so many groups. Please note: Parents of the 5th/6th grade class are needed as drivers and chaperons so cannot make this commitment. I am hoping to be able to participate as a volunteer and encourage as many of you as want to, to sign up. I think it will be a blast!

B'Shalom,

Rain Zohav

Beth Chai Family School Classroom Reports

Susan Stewart reports that her preschoolers have two favorite activities at Beth Chai: games and arts and crafts. For example, the children have enjoyed learning about Jewish holidays and rituals by playing games like Hanukkah Bingo and Shabbat Land (modeled on that old standby, Candyland). They have acted out Noah's ark by playing a game in which they acted the parts of various animals. In arts and crafts, they have enjoyed making their family trees, doves of peace, and Star-of-David picture frames.

The Second/Third grade class have had a busy time with several wonderful projects, focusing on Jewish holidays and the Genesis stories. They have studied Jewish holidays by playing "Jewish Jeopardy," and they did projects for specific holidays, including making their own trees for Sukkot and concluding the semester by making their own working menorahs for Hanukkah. As part of studying Genesis, the students read about Noah's Ark and spent several weeks writing and rehearsing a play on the story of Jacob's marriages to Leah and Rachel. They then performed their wonderful creation for the parents! At the end of the semester, they made their own multi-colored coats (actually vests) as part of their study of the Joseph story.



January Sunday School Dates



January 5, 12, 19 and 26

School begins at 9:30 AM
Hebrew Class: 9:30 - 10 AM

Please note: On Jan. 19, for the Martin Luther King Day Program, school begins at 10 AM

Beth Chai Family School is at
Burning Tree Elementary School
7900 Beech Tree Rd., Bethesda

Meet the Members of Beth Chai:
Stacy Downey and Michael Svetlik
 by Ken Jacobson

Stacey Downey and Michael Svetlik met a decade ago, on the first day of their two-year Peace Corps posting in Poland. Already uneasy at the prospect of serving there, Stacey found herself the only Jew among sixty volunteers gathered in Warsaw for three months of language training and cultural orientation. What's more, attempts she made to bring the history of Poland's Jews up for discussion fell flat; no one around her seemed nearly as involved with the subject. But Michael, who became the sole member of the group to ask Stacey whether she was Jewish, "not only saw the significance of the issue," she recalls, "but it occurred to him to inquire how I felt about it." His asking helped take their budding friendship to a deeper level.



These conversations developed into an informal project in Polish-Jewish history. Stationed in corners of Poland eight hours from one another, the two met on weekends to explore the sites of former Jewish population centers and to photograph neglected Jewish cemeteries. During their weeks apart, they spent free time reading widely on Jewish life in pre-World War II Poland and on the Holocaust.

Before long Stacey and Michael decided they wanted to make a life together, and the matter of children and religious affiliation came up almost immediately. Both had divorced parents and saw differences in religious background as having hurt their parents' marriages. Stacey had been given Jewish instruction as a young girl in New Jersey and had been eager to keep some traditions, but her Jewish mother had lacked the patience to let her struggle through the Hebrew blessings; Stacey's father, of Irish-Catholic origin, showed his own signs of ambivalence toward Judaism. Michael, raised in Beaumont, Texas, had gone to the Sunday schools of two Protestant denominations to which his mother had belonged, but found little of substance in either. His father, the son of Czech immigrants, passed on far more interest in language, history, and genealogy than in the Catholicism that he himself no longer practiced.

The decision to raise their children as Jews was "greatly influenced," says Michael, "by the context and atmosphere" in which he and Stacey had gotten to know one another. Profoundly touched by their intimate contact with the lost world of the Polish Jews, they determined to do what they could to keep the spirit and values of that culture alive, and saw educating their children in them as an important way. Several years ago, their search for a rabbi who would marry them brought them to Art Blecher, who they remember as praising them for the purpose and candor with which they confronted the issue of their backgrounds. Through Art, they came to Beth Chai, which they see as the appropriate congregational home for them, and where, happily, they feel comfortable as well.

Stacey and Michael often attend Beth Chai events despite the demands of interesting jobs at D.C. non-profits, a fixer-upper home on Capitol Hill — and the arrival eight months ago of their first child, Abigail. Professionally, Stacey, whom many members know as the facilitator of get-acquainted exercises, administers the mobile classroom unit of D.C.'s adult education agency. Michael works with the International Foundation for Election Systems, building democratic institutions in East European countries. In 2000, his job entailed a nine-month stay in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, where Stacey did volunteer work for the local Jewish community.



A Shopping Reminder

Search New and Used
amazon.com.



The Beth Chai website has a link to Amazon.com. Anytime you want to buy books, electronics, software, toys, or any other merchandise available through Amazon or its associated stores, be sure to enter through our Amazon portal, www.bethchai.org/books.html. A portion of every purchase you make will go to Beth Chai.

Buy books, electronics, toys software & more
Visit www.bethchai.org/books.html.



President's Message

Dear Members,

Over the last couple of weeks I have had the opportunity to explore my own Jewish roots. My paternal grandparents, both immigrants, met and married in Arizona in 1898. Through good fortune, my family has saved voluminous correspondence dating back over 100 years. Every time I go to Arizona, I read some of it. I also had the opportunity to visit an exhibit on Jews in the West at the Autry Museum in Los Angeles, to which we had lent a few items.

What struck me about my grandparents' experience, as well as that of many other western Jews, is how they honored and learned from their Jewish heritage as they made their way in a very non-Jewish world. In my mind this was symbolized by two very different family items that the museum curators chose to display: a baby *tefilat* embroidered with my father's name (undoubtedly sent from Germany, treasured but never used) and by my grandfather's Masonic membership card.

Just as my grandparents did, we here at Beth Chai participate in a world that is not shaped by Judaism. But we are fortunate to have the luxury of affiliating with and learning from a community of Jews — a luxury my grandparents did not have.

Julie Zalkind

Social Action News

On January 8, at 7:00 PM the social action committee will meet at my home, 23 Eastmoor Drive, Silver Spring, MD. We would love to have those who want to be part of social action to come and share ideas and planning. If you would like to be part of Beth Chai's social action work but are unable to come to the meeting, please call or email me (301-592-8558, m.shmueli@verizon.net).

Beth Chai's latest *tzedakah* project is to help Beta Israel Ethiopian Jewish children waiting to get to Israel. These children face terrible malnutrition due to Ethiopia's drought and famine, which causes them to faint during the day and makes school extremely difficult. Thanks to all of those who donated either the \$53 to provide lunch for one year or another amount. Please contact me and I will send you an "adoption application" to support one or more of these children.

We will have our annual Beth Chai Workday in the spring along with other upcoming activities.

Thanks to everyone for all of your hard work and financial support this year in our efforts at *tikkun olam*.

Mark Shmueli

Social Action Committee Co-Chair

Friday Night Shabbat & Program: Jewish Genealogy

Join us on January 24th for an exploration of the world of Jewish genealogy. Michael Herman will lead the discussion, focusing on the question, "Why study one's genealogy?" and considering some of the problems and resources that are specific to Jewish genealogy. Bring a family tree if you have one. Bring photos and stories of your ancestors. We will spend some time talking about them.

When and Where: Friday, January 24. Program starts at 8 pm. (Arrive at 7 PM if you wish to enjoy a deli platter, cost \$10/person; please RSVP to Mark Shmueli - see Directory, p. 2, for contact information.) Fireside Room, 2nd Floor, River Road Unitarian Church, 6301 River Road, Bethesda

Coming in February!
Beth Chai's Annual
Chinese New Year Celebration



Sunday, February 16, time to be determined.

It's the Year of the Sheep! Join other Beth Chai celebrants for this wonderful annual tradition.

Watch your weekly email announcements for details later on this month about reserving your place at this fun event.

Calendar of Events

Date & Time	Event	Location
Sat., Jan. 4 at 10 AM	Bar Mitzvah of Gabriel Lee Feldman. All members of Beth Chai are invited to the service and the Kiddush afterward.	River Road Unitarian Church, 6301 River Road, Bethesda, MD.
Sun., Jan. 5 at 9:30 AM Adult Ed. at 10 AM	Adult Ed. topic: "Working with Texts," led by Rain Zohav.	Burning Tree Elementary School, 7900 Beech Tree Rd., Bethesda, MD
Fri., Jan. 10 Deli social starts at 7 pm Shabbat service & program at 8 pm	Shabbat Service & Program: "What Is a Tu B'Shevat Seder?" A lecture & demonstration with Rain Zohav (see front page article for details).	Fireside Room (2nd fl.) of River Road Unitarian Church, 6301 River Road, Bethesda, MD. RSVP to Mark Shmueli, m.shmueli@verizon.net for the deli platter option.
Sun., Jan. 12, 9:30AM Adult Ed. at 10 AM	Adult Ed. topic: "Working with Texts," led by Rabbi Art Blecher.	Burning Tree Elementary School, 7900 Beech Tree Rd., Bethesda, MD
Sun., Jan. 12 at 8 PM	Beth Chai board meeting. All members welcome.	Home of Rain Zohav. Please email rainzohav@yahoo.com or call 301-294-8849 to RSVP and get directions.
Sun., Jan. 19 at 10 AM	Martin Luther King Day Program for all ages. Guest: Florence Isbell, veteran civil rights worker & associate of Martin Luther King.	Burning Tree Elementary School, 7900 Beech Tree Rd., Bethesda, MD
Fri., Jan. 24 Deli social starts at 7 pm Shabbat service & program at 8 pm	Shabbat Service & Program: Jewish Genealogy. Share your family history and learn more about tracing your Jewish roots.	Fireside Room (2nd fl.) of River Road Unitarian Church, 6301 River Road, Bethesda, MD. RSVP to Mark Shmueli, m.shmueli@verizon.net for the deli platter option.
Sun., Jan 26 at 9:30 AM Adult Ed. at 10 AM	Adult Ed. topic: "Spirituality and Humanistic Judaism" video with Rabbi Dan Friedman.	Burning Tree Elementary School, 7900 Beech Tree Rd., Bethesda, MD
Sat., Feb. 8 at 8 PM	<i>The Last Seder</i> , a play by Jennifer Maisel. See article, page 2, for details. RSVP by Jan. 15 to Mary Ellen Petrisko, 410-990-1264, or mpetrisk@ix.netcom.com.	Theater J at DC-JCC, 1529 16 Street, NW, DC.
Sun., Feb. 16, time to be determined	Beth Chai's annual Chinese New Year celebration.	Most likely a wonderful Chinese restaurant — watch your email announcements & Feb. newsletter for details.



Beth Chai

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Address Correction Requested

