

# JCOGS Bulletin

JEWISH COMMUNITY OF GREATER STOWE

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*Homegrown Judaism is part of a major trend around the world. Read the articles inside to learn more.*

## Trends in Judaism

### How JCOGS fits in

Emily Rosenbaum

Offbeat things go on at JCOGS. There's yoga on Yom Kippur, Bob Marley in the services, and board games on December 25. There are concerts and staged readings. In the summer, there's a race against the rabbi, and in the winter there's an Iron Chef competition.

As Rabbi David says, this is not your grandmother's shul; yet JCOGS is not alone in trying things a little differently.

In *Finding a Spiritual Home*, Rabbi Sid Schwarz defines a trend he calls the "covenantal community," the approach

modern synagogues are taking to provide meaningful spiritual opportunities for their communities. The four hallmarks of these deeply engaging synagogues are: mission driven, maximalist (not light) Judaism, empowered laity (instead of drive-by Judaism), and the Kedusha factor

*continued on page 3*

# Meeting the needs of now

From our rabbi



Six years ago, I was about to lead my first High Holy Days here at JCOGS. I had just begun as the spiritual leader that summer, and I was told that I was going to chant almost all of the 20+ aliyot during Rosh Hashanah

and Yom Kippur, all while leading the many services. Daunting for sure, but this was not my first rodeo, as they say. So I sat down and learned to chant them all.

Fast forward six years to this past High Holidays. Torah chanting classes, one-on-one tutoring with teens and adults, and plenty of Jewish learning. And *all* of the Torah readings were chanted by members of the JCOGS community.

A community cannot be supported by any one person alone. It takes a village. In that moment six years ago, I saw a community in need of furthering its connection to Jewish tradition. And I heard members in our community yearning for that connection.

Trends are all about meeting the needs of the moment—understanding the gaps that exist between need and reality, and shaping a new present.

All across North America, a combination of factors is driving the Jewish community towards a new reality. Hundreds of Generation X and Millennial self-led, independent *minyanim* communities are popping up everywhere. This is an extension of the Baby Boomer's *havurah* movement; "Do-It-Yourself Judaism" instead of

"drive by Judaism." This is how JCOGS began before it had a building, or a full-time rabbi and director of family and youth education. In rural Vermont, where you can be the only Jewish kid in an entire school district, this can-do spirit is even more crucial to sustain Jewish life for the future.

This is the vision behind the new JCOGS initiative – Homegrown Judaism.

Homegrown Judaism seeks to deepen the bonds among our members, getting to know each other better, engaging each of us in building community *together*.

We are holding a series of conversations, what I am calling *Homegrown Judaism: Kitchen Table Kibbitzing*. I urge you to come to one of these gatherings. Get to know your neighbours. Find out what their passions are, what connects you, why each of you have found a home in Vermont and at JCOGS. Plain and simple—be a part of growing your Jewish communal home.

Or join us for our monthly Homegrown Shabbat, where I co-lead services with our committed members, followed by a communal potluck. Reach out to me with an original poem or musical piece you'd like to share. Or be a *balebuste* and bring a delicious dish to the potluck.

And here's why Homegrown Judaism is important. The trends in our greater society are deeply troubling. We are facing a crisis. The social fabric is tearing apart, bonds among people are fracturing. Individualism is prioritized over caring for one another. Even as we get ever more connected through social

media, we grow further isolated person-to-person. And in Vermont, there are additional layers of rural isolation, including living as a small minority.

In his book, *Finding a spiritual home: How a new generation of Jews can transform the American synagogue*, Rabbi Sid Schwartz writes: "Learning about the Jewish tradition is of value only to the extent that people in a synagogue are encouraged to relate to one another and support one another in a true community...creating a communal culture that values and promulgates the opening of hands and hearts to one another."

We need to be there for each other. We need to get to know each other better and be more interconnected. We need to continue to evolve as a community, together, *lishmah*—for the sake of building community, but also for the sake of our past, present, and future.

I believe deeply in empowerment. I believe in creating shared purpose together, where each person contributes *l'fi orko*, each in our own way and ability. I put my faith in the power of covenantal community—where members give and receive out of love in support of one another. As Rabbi Schwartz says: "All other matters of doctrine and practice flow from that basic principle."

Let's bridge the gap that exists between our current reality and our shared needs, and together we can shape community.

*Rav brachot*, many blessings for belonging, connection, and a sense of individual and communal purpose.

## Trends and traditions

From our president



Friends,

I was never called to the Torah as a bat mitzvah. I had a bat mitzvah, but at my family's synagogue, girls did not read from the Torah. I read a Haftarah portion, and to this day I have never read from the Torah.

Judaism changes with the times. Girls at JCOGS become young women and are called to the Torah, just like their counterparts around the country. Their parents proudly present them with a tallit, and they assume the responsibilities of adults alongside their friends of all genders.

When we decided to focus this Bulletin on trends in Judaism, I thought about that

synagogue of my youth. It was a good building, with a large sanctuary and classrooms. The classrooms, however, were never used. There were so few young families in the shul that the few children were folded into the Hebrew school of another synagogue. We felt no connection with our home synagogue, where we went only for the High Holy Days, and we felt no connection with the Hebrew school we visited.

A Jewish community gathers its strength at the intersection of tradition and trends. We grapple with changing times, finding ways to embrace that which makes us ever more vibrant. This is critical for our youth, steeped in their modern world and looking to our rabbi, our teachers, and our whole community to be a bridge that helps them access the traditions of our people.

Really, it is true for all of us, and we serve as a bridge for each other.

As you read through these articles, I hope you're energized by the possibilities these trends provide. Not to turn away from our traditions, but rather fully to immerse ourselves in Jewish life.

Deep in Beth's article, you'll see a reference to a yearly adult b'nai mitzvah. When you read that, remember me, and know I'll need you there when the time comes for me to finally be called to the Torah.

All the best,  
Emily



# Trends in Judaism *continued*



The Summer Farm Dinner Fundraiser was truly magical. Thank you to our wonderful hosts, Sara and Bob of Sandiwood Farm, for exceeding all expectations. (Photo credit: Marcie Scudder)



Rabbi David with Sara Schlosser, host of the Summer Farm Dinner Fundraiser.



Nat Bacon from Jasper Hill Farm Cheese leading us through an incredible cheese tasting. (Photo credit: Marcie Scudder)

(providing sacred purpose). How does JCOGS stack up against these principles?

Well, last year, JCOGS went through a strategic planning process designed to set out our goals for the next five to ten years. The full strategic plan is available on our websites. The five pillars our community indicated were important are:

- Robust *tikkun olam*
- *L'dor vador* education
- Engaged membership
- Strong Jewish presence in north-central Vermont
- Financial sustainability

These five pillars are informing the work of our board and our committees, providing that mission-driven focus about which Rabbi Schwarz writes. Everything we do, everything we plan, it all comes back to these five pillars. The pillars that JCOGS chose in our strategic plan correlate closely with the principles of intentional spiritual communities that Rabbi Schwarz identifies, and they're playing out in fascinating ways here at JCOGS.

## **Robust *tikkun olam***

Our members made it clear that it's important for JCOGS to make a difference in our local community. Our hearts are big, and part of how we make meaning as Jews is to use our hands to provide for those around us. Since our strategic planning process, there has been a notable uptick in our *tikkun olam*.

Part of our strategy has been to partner with organizations that specialize in providing for those in need. We continue our close relationship with Lamoille Community House, with a JCOGS member serving as the executive director and our members offering meals and support. We have also begun to partner with Capstone Community Action, also run by a JCOGS member. Capstone is a multi-pronged approach to helping people out of poverty, and our membership raised more than \$3000 for their Fuel Your Neighbors program on Giving Tuesday. We will continue our partnership with these organizations and others, such as Lamoille County Food Share and the Red Cross.

*continued on page 5*

# Trends in Jewish Burial

Lynne Gedanken

Jews consider burial one of the most sacred acts we can fulfill. What have Jews done for centuries (even millennia) to mark this moment? Is Jewish burial something that is based on Jewish law, values and traditions, or is it Jewish burial simply because a Jew is being buried? And what are the current practices in burial and what might the future look like? As we turn first to traditional burial rites, and then to current and future trends in Jewish burial, let us reflect on our shared values—what is important to us in both life and death.

## Traditional Jewish burial

Jewish burial practices are part of a continuum of practices that begin with the death of a person and continue through the mourning period after burial. Two central values inform these practices: honoring the dead (*kavod hamet*) and comforting the mourners (*nichum ha'avelim*). These lead to certain principles and practices that seem to be agreed upon by all branches of Judaism.

From the time of death through burial, the focus is on honoring the dead. Like living people, the body is considered holy and treated with respect, dignity, and simplicity. Traditionally, while prayers are said, the body is watched over (*shmirah*), washed and purified (*taharah*), dressed in white cotton or linen burial garment (*tachrichim*), and then placed in a casket. Embalming is not done for several reasons: blood is removed (in Jewish tradition all parts of the body should be buried including the blood), it desecrates the body, and it interferes with the natural process of decomposition.

The deceased is buried in the earth as quickly as possible in a plain wooden casket (in Israel, bodies are generally buried in a shroud without a casket) that has no metal. The simplicity of the casket and funeral are intended to show respect for the departed and that all are equal in death. A final kindness is paid to the deceased as those present fill the grave with earth.

Once the burial has taken place, the focus shifts to comforting the mourners. This begins with the comfort offered by having the mourners walk between two lines of friends and family as they leave the grave. The process of offering comfort continues through the first seven days of mourning (*shivah*).

The community visits the mourners, bringing food and praying in a *shivah minyan*. The mourning period, during which a mourner recites *Kaddish* every day, lasts for 30 days (*sheloshim*) or 11 months for a parent. Traditional Jewish burial values the sacredness of the body, the natural process of death, and honoring those dead and those left behind and in need of comfort.

## What are Jews doing today?

Information is anecdotal. Although individual funeral homes and cemeteries can describe what they are observing, given the lack of good data, there is no way to know the actual extent of differences from traditional practice. It is reasonable to assume that nearly all Orthodox Jews, and that most Conservative Jews, are buried in fairly strict traditional practice. While there is probably more variation in practice among Reform, Reconstructionist and other affiliated and non-affiliated Jews, in-ground burial still seems to predominate. The two areas where change is being seen relate to cremation and Jewish cemetery practices.

According to a 2018 report of the National Funeral Directors Association, the cremation rate in the United States was expected to be 53.5% in 2018. While there is no separate data for Jews, reports from individual funeral homes indicate rates as high as 10-15%, a significant increase from cremation rates in the range of 3% twenty years ago.

For Jews, there are few areas related to end of life practices on which views are more divided and reactions more emotional than cremation. There are some Jewish scholars who have argued that although in-ground burial is preferred, there is no prohibition of cremation. However, for the most part, Jewish tradition has viewed cremation as unacceptable for a range of reasons. Some focus on the Torah speaking of burying the dead intact. Others argue that we don't burn that which is holy; just as we would not burn a Torah scroll, we should not burn a body. Still others find cremation to be a terrible reminder of the Holocaust.

While cremation is prohibited by Orthodox and most Conservative rabbis (although many will officiate at a funeral before cremation) and frequently discouraged by other rabbis, the increasing popularity of

cremation has raised issues regarding how cremation fits into other Jewish funeral and burial practices. For example, can *taharah* be performed and can cremated remains be buried in a Jewish cemetery?

## The Jewish cemeteries of tomorrow

Traditionally, as Jewish life was insulated from the outside world, only Jews were buried in Jewish cemeteries. However, as the Jewish community becomes more diverse, we are seeing more variety in who may be buried in a Jewish cemetery and how those burials may take place. Many Jewish cemeteries are looking for ways to accommodate all of the members of their communities where some members want to be buried in a manner fully consistent with Jewish tradition and others want to be buried with family members who are not Jewish.

An increasingly common arrangement is like the one at JCOGS's cemetery Darchei Shalom (Paths of Peace), where we have two sections. The Chesed section is for those who are Jewish and buried traditionally; and the Emet section is for those who are Jewish, non-Jewish spouses or relatives of those who are Jewish, non-Jewish members of JCOGS, or those buried with cremated remains.

Green burial is another trend in Jewish burial. Rabbi Jay Lyons, the founder of the South Florida Jewish Cemetery, calls it "radically traditional" because it effectively combines traditional Jewish burial practices with a concern for environmentally sustainable practices. Green Burial Vermont defines green burial in its simplest form as "burial without a concrete (or other type) vault, with an unembalmed body, buried in a biodegradable casket, container, or shroud," which sounds a lot like traditional Jewish burial.

As one moves to greener options, green burial seeks to minimize environmental damage (for example, caused by the monoculture of lawn grass and the use of pesticides and fossil fuel) and to restore and preserve diverse habitat. Not counting traditional Jewish cemeteries, there are already more than a dozen green Jewish cemeteries. As Jews learn more about the significant environmental costs of cremation, green burial may become an alternative that many may find more consistent with Jewish tradition and concern for the environment.



# Trends in Judaism *continued*



*The chesed committee cares for community members in times of need or change. Please contact the JCOGS office to get on our meal-maker list. It's a low-commitment way to give back to your community.*



*The tikkun olam committee packing up gear and clothing for three young refugees who had scholarships to overnight camp.*



*Lisa Carrick has been involved with JCOGS from long before we had a building or a rabbi, as Marvin Gameroff's administrative assistant. She was there through our building campaign and has supported us through growth and changes. At our barbeque this past summer, JCOGS honored Lisa, along with Skip Wentz, our long-time CPA. Lisa and Skip are both retiring, and we are grateful for all they have done for JCOGS.*

*Tikkun olam* is much more than a checked box. It is the *Kedusha* Factor that Rabbi Schwarz writes about, the way people "craft lives of sacred purpose." When we make sure our neighbors have food, shelter, and heat, we are acknowledging our role in the web of community. If you want to be more a part of this reinvigorated *tikkun olam*, email our front office at [jcogs@jcogs.org](mailto:jcogs@jcogs.org).

## **L'dor vador education**

Children's education is covered in Beth Liberman's article, and education doesn't stop with youth. We have classes for adults, including Hebrew, Torah chanting/*leyning*, and Torah study. Rabbi David has put special effort into reaching out with engaging topics through his monthly Torah on Tap discussions. This is the maximalist Judaism Rabbi Schwarz refers to: Judaism that pulls people into its deepest offerings, rather than allowing folks to skim its surface.

## **Strong Jewish presence in north-central Vermont**

Every year, Rabbi David communicates with our local schools, helping them craft schedules and policies that allow Jewish students and faculty to participate fully in our holidays. He is on the board of the Lamoille Community House and serves on the steering committee for REAL - Racial Equity Alliance of Lamoille. And he works with other clergy and lay leaders as part of the Greater Stowe Interfaith Coalition. Beth, as our director of family and youth education, works closely with the schools to provide support in Holocaust and antisemitism education.

However, it's not just our staff members who nurture a strong Jewish presence in north-central Vermont. Every JCOGS member brings our faith and our culture into the community. We do this through more formal means, such as our visibility during the holiday celebrations, but we also do it informally in our everyday lives and through our volunteerism in the greater community.

## **Engaged membership**

Jewish community grows when we work together to build that community. This may sound like circular logic, but it's the engaged laity that Rabbi Schwarz writes about. Working alongside each

*continued on page 6*



# Trends in Judaism *continued*



*Our young families baking for the food shelf before Thanksgiving.*

other strengthens our commitment to our community. We value what we work for.

At Kol Nidrei services, Rabbi David launched Homegrown Judaism, a multipronged approach to deeply engaging our members in the work of JCOGS.

Members are helping run services, both in music and in prayer. Our membership committee, chaired by board member Steve Levine, is helping organize small gatherings in people's homes where we can converse about what we want to build together.

There is work for everyone at JCOGS. Whatever people's passion or strengths, there is a way to use it in service of our Jewish community. We have 6th graders proofreading, elders welcoming new members, a team managing potlucks, and a whole crew on fundraising. That's not to mention our building committee, chaired by Susan Bayer-Fishman, which works behind the scenes to keep our building beautiful and shipshape.

**As to financial sustainability... well, there's a committee for that, too.** Homegrown Judaism invites each JCOGS member to ask: "What can I do to serve my Jewish community?" Look at the pillars of our strategic plan – our ongoing mission – and if you're ready to answer that question, email us at [jcogs@jcogs.org](mailto:jcogs@jcogs.org). Your email will be forwarded on to our membership committee.

As one of our members likes to say, we're an experiment that's working. In an area with only a small Jewish population, far from urban centers, we are flourishing. We are, indeed, a covenantal community.

## Trends in Jewish Education And what we're doing at JCOGS

Beth Liberman



*R-e-f-u-a-h s-h-l-e-m-a-h.* A seven year-old carefully traces Hebrew letters onto a page on a light table, while another picks out aleph-bet stickers and deliberately arranges them on a card. Nearby, a pair of tweens negotiates how many triangles they'll need to create a banner of *ר-פ-ו-א-ה ש-ל-מ-ה*. Dividing the task, they set to work writing one Hebrew letter onto each triangle and then reconvened to put them in order. They lay them out, right to left.

These students are at the Chesed table, a fixture of our weekly programming, where they have learned that two members of the congregation are ill and could use some cheering up. The task has engaged them in caring for others while they learn.

Learning, connecting, and Jewish engagement are happening on many levels: developmental, intellectual, social-emotional, artistic, Hebrew literacy. Students are inspired by their own curiosity and interest, rather than content goals set by teachers. They are learning to engage, not engaging to learn.

This is the new face of Hebrew school. At our Olam Chesed Education Center, we have been digging deeply into this trend of sparking intrinsic motivation with hands-on discovery and inquiry-based learning.

Leaders in the transformation of congregational learning point out in an article in the New York Jewish Week, that "meaningful and joyous learning for children and families [is] replacing classroom-only experience." A greater emphasis on nurturing relationships such as connecting children to members of the



*The Slen family brought delicious soup and challah to Olam Chesed for dinner one evening. Families broke bread together before heading out on their long drives home in every direction.*



# Trends in Jewish Education *continued*



*Learning as a community at Olam Chesed.*

community through the Chesed table project; exploring educational modalities through meaningful and invested arts activities; and more intensive preparation of educational leaders and teachers leads to Jewish learning that lives. Truly, this is nothing like "Hebrew school."

The change is palpable here at JCOGS. Inviting our Mitzvah! students to participate in the journey of adults preparing for their mitzvah ceremonies fully immerses them in preparing for the ritual in advance of their own. For one celebration, the kids lovingly crafted a *tallit*. For the next, they carefully chose a meaningful Hebrew name for the celebrant.

Meanwhile, last year, our littlest ones planted then harvested potatoes at a local Jewish-owned farm, made some into latkes at Hanukkah, and then delivered sixty pounds of

spuds to the food shelf. Worksheets couldn't come close to teaching about being keepers of the earth, Jewish foods, and the mitzvah of *tikkun olam*.

According to The Jewish Federations of North America: "Hebrew has been taught backwards for decades, with the emphasis on identifying letters and pronouncing words before having any... understanding of their meaning." Teaching symbol before sound sets up a code dynamic rather than emphasizing Hebrew as a communicative language with meaning and poetry all its own. "#OnwardHebrew is a grassroots initiative that is standing 'on the edge of possibility.'" Olam Chesed is fully immersed in making Hebrew relevant, accessible, and alive.

Visit JCOGS's lower level and you are transported to Eretz Israel. At eye level is the



*Ateed teens after an afternoon at the Percy Corn Maze.*

kotel/Western Wall with notes tucked in the cracks. Each classroom is named in Hebrew only: *har*/mountain, *ya'ar*/forest, and *midbar*/desert. Students now "own" this vocabulary of biblical terrains. And if you stop by *midbar* on a Wednesday afternoon, you just might get to explore the desert sands of Torah Godly Play, an innovative method of educating for *shlemut*/wholeness that turns Torah into a mesmerizing storytelling adventure.

The Coalition of Innovating Congregations puts it another way: "To achieve outcomes of nurturing whole persons on lifelong Jewish journeys... learning experiences must be powerful enough to connect to and stimulate the learner and be anchored in caring, purposeful relationships."

The week after creating cards for ill congregants, one of our tweens returns to the Chesed card-making table to follow up. She now writes in careful calligraphy the words *refuah shleimah* in Hebrew, without adult involvement. Across the table, beside an update about the members who are ill, several elementary students have enthusiastically asked their teacher to google a picture of a bulldog so they can add drawings to the banner and cards they've created. They desperately want to know something important: why do people call this community member Bulldog?







*Cyndy Wyatt reading off the raffle winners at Share the Light, an all-Vermont Hanukkah party. Thank you to Nancy Salzman and Cyndy for their outstanding work!*



*Greeting people at Share the Light.*

## Simchas in Our Community

Barbara Segal and Howard Brown on the birth of their grandson, Arthur Moshe, to parents Margot and Alex on July 29, 2019.

Susan Bayer Fishman and Stephen Fishman on their new grandson, Dean Firefly. Born August 20, 2019, to parents Ari and Molly, and sister Daisy.

Miriam & Stephen Rosenbloom on the birth of their grandson, Asa Rye, on September 2, 2019, to parents Nancy and Zach, and big sister Maia Risa.

Marcie & Bill Scudder on their new granddaughter, Ruby Sage, who arrived December 21, 2019, to parents Daniel and Sabrina.

Bob & Joan Katz, who celebrated their 65th wedding anniversary on August 15, 2019.

## Sad News Announcements

**Baruch Dayan Emet**  
Honoring lost loved ones

**Jean Minkin z"l**, mother and mother-in-law of Andy and Priscilla Minkin, passed away on Friday, July 26 (23 Tammuz).

**Robert M. Merson z"l**, father and father-in-law of Howard and Caren Merson, passed away on Tuesday, September 24 (24 Elul).

**Ruth Dunn Lombardino z"l**, sister of Larry Dunn, passed away on Monday, December 9 (11 Kislev).

**Beatrice Link z"l**, grandmother of Alison Link, passed away on Wednesday, December 11 (13 Kislev).

**Steven Shawn Klein z"l**, son of Doris and Sheldon Klein, brother and brother-in-law of Elysse and Jonathan Freedman, passed away on Thursday, December 12 (14 Kislev).

*May their memories forever be a blessing.*



*Barbara Segal and Judy Dunn light our Hanukkiyot.*

## Mitzvah celebrations!



Jeri Wohlberg,  
April 4



Lex Leikin,  
May 23



Oliver Laxer,  
May 30



Samson Berlin,  
June 6



Samantha Kohl,  
June 13



*December 25 was the Second Annual Noncompetitive Board Game Competition. A dozen people showed up for a potluck and board games, but Hersh found something more interesting to play with.*