



**LevLearning**  
*joyful, inspired, judaism*

## **2021-2022 Staff Bios**

## **Director of Congregational Learning**

**Ashley Plotnick** (she/her) became the Director of Congregational Learning in 2015. Ashley holds Masters' degrees in Jewish Studies, Human Sexuality Education and Social Work. Ashley is also a trained Spiritual Director and holds certificates in Social Emotional Learning from Rutgers University and Grief Counseling from the University of Madison. Ashley's undergraduate degree is from Indiana University, with majors in Jewish Studies and Religious Studies. Ashley and her husband Seth Schriftman reside in Deerfield with their children, Noah (2009), Molly (2011), and Sophie (2016). When Ashley is not at Makom, she volunteers for the COVID Grief Network and works part-time as a therapist at Wellington Counseling Group. Ashley is also enrolled in the Doctor of Ministry program at Claremont School of Theology. Ashley is passionate about building relationships and creating joyful, safe spaces for our children to connect to Jewish life and community. She is grateful to have found her spiritual home at Makom Solel Lakeside.

## **Lev Learning Assistant**

**Sammi Krakow** (she/her) became Makom Solel Lakeside's new administrative assistant in August of 2020. Sammi grew up at legacy Solel, celebrating her bat mitzvah and confirmation with the community. Sammi was a madricha for the Lev Learning office from 7th grade through 12th grade, when she graduated from Highland Park High School. Sammi is currently attending DePaul University and majoring in Psychology. Sammi also helps out with leading the youth group as well as other community programming events. Sammi has really enjoyed all the experiences she has had through Solel and Makom Solel Lakeside and can't wait to again be part of the staff for Lev Learning 2021-2022.

## **Clergy**

**Rabbi 'Ike' Serotta** (he/him) is committed in both word and deed to social justice. He is a strong advocate for civil rights, women's rights, voter's rights, LGBTQ rights, and immigrant and refugee rights. He is also active in interfaith dialogue, with service as past president of the Southeast Lake County Clergy Association and similar roles with the Greater Milwaukee Interfaith Council as well as the National Conference of Christians and Jews. He teaches regularly in interfaith study groups. Rabbi Serotta is easily approachable to both adults and children. He is passionate about sports, music and movies. Congregants consider him to be scholarly, highly personable and uncommonly kind and caring. Rabbi Serotta is married to Ceilanne Libber and has three

children. Rabbi Ike loves leading our teen trips and co-leading, with Rabbi Evan, the teen class and Confirmation program at Makom Solel Lakeside.

Respected as a Jewish thought leader both in the Chicago area and nationally, **Rabbi Evan Moffic** (he/him) is a charismatic and engaging leader both in our congregation and beyond. He is dedicated to interfaith outreach, social justice, and inspiring a modern relevant spirituality for today's world. While leading worship, officiating at weddings and be mitzvah, and serving a large and diverse congregation, Rabbi Moffic loves to write and work with others to explore what practices help us feel a greater sense of satisfaction, meaning and purpose in our lives. Rabbi Moffic is the author of four best-selling books. Rabbi Moffic graduated from Stanford University and was ordained by Hebrew Union College in 2006. He is married to Rabbi Arielle Moffic. They have two children. Rabbi Moffic enjoys teaching our teen class and Confirmation program along with Rabbi Ike.

Whether you are hungry for music with an uptempo beat or something mellow to stir your soul, **Cantor Jay O'Brien** (he/him) delivers it all. With a fine tenor voice equally suited to singing opera or show tunes, Cantor O'Brien appeals to Jews of many different demographics and denominations through his fusion of traditional, contemporary, folk, and classical musical genres in Jewish worship and communal life. His interfaith background and observant Jewish upbringing makes him an inspiring and compelling musical leader. Cantor Jay loves bringing music to our students at Lev Learning and leading the Be Mitzvah program.

### **Hebrew Tutor and Be Mitzvah Facilitator**

**Simcha Ackerman** (she/her) joined our staff as a Religious School teacher in 1995. In 2003 she became the full-time B'nai Mitzvah Educator and began tutoring b'nai mitzvah students. Simcha is the person who assigns be mitzvah dates, currently tutors all be mitzvah students and helps with coordinating the be mitzvah service by meeting with families. She attends all be mitzvah services. Simcha also teaches *hevruta*, a small group b'nai mitzvah preparatory course. *Hevruta* meets on Sundays before Lev Learning. Simcha also works with students needing additional Hebrew help during class time. When she is not at Makom Solel Lakeside, Simcha loves spending time with her family and grandchildren.

### **Music Specialist**

**Todd Kessler** (he/him) grew up in Northbrook and now lives in Deerfield with his wife, Lauren, and their two sons, Benjamin and Ezra. Upon graduating from the University of Illinois in 2005 with a degree in Music Theory and Composition, Todd quickly began a career in music that has spanned 12 years, the release of multiple albums and tours around the country, and a spot on season three of NBC's hit show The Voice. Todd's work in the Jewish Community began in 2008 at Chicago Jewish Day School as the Jewish Music Specialist. In 2010 he took on the Songleader role at Sinai Congregation in Chicago. After four years with Sinai, Todd moved to Deerfield with his family and transitioned into his role at Lakeside Congregation, now Makom Solel Lakeside. In addition to his work at Makom Solel Lakeside, Todd teaches Jewish Music at Bernard Zell Anshe Emet Day School in Chicago and performs as a Cantorial Soloist for B'nai Mitzvah services all around the Chicago area.

## **Lev Learning Teachers**

### **Parent Tot**

**Leah Silverman** (she/her) is excited to join the staff at Lev Learning this year. Leah lives in Skokie with her husband Aaron, and their five children Basya 17, Aviva 17, Coby 12, Ezra 8 and Zev 8. Leah is an Inclusion Aide at Cherry Preschool in Evanston. She is very passionate about advocacy and inclusion as her son Zev has Down Syndrome. Leah looks forward to meeting everyone and getting to know their families!

### **Pre-K**

**Amanda Reinglass** (she/her) is excited to return to Lev Learning for her seventh year as a Pre-Kindergarten teacher! During the week, Ms. Reinglass works at Chicago Jewish Day School as a second grade teacher. She attended Indiana University, where she received her Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education. She is currently pursuing her Masters of Education (M.ED) at National Louis University. She previously worked at Arie Crown Hebrew Day School, where she taught Kindergarten for three years. In her past five years of full-time teaching, she has worked with a variety of ages ranging from Kindergarten through fifth grade. Judaism plays an integral part in Ms. Reinglass' life. She is excited for a fun year ahead filled with learning and growth.

### **Kindergarten**

This will be **Staci Friedman's** (she/her) first year at Lev Learning. Staci already feels at home with Makom as she helped open and launch the first Jewish Montessori program

classroom in our building. Staci comes to us with over 15 years working in education and holds a Montessori Teaching Certification as well as a Masters in Education from Loyola. Staci also holds a Bachelor of Arts in Communications from the University of Wisconsin - Madison. She has worked primarily with children ages 3-6, taught parent-tot classes, and led parent-education classes. Before teaching, Staci was in branding/marketing/event planning which she still does on the side. Originally from Minnesota, Staci now lives in Highland Park with her husband Kenny, and her son, Miloh (11). Staci is very excited to work with the children, for the school year to begin, and to get to know each of our students and their families.

**Donna Reinglass** (she/her) is happy to be returning to Lev Learning for her eighth year as a kindergarten teacher. She previously taught kindergarten at B'nai Torah for fifteen years before joining the Makom Solel Lakeside community. Donna received her Bachelor of Science in Education from Northern Illinois University. She began her career as a Special Education teacher in Mount Prospect. She then went onto teaching kindergarten in Bartlett, U-46 School district until her children were born. Donna resides in Highland Park with her husband Dr. Steven. She has three children, Derek who has recently moved back to Highland Park with his wife Alex and their son Jett, along with two daughters, Amanda and Kaylie, who are both living in the Chicago area. In her free time, she loves to take part in all kinds of art, daily exercise and spending time with family and friends. Donna's creativity extends to the classroom environment where she introduces the children to Judaism through stories, games and art.

### **1st Grade**

**Debra Vilchis** (she/her) has been teaching First Grade at Lev Learning since 1996. After 25 years, Debra enthusiastically approaches each new school year as an opportunity to instill a love of Torah and Jewish values in a fresh group of young learners. Through coursework at the Florence Melton School for Jewish Educators, the Mussar Institute and continued professional development, Debra's specialty is introducing first graders to Jewish ancestors and Torah via storytelling, drama and interactive play. Her goal is to help her young students develop character values that lead to positive life choices. When not teaching, Debra is COO of Fishman Public Relations, a national PR agency based in Northbrook. A former journalist, Debra holds an MA in Journalism from the University of Illinois and a BA in Journalism from NIU. She is the proud mom of Cassidy, Marlee and Charlie. She loves camping, hiking and watching stand-up comedy.

**Alli Crain** (she/her) is so excited to be teaching first grade Sunday school! After substitute teaching several times at Lev Learning, Alli is happy to be a regular faculty

member this year. Alli has been working with children and families for over 20 years in the Deerfield/Northbrook/Highland Park area as a nanny, preschool teacher, and piano teacher. She taught preschool for 12 years, 7 of those years were in local Jewish Preschools. Alli has undergraduate degrees in Early Childhood Education and Leadership. She has her Master's in Religious Education. Alli is passionate about Jewish Education. She loves sharing Jewish tradition and values with her students. She seeks to help children connect with Judaism in ways that are meaningful for them. She believes in education that is dynamic, vibrant, and relevant. Alli creates a classroom atmosphere that is warm, welcoming, and nurturing. She always approaches her work with humor and positivity. For the past 7 years, Alli has been teaching children's piano lessons. She also does a lot of pet-sitting in the area. In her free time, Alli enjoys reading, cooking, gardening, and doing yoga.

## **2nd Grade**

**Lindsey Rosenson** (she/her) is thrilled to begin her sixth year at Lev Learning as both a Sunday second and Hebrew fifth grade teacher. During the school year, Lindsey provides student support services school wide for Solomon Schechter Day School, which she graduated from as a student. Lindsey attended Tulane University, where she earned her bachelor's degree in Psychology and Judaic Studies, and completed her master's in Mental Health Counseling at the University of Miami. She is currently pursuing another degree in Elementary Education at Western Governors University. Lindsey especially loves spending her time with our students, involving them in collaborative, hands-on learning experiences.

## **3rd Grade**

**Ami Flatt** (she/her) is thrilled to be teaching third grade this year at Lev Learning. Ami has subbed for various classes in the past and truly loves the energy, sense of community and passion that emanates from each classroom. Ami graduated from Yeshiva University with a degree in English Communications and History. Ami lives in Skokie, with her husband, and three daughters Rachel (14), Daniella (9) and Sophie (3). Ami loves Jewish holidays, experimenting in the kitchen and can't wait to travel to Israel again!

**Lara Zeigler** (she/her) is delighted to be a part of the Lev Learning faculty for her third year. After graduating from Brandeis University, Lara became a Teach for America corps member in New Orleans and discovered a passion for teaching. She obtained her

master's degree in education from Harvard University and then returned to Chicago, where she taught at the Legacy Charter School in North Lawndale for seven years. Since 2014, she has been teaching at Lincoln School in Evanston. Lara, who grew up in Deerfield, now lives there with her husband, Josef, and their daughters, Cybil and Paulina, with whom she loves to spend her time. She is committed to instilling in them and in her students at Lev Learning a love of Judaism and Jewish living.

#### **4th Grade**

**Elana Carmel-Levy** (she/her) has been a teacher at Lev Learning since 1997! She has a strong background in Jewish Studies, having graduated from a private Jewish high school in Winnipeg, Manitoba and minoring in Jewish Studies for her Undergraduate B.Ed. After many years of teaching 6th grade at Makom Solel Lakeside, Elana now teaches 4th grade on Sundays and 6th grade Hebrew on Tuesdays. In addition to teaching at Lev Learning, Elana teaches in Glenview District 34 and is a private Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutor. Elana lives in Deerfield with her husband, Yoav, and their three children Sean (18), Sarah Mae (15), and Nathan (12).

**Jen Schmidt** (she/her) is excited to join the staff at Lev Learning. Jen graduated from U of I and holds a Master's in Education from DePaul. Jen previously taught Sunday school at Shir Hadash for 8 years. Jen lives in Deerfield with her husband and three children, and her niece and nephew attend Lev Learning. Jen is passionate about Jewish education, culture, and community. She looks forward to creating a fun, engaging classroom this year.

#### **5th Grade**

This is **Eva Steingold's** (she/her) 23rd year teaching religious school and seventh year teaching 5th grade at Lev Learning. She has taught 4th, 5th and 6th grade levels. She lives in Buffalo Grove with her husband Larry, who teaches 4th grade at Lev Learning, and their 3 daughters, Dana (16), Maya (12) and Brooke (4.5). Eva's undergrad is in secondary education from Indiana University and her Masters is in Training and Development from Roosevelt University. She works full time as a Corporate Trainer at Stepan Company, a chemical manufacturing company in Northbrook. When Eva is not working, she enjoys hanging out with her family and friends, working out, and shopping.

This is **Marci Balonick's** (she/her) first year teaching at Lev Learning. She works full time as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker specializing in older adults and people and families dealing with Dementia. She has a B.A. in Journalism from University of

Wisconsin-Madison, and a Master's of Social Work from Loyola University Chicago. Marci grew up in Skokie and attended Solomon Schechter Day School. Having a father who is a Holocaust survivor, Marci is passionate about sharing the importance and significance of Jewish lifecycle events. She lives in Highland Park with her husband Barnett (Bat), daughter, Eve (8), son, Nathan (6), and beloved dog, Walter. Marci is looking forward to meeting her students and families!

### **6th Grade**

**David Valentine** (he/him) taught at Lakeside for more than 20 years, and is beginning his fourth year at Lev Learning. David has worked in this community for so long that he has changed careers since he first started working here. David has a master's in social work and is now working as an I.T. Consultant. David lives in Northbrook with his wife, Luci. They have two grown children, Fletcher who is currently serving in the IDF in Israel, and Dana who is an engineer living in Connecticut and builds submarines. He enjoys talking about current events and ethical dilemmas with his students. When he is not teaching, he runs triathlons and marathons.

This is **Mallory Sherwood's** (she/her) third year teaching 6th grade at Lev Learning. Mallory grew up loving religious school and always knew that someday she would teach it! She graduated from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign with her degree in Spanish Education. During the week, Mallory teaches 7th grade Spanish in Winnetka and spends time with her family. She has a 20 year old brother and 10 year old sister. Mallory loves sharing her passion for Jewish History with her students and looks forward to an amazing year!

### **7th Grade**

This is **Lawrence Steingold's** (he/him) 7th year at Lev Learning. He previously served as a Board of Directors for JCYS and taught at another synagogue for over 12 years before joining the faculty for Lev Learning. In his spare time, Larry is a patent attorney and tutors high school students in math, science, and ACT. Larry and his wife Eva enjoy bringing their three children to celebrate holidays with our community. His oldest daughter Dana will be helping to teach Hebrew this year at Lev Learning. His middle daughter spends time competing in ice skating. His youngest daughter was born the day the Cubs won the World Series and is excited for Kindergarten at Lev Learning this year.



### **7th Grade and Teen Program Guest Teacher**

With a decades-long history of teaching in secular and Jewish classrooms and a Masters in Education, **Kelly Goldberg** (she/her) has enjoyed numerous administrative Jewish roles, including Principal of BJBE's Chai School, as well as BJBE's Director of Youth and Family Engagement. Kelly's favorite Jewish educational memories always include her time with teens. Kelly was a youth advisor for many years, and she's taught nearly every teen course or

topic you can think of. Besides leading teen trips to Israel, some of Kelly's favorite teaching moments include listening to Billy Jonas' song "God Is In" and analyzing the lyrics with her students; helping Jewish teens find their voices as proud advocates of Eretz Yisrael; leading Jewish yoga as an expression of prayer in movement; and engaging Jewish teens as social justice warriors through Tikkun Olam. Kelly and her husband Mike are proud parents of Danny and Bella, their adult-ish, twenty-something children.

### **Art Specialist**

**Laura Frisch** (she/her) has enjoyed teaching in our community for 30 years! She is also a member with her husband, Craig, and two children, Hana and Ari, who is a Madrich. Morah Laura, as she is known by our students, has taught art, comparative religion and 7th grade over the years. This year, she will safely coordinate art in the classrooms for all grades. Laura also helps to bring art to our community events and is passionate about social justice, with extensive involvement in MASK, Mothers/Men Against Senseless Killing and tutoring refugee children through the Makom Tikkun Olam committee. During the weekdays, Laura works with children who have learning differences at Niles Township District of Special Education.

### **Hebrew Teachers**

**Anna Gorbikoff** (she/her) Anna Gorbikoff was born in Ukraine, and at the age of nine she moved with her family to Israel. After graduating from the Air Force Technical Academy in Beer Sheva, she moved to Chicago. Anna has graduated from Northeastern Illinois University with a BA in Secondary Education with endorsements in Spanish and Hebrew. She began her career as a teacher in 2005 at a private Sunday school, where she taught Hebrew, Jewish traditions, and prepared students for Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremonies. In 2009 she joined Stevenson High School, where she currently runs the Hebrew program. Anna also previously taught Hebrew at Deerfield High School. She is an active member

of the Jewish community, and ever since she moved to the US, she keeps creating and supporting various Jewish educational programs in Chicagoland. Anna enjoys reading, traveling, and spending time with her family and friends. Learning languages and discovering new cultures is her passion. She enjoys culinary classes with her husband and climbing stairs with her three kids, hoping to climb real mountains in the not so distant future.

**Lindsey Rosenson**: see 2nd Grade teachers

**Elana Carmel-Levy**: see 4th Grade teachers

**Larry Steingold**: see 7th Grade teachers