



Celebrating Leadership – 2023 OKC Volunteers of the Year



Gidon van Emden (*Keter Shem Tov Honoree*)

Soon after moving to the area, Sharon and Gidon were drawn to Ohr Kodesh and joined in 2011. Actively involved from that moment on, they love the warmth of the people that make up the community, and have made OK their second home. In fact, between the ECC, the ABRS, MoEd and Shabbat services, Gidon and his family are in the building almost every day. Orit and Pia strongly prefer Ohr Kodesh over any other shul (thanks to its egalitarianism and the Lollipop Man), and are excited to be active shul members too, with Orit recently *leyning* for the first time!

Hailing from Amsterdam, Gidon was raised with a love for Judaism and with a spirit of volunteerism by his parents, Hans and Hetty. Growing up in a small community afforded opportunities to get involved in leadership positions early - he started at 15 as a counselor and organizer for the *Bnei Akiva* youth movement. After high school, Gidon studied in a *yeshiva* and worked on a *kibbutz*, and more importantly, met people from larger

communities. He commenced his studies at the University of Amsterdam, but realized that city's Jewish community was no longer where he wanted to be - so he moved away.

After a sojourn in London and another year in Israel, Gidon ended up in Boston, where he met Sharon (for the second time, ask him about this during *kiddush*!) and obtained an MBA and an MA in Jewish Communal Service from Brandeis University. Adding these degrees to his BA in Hebrew from University College London, and his MA in Semitic Languages from the University of Amsterdam, Gidon was now thoroughly over-qualified and under-experienced, and found a job in Brussels, working first for the European Union of Jewish Students, and then for CEJI - A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe, where he worked as an organizer and a lobbyist on human rights, religious freedom, and education policy. He also volunteered for his *shuls* in Brussels, and continued rising through the ranks of *Bnei Akiva*, ending up as their first and only non-Israeli *shaliach*.

Refusing to be cowed by the Belgian bureaucracy involved in obtaining a visa, Sharon joined Gidon in Brussels in late 2004, a year after he moved there. They married in 2008 (twice - and also twice in 2007. Ask them about this at *kiddush*!) but decided they did not want to raise a family in Brussels. So in 2010, Sharon and Gidon moved to the Washington area, and found Rock Creek Forest to be an amazing place with a thriving Jewish and general community, great schools, a wonderful selection of *shuls* - and let's not forget the Parkway Deli!

Ohr Kodesh has afforded Gidon many ways of getting involved, and he has grasped that opportunity with both hands. From his regular Tora reading, to OK Kids, a now-defunct coffee-meet for parents of pre-ECC kids, to the House Committee, the *Chevra Kaddisha*, the *Mentsch Club* and its first retreat, the Social Action Committee, a nearly-nine year stint on the Board and as an early advocate for a review of the shul's governance, Gidon has been involved wherever he felt he could meaningfully contribute - including as one of the shul's *mashgichim* and its unofficial brewmaster and Etrog vodka-supplier.

Next to his activities at Ohr Kodesh, Gidon has been involved with [Jews United For Justice](#), a local Jewish social justice organization. He *leyns* regularly at [Minyan Segula](#), an independent *minyan* that meets in Silver Spring and Shepherd Park, and due to his work for the Chevra Kaddisha (talk to Gidon during *kiddush* about ways to volunteer for it!) and with the [Jewish Funeral Practices Committee of Greater Washington](#), he was appointed to the [Maryland Board of Morticians and Funeral Directors](#). Since those gigs don't pay, Gidon is the CEO of [KOL Foods](#), the kosher grass-fed meat company, where he has worked since 2012.



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Adam Small & Rachel Gildiner met in college in New York City. They live in Washington, D.C. with their three children. Their family has been members of Ohr Kodesh since 2012. All three children attended the ECC.

Adam grew up in Baltimore and is now a Trial Attorney in the Department of Justice's National Security Division. In his spare time, he enjoys skiing, biking, hiking, and coaching youth sports.

Rachel was born in Philadelphia, PA and grew up in Cherry Hill, NJ. She has been a Jewish communal leader for over a decade and is now the Chief Engagement Officer at Hillel International.



Nina (and Sol) Glasner landed at Ohr Kodesh 45 years ago. They were preparing to move to the suburbs from Capitol Hill and were shul shopping as they were expecting their first child (who turned out to be twin boys!). On their first visit to OKC they were greeted by Rabbi Porath (z'l) and several members (some of whom have become their closest friends), including Alice Abramson (z'l) who invited them for lunch. Their decision was made – how could they not join a synagogue that was so welcoming to total strangers!

The Glasner children, Ariel, David and Tamar celebrated their *bnei mitzvah* at Ohr Kodesh and Rabbi Fishman co-officiated at each of their weddings. Nina's parents, Eli and Edna Gerstmann (z'l) were frequent visitors to OKC and became part of the family's circle of Ohr Kodesh friends. Nina and Sol are thrilled that the Glasner membership has expanded to include Ariel and Aliza (Lev, Rafi, Ori, Dalia) and Tamar and David Wallsh (Gabi, Roni, Levi). David and Elana (Eldad, Noah, Hannah) can be found at Ohr Kodesh when they visit from Cleveland.

Over the years, Ohr Kodesh has played a major role in Nina's personal, family, communal and spiritual life. Nina attends services regularly (when she is not in Cleveland, at the family beach house in Delaware, or on other travels). She appreciates the sharing and support of friends, clergy and staff during good as well as challenging times. Sol and Nina are among the walkers, making it possible to enjoy Shabbat and holidays with other congregants, whether they drive or not.

Nina tries to contribute to the workings of Ohr Kodesh in both small and larger ways. She was active in the formation of the ECC and her children were among its early graduates. She was a member of the Youth Committee, participated in the creation of the teen *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, and served for two terms on the board of directors. Nina continues to perform *taharoth*, which are coordinated through the Funeral Practices Committee. She was among the callers when OKC formed phone trees to connect with congregants around the holidays. Most recently, Nina worked on the second Women's Retreat Committee and co-chaired the last two congregational retreats. These were particularly important to her because of the value she places on intergenerational opportunities. As a member of the *Chesed* Committee she is actively working on the establishment of support groups for identified interest cohorts.

Just as she and her family have been on the receiving end of such kindness, Nina tries to be available to friends and congregants. On a less public scale, she reaches out to others with offers of food, with the creation of meal trains, and by trying to connect in person, by phone or with online visits. Nina is on the *minyán* SOS list and does her best to respond when called.

Outside of OKC, Nina is a retired teacher of the visually impaired. She is a social worker in private practice working mostly with older clients and/or clients with visual impairments. She is on the board of the Defiant Requiem Foundation (DRF) - an organization dedicated to honoring the memory of victims of the Holocaust. The Prevention of Blindness Society (POB), an organization providing services to people with visual impairments, has asked Nina to serve on their board as well.

Nina and Sol are the very proud and grateful grandparents of ten grandchildren ranging in ages from 1 to 11 years old. Much to her delight, Nina spends time with them babysitting, hanging out, sleepovers and attending their myriad sports, school, and extra-curricular activities, and of course - at Ohr Kodesh.



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Vera Krimnus first got to know the OKC community as DC's Regional Manager for [Community Security Service](#) (CSS). She has been involved with the Jewish security organization for more than a dozen years, beginning as a cadet and *krav maga* student in New York City and remaining involved as she relocated to DC in 2013. Over time, she helped launch full CSS operations at several shuls, eventually including OKC. Right away, Vera felt that it was a warm community with members who are dedicated to the synagogue and fun to be with (at a board committee meeting no less). Currently, Vera is leading the OKC CSS Team (and would love to have you join the team!).

Vera and her family (husband Phil Wallach, and daughters Bina, Ettie, and Fanya) started attending OKC services in the parking lot during COVID, brought by their friends Ben and Margery Kay. Although they wondered whether the congregation just needed warm bodies in that cold winter of '20-'21, they quickly felt drawn into the group of regular attendees. In-person services were a highlight during that shut-down time. They have happily been part of the community since then, becoming members in 2021. She loves that her three girls run around the synagogue like they own the place on *shabbat*—even if it's very bad security practice—and it is a thrill to have her 6-year-old whine whenever she's told she's not going to shul.

Vera was born in Odessa, in what was then the Soviet Union, and immigrated to New York in 1989. Her family came as Jewish refugees, aided by HIAS, and they sought out the Jewish life that had been denied to them in their native land. Vera had her *bat mitzvah* in the reform temple in Borough Park (a well-kept secret), and has been refining her practice of Judaism through synagogues, camps, and community ever since.

Since getting her MBA at the Wharton School, Vera has worked to help more children in America get the high quality public education that she received in NYC.