

Weaving memories

Metuchen shul offers chance to create tallitot threaded through with love

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How do we value things? Material, tangible things, objects that we can touch and feel and step on and smell and wrap ourselves in and occasionally misplace — and also lose ourselves in?

Sometimes we value things by how much they cost; how much we paid for them or how much off the list price we had to fork over. And sometimes we value them for their history, for the memories and emotions they evoke in us.

Sometimes we can create things with full intention, knowing that the act of creating them, the memory of creating them, and the knowledge that they are intended as a gift

to someone we love, invests them with more value than any outsider ever could understand.

That's what happens in the Loom Room at Neve Shalom, the Conservative synagogue in Metuchen. People — women, and also men, and sometimes children, alone or in groups — come in, they sit at the loom, and they leave with a material thing woven through with memories.

The Loom Room story starts about 40 years ago — actually it goes back way farther, but that's when this part of it begins. Cory Schneider, a former president of the Women's League for Conservative Judaism — that's the North American umbrella organization to which Conservative synagogues' sisterhood groups belong — was getting ready for her first child's bar mitzvah. She lived in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, then. “We belonged to a non-egalitarian shul then, and I wanted to be sure that I did more for Steven's bar mitzvah than arranging the catering,” she said. She learned that an Orthodox shul in Allentown had a loom, where people could weave tallitot, challah covers, and other pieces of Judaica. “It wasn't a very popular thing,” she said. “And it was a long time ago. I couldn't just google it. I couldn't find it on the internet. There was no google and there was no internet then.” But because of the informal inter-movement sisterhood connection, she discovered the loom, and she was able to use it. “I wove a tallit, and it was such a positive experience that I came back and talked about it,” she said.

She talked about it so much, in fact, that the Conservative shul in Harrisburg that she didn't belong to — the bigger one, Beth El Temple— bought a loom, and allowed people to use it, just as the Orthodox shul in Allentown did. Her own shul didn't have the space for it.

She didn't know how to weave; “it usually takes about two and a half hours the first time, working with an instructor, to feel comfortable at the loom,” she said. All these years later, “I still can't do the technical stuff. I can't dress a loom.” That is, she can't put the long strands of yarn that the shuttle traverses on it. “But I can throw the shuttle back and forth.



Children examine the loom at Neve Shalom in Metuchen.

“I wove the tallit, and I was thrilled, and my son was thrilled,” she said. “I wove an atarah,” the neckband, “and I petit-pointed his Hebrew name onto it. He used it for his bar mitzvah, and in fact he used it until he got engaged.” It was a small tallit, one of the scarf-like ones, and “he said that he wanted a tallit gadol,” a large tallit that the wearer can drape over his shoulders, and at times over his head, “so I found a weaver with a wide loom.” And she wove her son a second tallit.

“And my son said that maybe some day he would have a son, and maybe that son would like to wear his father’s tallit.” He did. “So I wove a new atarah for the old tallit, and I petit-pointed my grandson’s name in it.”

Her second son, David, “has a son who is 8 years old,” Ms. Schneider said. “I have already prepared the whole tallit, with a note from me in case I am not around.”

Between Steven, David, and their third son, Scott, Ms. Schneider and her husband, Stan, have 10 grandchildren. Each one who wants one will get a handwoven tallit.

In 2014, Cory and Stan Schneider moved to Somerset, and they joined Neve Shalom. “My granddaughter said that she didn’t want us to buy her a tallit,” Ms. Schneider said. “She wanted me to weave one. So I figured that I had to go back to Harrisburg.

“But a couple of days after that conversation, I was walking down our street, and across the street a neighbor’s garage door was open, and there was a loom sitting there, almost exactly like the loom I used in Harrisburg. So when I saw the neighbor outside, I said, ‘Why do you have a loom in your garage?’ and she said, ‘I used to weave, but now I’m into quilting. I’m trying to sell the loom. I want to be able to use the garage for my car.’”

She’d had no luck selling it, “so I asked her, ‘Would you consider donating it to the synagogue?’ And she did.” No, the neighbor is not Jewish, but that didn’t matter.



The tallit that Elyse Geshwind Haber of Fort Lee wove.

A new loom would cost around \$3,500, Ms. Schneider said.

“I spoke to Jennifer Bullock, the sisterhood president, because I wanted this to be a sisterhood program, and she was really excited about it,” she continued. “She’s my partner in the program. She got it approved; we got the supplies, and my son and some of his friends moved it. It’s a very hands-on program.”

The loom is upstairs, in what used to be the rabbi’s office until the office moved downstairs, and is now the Loom Room. “It’s in an isolated part of the building,” Ms. Schneider said. “And yes, it was a real challenge to get it upstairs.”

So far, she added, “over 400 people have woven on it.”

People can come alone or in family groups of different sizes; a parent and a child, parents and children, grandparents, children, and grandchildren. “We had the nursery school class come in and weave a challah cover for their Shabbes program,” Ms. Schneider said. Occasionally parents would be able to stay with their young children and weave together.

“It’s been fabulous,” she continued. “I would say that 99.5% of everybody who ever has woven has had a positive experience. We have had many return weavers. I had a woman who made two pieces to sew together for a tallit gadol. I had a woman who wove a tallit for her grandson, and then for his brother, and then her other two grandsons, who already had their bar mitzvahs when she started weaving, said, ‘Hey, wait a minute, we want one too,’ so she’s weaving tallitot for them too.”

That’s the first loom. The main one. Neve Shalom now has a second loom.



A nursery school child at Neve Shalom puts candlesticks near a challah cover that was woven at the shul.

“In January of this year, I got an email from a woman who wanted to know if I am the right person to talk to about the weaving program,” Ms. Schneider said. “I wrote back and said yes, I am, and within five minutes she called me.

“Here’s the short story about her.”

The caller, Deborah Lamensdorf Jacobs, who lives outside Atlanta, is the great granddaughter of Morris and Molly Bernstein Grundfest. The eastern European-born Grundfests made their way to the Mississippi Delta. He began as a peddler, they settled in Mississippi, opened a general store, and eventually “did something they couldn’t have done in Russia,” Ms. Schneider said. “In 1919, they bought land in

Cary, Mississippi. Two or three hundred acres of land. They grew cotton. The family still farms that land. They also have a cotton gin.

“Deborah is the very charitable president of her sisterhood, she’s active in her synagogue, and she is on the board of the new Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience in New Orleans; her father’s tallit is on display there,” Ms. Schneider said.

Twenty or so year ago, Ms. Jacobs “decides that she is going to create family heirlooms from the cotton grown on this land,” she continued. “She took a bale of cotton to the gin, had it ginned, and made it into yarn suitable for weaving. She found a weaver who put the family cotton on her loom and wove tallitot and challah covers. Her mother worked with the weaver and wove a tallit for her father.” (Since then, both of Ms. Jacobs’ parents have died.)

“This weaver in the Atlanta area wove challah covers, and Deborah would give them as presents, and tell the story of the yarn along with it. She had tallitot made for cousins.

“But a few years later, the weaver sold her loom. She didn’t want to weave any more. And ever since that time, 18 years ago, Deborah has been looking for a place where someone would weave with her family’s yarn.”

The most obvious answer to the story isn’t what happened. She couldn’t use the loom at Neve — dedicating the loom to Ms. Jacobs’ project would have meant giving up the Loom Room program — and “I didn’t want to do that,” Ms. Schneider said.



Alana Werwa, wrapped in her new tallit, lays at her bat mitzvah; Joseph Narowe from the Jewish Congregation of Maui, left, is the gabbai, and her brother and father look on.

But she did want to help. “Before the pandemic, someone in our congregation who had a loom in her basement for 20 years offered it to the program,” Ms. Schneider said. Although it wasn’t clear at first that it could work — it seems that not all yarns can go on all looms — “it turns out that we could recondition the loom. So my son and his friends help shlep it up to the sitting room of the rabbi’s old office. We dressed it with Deborah’s yarn, and her first commission was for 30 challah covers.

“I’m weaving on it, Jennifer is weaving on it, and we are getting other volunteers. It is absolutely fabulous. And Deborah is planning to come up — we’ve never met, just talked on Zoom — and she agreed to give a presentation on Southern Jewish life, and tell her story, and then she’ll do some weaving on the loom.”

Like the loom dedicated to the Grundfest family yarn, the main Neve Shalom loom uses cotton, not wool. “The first tallitot that I made, in Allentown, were wool, and the loom in Harrisburg started with wool, but then they switched to pearl cotton, and I like that much better,” Ms. Schneider said; it’s what’s used in Metuchen too. “It’s stronger than wool. Very rarely do we have a strand break. And we don’t have to worry about shatnez,” the biblically prohibited mixture of wool and linen. “Some people want to take grandma’s dishtowel and cut and applique it to the tallit,” she

said. “If it were wool, we couldn’t do it.” It would be too risky. With cotton, there’s no problem.

“We dress the loom in a natural off-white color, and then people can use whatever colors they want,” she continued. “We supply all the materials; we stock tzitzit and techelet.” (That’s the tassels, including the blue-dyed ones, that hang from a tallit’s corners.) “We want to make this a very positive experience. We don’t do the finishing and the machine embroidery ourselves, but we have people who do it.”

Lara Werwa is Hadassah’s managing director for the tristate metropolitan New York region. Six years ago, she, her husband, Todd, a television producer, and their two children, Griffin, now a 19-year-old sophomore at Brandeis, and Alana, an almost-15-year-old Livingston High school freshman, moved to Livingston from Florida. The family belongs to Congregation Beth El in South Orange, where Ms. Werwa is active in the sisterhood. She’s known Cory Schneider for years through her volunteer work for Women’s League.

Years ago, when they still were in Florida, Ms. Werwa heard Ms. Schneider talk about how she’s woven her sons’ tallitot as they prepared to become bnai mitzvah. “But when we moved up here, it already was too late for me to make one for my son,” Ms. Werwa said. “And he already had an amazing tallit. But it was getting to be time for my daughter’s bat mitzvah, and Cory said, ‘Well, you’re weaving.’”

“And I thought about how she was able to do it with her children and grandchildren, and how she feels about wearing one that she wove with her mother, and the whole experience sounded so rich and warm and loving that I thought that I wanted to do that too.

“You can go and buy your child a tallit. That is a mitzvah. But you can be part of making one, and that is a bigger mitzvah.



Alana Werwa of Livingston works at the loom in Metuchen.

“So we were going to do it together. A teenage daughter and her mom — depending on the day, that can be a fabulous moment, and you can develop fabulous memories, or not, depending on how the day goes. I was hoping for a marvelous opportunity.” Mother and daughter picked colors and the piece of scripture that would be embroidered on the atarah. “She felt that a rainbow was a positive and inclusive thing to have on the tallit, and she wanted a dove in the corner.

“And then covid shut it down.”

When the world started slowly reopening, in masked, socially distanced fits and starts, the Werwa family rescheduled Alana’s bat mitzvah, and they moved it from New Jersey to the beach in Maui. Alana was able to get her hand-woven tallit after all. The color changed; “because the bat mitzvah was going to be on the beach, Alana chose aqua, so that the rest of her life she’d be able to hearken back to the memory of having her bat mitzvah on the beach at Maui.”

Because of the way the revised schedule was compressed, Alana wasn’t able to weave with her mother. Instead, Ms. Schneider joined Ms. Werwa. “So we did something

fantastic for my daughter, and getting to weave it with a dear friend who has been an important part of our lives was really incredible,” Ms. Werwa said.

She found the act of weaving less intimidating than she thought it might be. “I thought it would be much harder, but Cory is an amazing teacher,” she said. “She has patience. She lets you know the places where it has to be really particular.

“And once it was done, we went to Cory’s house and tied the tzitzit, so she got to learn how to do it. And when we came home we had two undone, and she taught her father and her brother how to tie them.” So each of the four tzitzit of Alana’s new tallit, one on each of its corners, was tied by one of the four nuclear family members.

“Alana calls Cory bubbe,” grandma, Ms. Werwa concluded. “She said, ‘Bubbe Cory was right. Every time I wear my tallit, it’s like you’re giving me a hug. It feels like I’m wrapping myself in love.’”



A child and a parent work the loom in the Loom Room.

Elyse Geshwind Haber of Fort Lee wove a tallit. “I created an heirloom,” she said. “I put a name in each corner of the tallit, front and back. I put both my daughters’ names, Hebrew and English, and my mother’s, my sister’s, and my two grandmothers. I

always feel wrapped in them, and it is a tribute to the most important women in my life.”

She did not create the tallit for a special occasion; the occasion was the creation of the tallit. “It was a big deal to weave it,” she said.

To be practical, “you need a lot of time to do it.” She’s a consumer researcher, but she had vacation time coming. “It takes about 24 hours of continuous weaving. It’s hard when you work full time. I had to find the time to do it — and I did.”

It was particularly important for her because she’s not lived in Fort Lee for very long. She used to live in Metuchen, and moved north when she married Steven Haber, the past president of Kol Haneshama in Englewood. So she’s known about the Loom Room for some time.

“Weaving a tallit is such a powerful experience,” she said. “It really brought me as a woman closer to Judaism. I am very self-taught Jewishly. I didn’t grow up in a religious home.” Who she is now is “the culmination of learning, doing, and the community that I developed over time at Neve Shalom. Weaving the tallit was a very spiritual thing for me.

“You get into a Zen mode,” Ms. Haber continued. “It’s very relaxing. You can sit there for hours weaving,” moving the shuttle across and back, paying attention to it and to the mood it evokes in you. You do not have to focus to the exclusion of everything else, but paradoxically you also do have to pay attention. “It’s very repetitive, and you also have to count everything,” she said.

“And the pattern was important to me. It’s my favorite colors, purple and pink.

“It’s so exciting to see it develop. You get about halfway through, and you can see it. It’s a powerful and really beautiful experience.”

Even though people often weave alone — and even though the experience of weaving alone was a profound one — Ms. Haber feels that you must do it as part of a community. “You need people who know how to do it,” she said. “If you have a loom emergency, you have to know who to call.”

She’s also made a matzah cover, and she’d love to make a tallit for her husband.

“I would love to do it again,” Ms. Haber said.