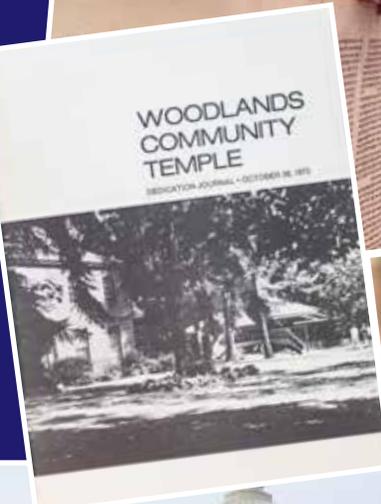
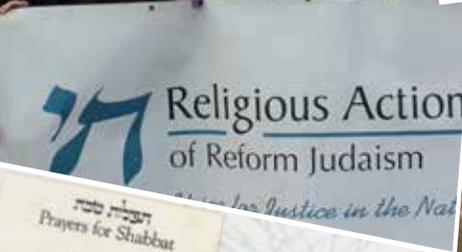


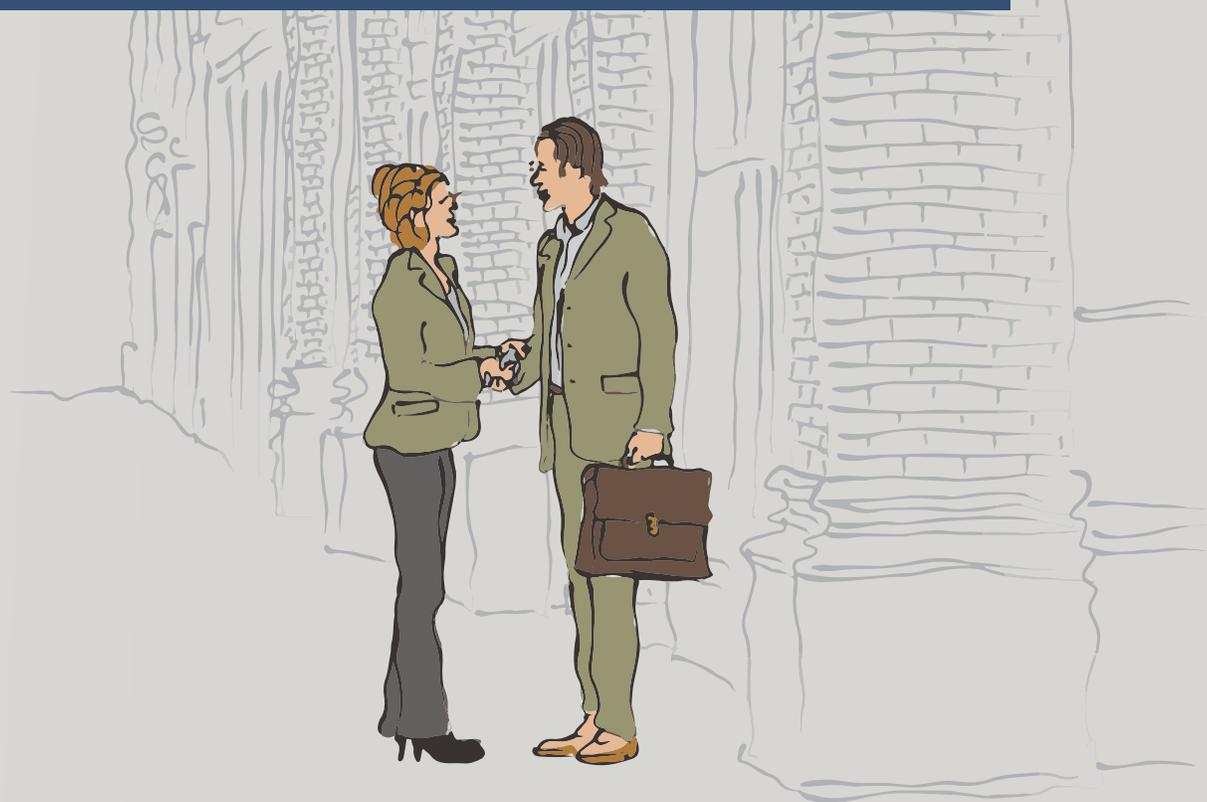
מקום Makom



WCT Evolves But Its Values Remain the Same



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COVER ART: Adam Lein, RoherSprague Partners

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p. 9: Ryan Kaplan, Small Moments Studios

B'reisheet



Building on Our Blessing

By Rabbi Mara Young

B'reisheet.

The very first word of the Torah. We often translate this as "in the beginning," but as with anything in Torah, there's more to the story. A better translation is probably: "as God began to create." You may think there's little difference, and semantically you may be right, but theologically, there's much to mine.

The Genesis account is not necessarily the start of the universe's story. The rabbis suggest that God created many universes before ours. The beginning in the Torah is just our beginning—the next chapter in the ever-expanding story of reality.

After all, you have to wonder: Why does the Torah start with a *bet* (the second letter of the *aleph-bet*) and not an *aleph* (the first letter)? Perhaps it indicates that we're picking up somewhere in the middle. Perhaps, the rabbis posit, it is because God wanted the Torah to begin with the letter of blessings (*brachah*—"blessings"—starts with a *bet*) and not curses (*arur*—"curse"—starts with an *aleph*).

As we begin a new temple year, I'm mindful of the ways we are not completely "in the beginning." I'm deeply appreciative of Woodlands' 56 years of existence and relish the new year as an opportunity to build upon the blessings of the past. I appreciate our tradition's wisdom that there is always something new to discover, a new universe to expand. In this issue of *Makom*, you'll hear about folks for whom this is a true beginning: our new cantor, Jenna Mark, and our first-ever executive director, Haya Luftig. You'll learn a little Woodlands history while also dreaming about the ways we can see and appreciate the cultural diversity of the Jewish community.

I'm looking forward to creating so much with you in 5783.





Above: Rabbi Joan Glazer Farber instructs her 4th-grade Keshet class on reading from the Torah. Below: Rabbi Mara visits Crane Lake campers.

WHAT ARE OUR KIDS DOING? Summer Camps and More

Wondering what our Woodlands kids did during the summer? Are your kids missing their days at summer camp? Come join us for Camp Shabbat on Sept. 23 at 7 pm to hear about the amazing experiences our Woodlands campers had while they were away. From cheering at *Maccabiah* (color war) to swimming in the lake to dancing at Shabbat song sessions to making lifelong friends, our campers come home with lots of stories to tell. We'll also sprinkle in some fun camp prayer melodies to bring in Shabbat with a little summer camp magic. Kids: Make sure to wear your favorite camp swag!

Do you want to hear more about URJ camps? URJ Camp Staff will have a parent info table and will lead Hanukkah activities for our students on Dec. 18 from 9-11 am.

Other activities parents and kids won't want to miss:

Parent Welcome: Opening day of classes for grades K-6 on Sept. 10 and 11. Join our Community Time at 9 am, then stay for coffee and get to know other parents in your child's grade.

WCT on Ice: We've rented out Westchester Skating Academy on Feb. 12 from 4-5:30pm. This beloved tradition is open to the entire Woodlands community and beyond, so invite your friends!
— Avital Abraham and Abby Reiken



The Breakfast Run: Back on Track

The Breakfast Run is returning to "normal" after Covid disrupted some of its services during the past year. WCT volunteers can once again provide hot food, baked goods, and coffee to those in need, in addition to cold food, clothing essentials, and toiletries. One innovation: a new Amazon wishlist allows people to buy exactly what is needed, or they can prepare food bags, bagels, or other goods.

Four times a year, adults and families with children of middle-school age and older meet at Woodlands at 6:45 am and travel to New York City with breakfast and other goods, returning by 10 am. A typical run helps 70 people. The first two runs this fall will be held **Sun., Sept. 18**, and **Sun., Oct. 16**. For more info, contact co-chairs Mike Silverman and Julie Fischer at midnightrun-breakfasts@wct.org or see wct.org/socialaction.



Cantor Jenna's Installation Weekend

Mark your calendars for the first weekend in November when Cantor Jenna is officially installed as our cantor. Here are the dates you need to know:

Friday, Nov. 4

8 pm: Installation service with special guests Cantor Lucy Fishbein and Cantor Ellen Dreskin

Saturday, Nov. 5

10:30 am: Shabbat morning service—An introspective and laid-back morning service of extra spiritual Shabbat peace.

7:30 pm: Concert with Cantor Jenna and friends—Cantor Jenna will be joined by cantorial classmates, cantors, friends, and mentors for an evening of Jewish and secular music.



High Holy Days 2022/5783



Schedule of Services

Rosh Hashanah

Erev Rosh Hashanah

Sun., Sept. 25 8-9:30 pm

Rosh Hashanah Day 1

Mon., Sept. 26

Morning Service 10 am-12 pm

Family Service
(all ages) 2-3:15 pm

Tashlich 4-5 pm

Rosh Hashanah Day 2

Tue., Sept. 27

Morning Service 10 am-12 pm

Yom Kippur

Kol Nidre

Tues., Oct. 4 8-10 pm

Teen Experience
(grades 7-12) 8 pm

Yom Kippur Day

Wed., Oct. 5

Morning Service 10 am-12:30 pm

Learning
with Rabbi Joan Glazer Farber
1-2:30 pm

Family Service
(all ages) 1:15-2:30 pm

Yizkor 3-4 pm

Afternoon 4:30-5:30 pm

Neilah 5:30-6:30 pm

Sukkot

Sun., Oct. 9

Sukkah Decorating
& Activities 5 pm

Kabbalat
Sukkot Service 6:15 pm

BBQ 7 pm

Simchat Torah

Simchat Torah Evening

Sun., Oct. 16 7-9 pm

Yizkor Service

Mon., Oct. 17 9-10 am

Please see wct.org for further details.



Shavuot is Back: Following two years of observing Shavuot remotely because of the pandemic, we had our first in-person learning sessions as we marked the holiday on June 4. Above, Rabbi Lisa Izes leads a breakout group on what it means to be Jewish and resilient in 2022/5782.

Making Woodlands Work

Now entering its second year, *Supporting Woodlands, Together (SWT)*—our new dues structure that allows members to donate the amount they are comfortable with—looks to be a resounding success. In its first year,

Woodlands' revenues have increased more than the average of other synagogues that have switched to a voluntary dues structure. In large part, our success is attributable to an influx of new member families: Fifty new families have joined since we switched to the new structure. SWT has allowed us to bring the Woodlands Way to many more families than in previous years; these new members have begun joining our events, temple services, and Kesher programs.

Pledging of course is critical for all members, new and old. As of mid-summer, member pledges accounted for 78% of WCT's \$988,000 budget. (If you haven't yet pledged, please log into your WCT portal account to pledge today.) While our community is the connective tissue that holds us together, finances are the lifeblood that keeps Woodlands alive and healthy. — *Mike Scafidi*

Introducing Rivertown Jewish Single Parents

Over a year ago, congregants approached Rabbi Mara about starting a Jewish single parents group, not just for WCT members, but one that would connect with other local synagogues and the Shames JCC on the Hudson. Thanks to a grant from the UJA Federation, the Rivertown Jewish Single Parents Network was born. The group's goal is to support Jewish single, divorced, and widowed parents in our community through social, educational, and family events. This is a population often forgotten, and Woodlands wants to help people during this part of their life. The network had its inaugural event — a very successful "Trivia Night" and is planning more events for the fall, including a season kickoff bowling get-together. Though the group is sponsored by WCT, it is open to all single parents. For more information, please email rivertownjewishsingleparents@gmail.com or find it on Facebook.

WCT PRESIDENT JENNA LEBOWICH

Moving into the Future While Honoring the Past

Rosh Hashana heralds our Jewish New Year, but our “temple year” began on July 1 with the start of our fiscal year and the handoff of our temple leadership. I am honored to be Woodlands’ new president and I am so excited to work with our incredible team of professionals and lay leaders.



The capacity to grow and change with creativity and enthusiasm is a hallmark of Woodlands, one that has been tested a great deal in the past few years. We have a history of taking on challenges and trying new things, supported by a tradition of community volunteerism and strong lay-professional partnerships, anchored in our commitment to social justice and the tenets of Reform Judaism. Woodlands’ core values support our decision making and inform who we are as a community.

At the new board’s first meeting in July, I asked the trustees to join me in an effort to bridge the past and the present—helping us to move ahead into the future while honoring the past. We’ll be spending a lot of time on our temple operations and working with Executive Director Haya Luftig to create systems that help us run more smoothly, supporting a more effective and meaningful volunteer experience. We’re also going to be working on evaluating and reimagining our member engagement efforts, looking at and strengthening how members enter and interact in the community, and the systems that support our membership experience. And we are going to delve into our founding principles as we make a concerted effort to share our temple’s history with the next generation of members. We will also review our constitution, policies, and procedures to bring them up to date with current practices.

Our leadership team is excited for the challenges ahead and welcome you to join us on this exciting journey into Woodlands’ future. Here’s to a happy and healthy year ahead for all of us and for our community.

We’ll see you in the tent!

DIRECTOR OF CONGREGATIONAL
LEARNING ABBY REIKEN

Building Connections in Our Community

When families feel connected to others, they are more likely to participate in their Jewish community and in personally meaningful Jewish experiences. At Woodlands, we are always seeking new ways to build stronger connections within our synagogue and the broader Jewish community.



We are thrilled to share that Woodlands was selected to receive a \$10,000 PJ Library New York Engagement Grant. Woodlands is one of seven organizations from throughout New York City, Westchester, and Long Island, that received the grant.

Our WCT team of professional and lay leaders will learn about relational-based engagement with Gather Inc. and receive mentoring on developing plans to deepen and broaden the relationships in our community. The grant work is focused on engaging families with children aged 0 to 2 years, and we will also apply what we learn to all ages in our community.

We will create ways to connect families between our programs, both at WCT and offsite at homes and parks. Through individualized outreach, we hope that parents will feel valued and welcomed, and that they find ways to connect that meet their needs and inspire continued engagement.

To learn more about our education programs and see upcoming events on our temple and Keshet calendars, go to wct.org.

Any questions? Contact me at abby@wct.org.

Wishing you a *Shanah Tovah!*



RABBI JOAN GLAZER FARBER
AND ROBERTA ROOS

Tikkun Olam at Family Time

When we ask congregants to join us in *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), we know we are competing with family time. You want to help food-insecure folks, but where to find the time when trying to balance this desire with the needs of your family?

That's why the Social Action Committee seeks to provide some valuable activities that families can do together.

Civic Engagement and Advocacy.

Leading up to the November election, we are sending postcards to folks traditionally targeted for voter suppression, informing them how to secure their access to the polls. This is a perfect kitchen-table activity, with adults and teens

writing cards and younger kids affixing the stamps—while discussing what the right to vote means. You are also giving your kids a civics lesson—or maybe, they are teaching you.

Hunger/Homelessness. Parents and teens can join a breakfast run into NYC on a Sunday morning, bringing food and clothing to homeless folks—and the younger kids can make food bags for distribution. Playdates can center around baking cookies for a teen shelter. Or do it as an intergenerational activity, with grandparents passing down their recipes. A trip to the supermarket is a chance to discuss nutrition with your kids as you select items for donation to our food cart, which are then sent to local food pantries or used in our High Holy Day food collection.

Helping the Elderly. Our December luncheon for seniors from Project Ezra is an opportunity for your whole family to host a table, providing food and conversation. (Our guests love talking with our kids.)

All these can be done by adults individually, but for those looking to combine good deeds with family time, it's a real solution. Start with one activity. We guarantee you will be back for more.

Rabbi Joan Glazer Farber and Roberta Roos are co-chairs of WCT's Social Action Committee. More information can be found at wct.org/socialaction or by emailing them at SocialAction@wct.org.



Roberta Roos



Joan Glazer Farber

COREY FRIEDLANDER
AND JEANNE BODIN

Learning About the Real Israel

Did you know . . .

In July, Israel hosted the largest Maccabiah Games ever, with 10,000 athletes participating from all over the world.

Bar-Ilan University just launched the Center for Energy and Sustainability, which will focus on the research and development of renewable energy.

While stories about the West Bank settlements and conflicts in Gaza seem to dominate U.S. headlines about Israel, life in Israel is diverse, richly textured, and so much more than a single issue. In the coming year, Woodlands' Israel Committee hopes to broaden our understanding of the real Israel and what it means to us.

We will encourage and facilitate a connection to the people, the land, and the state of Israel that is authentic and meaningful to each of us as individuals and to all of us as a community. We will create and sponsor youth and adult programs, speakers, and activities that recognize the many wonderful ways there are to connect to Israeli life and culture.

Topics covered may include Israeli film and television programs; food (it's more than just falafel); travel, both real and virtual; social justice; literature; sports; theater; dance; history (ancient and modern); archeology; art; ecology; education; politics, and high tech, e.g., think cell phone and Waze among many other inventions.

Keep an eye out for our new newsletter that will keep WCT members posted on the latest developments. To offer your ideas, to volunteer for a project, to join the committee, or to get more information, email us at: Israel@wct.org.

Corey Friedlander and Jeanne Bodin co-chair the ARZA/Israel Committee."



Corey Friedlander



Jeanne Bodin

Woodlands' First Executive Director: Why Now?

WCT Evolves But its Values Remain the Same

The June 1 appointment of Haya Luftig as Woodlands' first executive director represents a major change in how the synagogue is run, offering new efficiencies as the WCT community faces shifting demographics, demanding workplaces, and family responsibilities. Stu Berlowitz and

Marge Glusker, co-chairs of the task force charged with making the case for an ED, Immediate Past President Andy Farber, and current President Jenna Lebowich discuss with Makom Editor Joel Chernoff what led to this momentous decision and what it means for Woodlands.

Why Hire an ED?

Joel Chernoff: *Woodlands historically has relied on its volunteers to fulfill many responsibilities. What has changed? Why do we now need an executive director?*

Stu Berlowitz: The lack of an ED has restricted our ability to attract talent to lay leadership positions. It's an enormous burden to be VP of facilities or VP of finance or financial secretary without an executive director. A lot of well-qualified people have shied away from senior lay leadership positions because they just don't have the time, especially those with full-time jobs.

Andy Farber: We had not one, not two, but three or four presidents warning that new presidents were going to be impossible to find because being a president was really being a full-time executive director. The reason we didn't need an ED 20, 30 years ago was that life wasn't as complicated then. You could deal with HR stuff based on common sense, but now we have to worry about legal and liability issues. Similarly, building systems and maintenance are far more complex than before.

The other thing that had changed was the recognition that there was no institutional memory. There was no one person you could go to for information, it took a long time to find



"We had to make sure that the essence of what makes Woodlands Woodlands was not taken away from."

— Stu Berlowitz

that person, and, in the meantime, there were opportunities lost. We needed somebody or some process to codify everything and put everything one place.

Stu: In addition, we've always seen it as something that would enhance the involvement of lay leaders. For example, the ED wouldn't all of a sudden take over the ShaBBQ, which is a great lay-led event. The ED just might have

a more active role in making sure that tables and chairs are set up.

Also, we haven't had any direct supervision over the office or the caretaker for years and years and years, which means several things fell through the cracks from a facilities standpoint. And the Executive Committee has been much more involved with day-to-day operations than in setting strategy and focusing on longer-term goals. And we had to relieve the administrative burden for the clergy as much as possible, so that they can focus on their jobs as clergy and not coordinating with the caretaker for various setups.

Marge Glusker: In addition, we were coming to a point where membership was becoming a real issue. The whole catchment area has changed: It used to be Edgemont and Ardsley, now it's the whole county. We needed someone in an ED position so that we could focus more on building a strong membership. It became even clearer as I was on *Supporting Woodlands, Together* (WCT's new dues system) that we were going to need an executive director's help to make that run smoothly.

The goal was to bring down barriers to membership because we don't have a temple unless we have an active committed membership.

Ensuring that Woodlands Remains Woodlands

Joel: *How did you ensure that Woodlands' values weren't affected by the creation of the position?*

Stu: We had to make sure that the essence of what makes Woodlands Woodlands was not taken away from, and that the person who was going to fill this position was going to be somebody who would support that goal. That was more important than whether the candidate knew the latest version of the synagogue management software. We felt that those things could be learned but that finding the person who understood Woodlands' culture was first and foremost.

Marge: When I joined Woodlands in 1979, the Shabbat oneg was prepared by each family. It was a rotating responsibility. Every family or every member unit had it two or three times a year, when you literally baked the cookies. As women went back into the workforce, that wasn't going to quite work. How do you keep these collective communal values and spirits where everybody has a stake in the success of our spiritual home? As times change, how do you do that? I think the hiring of the executive director will be so pivotal to us in keeping those values because it will allow the volunteers to do more of what they signed up for and what they want to do, and it will allow new members to join in an organized, inclusive, and welcoming way. That is one of the hallmarks of Woodlands.

Joel: *Woodlands has experienced major changes in the past few years, not just with the creation of the ED position, but with the changeover in the clergy and the professional staff. How do we cope with all of these changes?*

Marge: *L'dor v'dor*, from generation to generation. You have to think about what is going to ensure the continuity for those of us whose lives have been



“There's a lot of change taking place but how are we going to hand over “the place where my heart holds dear” to the next generation.”

– Marge Glusker

entwined with the temple. We wanted Woodlands to be here for the next generation of Jewish leaders, for the next generation of congregants. There's a lot of change taking place but how are we going to hand over “the place where my heart holds dear” to the next generation?

Joel: *How did the Executive Committee and the Board view the recommendations?*

Andy: This was something that had been percolating around leadership and even at the board level for many years but that doesn't mean that everybody on the Board knew about it. When the first task force came to the Board over three years ago, they recommended hiring an executive director, and proposed a detailed job description that covered all of the operations, including administration, facilities maintenance, contracting, and human resources. The report was accepted and reviewed but right at that time, we suddenly were presented with much higher priorities.

Cantor Jonathan was retiring, we were implementing a radical new dues structure, and then Covid struck. So the executive director position was pushed back to the summer of 2021. We asked Marge and Stu to blow the cobwebs off of this proposal and obtain Board approval for putting together a search committee.

When it came back to Exec and the Board, there was really very, very little opposition to it. We all recognized that the status quo could not continue. And it all came down to finding an executive director to handle all the operational stuff. The policy would always remain with the volunteers. I learned to view a not-for-profit organization as a bicycle: The volunteers, led by the president and the board, are the front wheel determining the direction, and the rear wheel is the executive director and the staff, driving the organization in that direction. They're the ones who provide the power to make it go.

The Opportunities

Jenna Lebowich: I think that this is an opportunity for us to really look at membership engagement and volunteerism. What was considered the ne plus ultra of volunteerism 40 years ago just wasn't going to happen anymore. When we wanted to build a new building, people rolled up their sleeves and managed all the small parts of this project. We don't have that same availability in our community. I'm not saying that we don't have the talent. I'm sure that we do. But it's exhausting for people to take on a major temple project plus manage their full-time jobs, take care of their families, and everything else in their lives.

And that's not sustainable. Even though it may be an important part of our culture, if we kept going that way, we weren't going to be able to survive. We were already finding five years ago that it was harder and harder to populate committees and to get people to agree to chair programs and events.



"I learned to view a not-for-profit organization as a bicycle: The volunteers, led by the president and the board, are the front wheel determining the direction, and the rear wheel is the executive director and the staff, driving the organization in that direction."

— Andy Farber

effectively, and that our office staff and our administrative team is being deployed effectively.

For all congregants, hopefully things are done better in the preparatory stages, so that when you're signing up to attend an event, registering for a program, or you're picking something up from the temple, it will be a better end-user experience because we have somebody there making sure all the parts are thought through and coordinated centrally.

Andy: We spent a year and a half trying to figure out how to get *yahrzeit* letters out of ShulCloud (WCT's synagogue management system). Some people would go and update their member records to put in their *yahrzeits*, and then come back and tell me, "I didn't get a *yahrzeit* letter and I know my grandparents are in because I put them in." The problem was that we weren't using the new system to generate the letters.

In Haya's onboarding, I said, "This is one of the things that needs to be done." When information is wrong, it will be updated directly in the database. And every member will now see the data. It's not that nobody else in the ShulCloud project couldn't have done it, it's just that we've been so overwhelmed, it was just one more thing that kept getting backburnered.

Seeing All the Pieces

Jenna: We know our weak points. We know that three people might be looking at something from different perspectives and not necessarily realize they were overlapping. But Haya is seeing all the pieces. She's able to say to me, "All right, this one's doing this, this one's doing that, and they're not all necessarily working together." For something like *Supporting Woodlands, Together*, that's really important. Traditionally, we have always run our dues management and our collection as a completely volunteer-driven process. By having a central person looking at this full time, that's a way for us to better manage our revenue.

We had 40 new families join last year. [As of late June], we've had 10 new member units make pledges for the coming year. People are clearly interested in Woodlands and want to join our temple. We need to make sure that we are managing their entry into the community as best as possible. The hiring of an executive director is a critical piece to optimizing our overall member experience and will help us bring Woodlands into the future.



"Haya's job is not to do the project for you. Her job is to make sure that we're using our resources wisely and effectively, and that our office staff and our administrative team is being deployed effectively."

— Jenna Lebowich

ENTER STAGE LEFT: Haya Luftig

WCT's First Executive Director is the Ultimate Stage Manager

By Joel Chernoff

Haya Luftig excels at working behind the scenes. Trained as a stage manager, WCT's first executive director is accustomed to helping others shine, while staying out of the limelight.

"As soon as I found out that Haya had trained as a stage manager, that was a huge 'Aha!' moment for me, because a good theatrical stage manager is there to make the show run smoothly so the performers can put on the best possible performance," explained WCT President Jenna Lebowich.

"That spoke reams to me about her, because that's a really hard talent to find," Jenna added. "And it's not just the technical knowledge and the organizational skills. It's also a reflection of the individual's ego, that they can know that they're really good at doing their job, but can let somebody else be the star."

For Woodlands, with its long history of relying heavily on volunteers, those are essential skills. "One of things that is so special about Woodlands is its culture," Haya said. "Changing it would be a disaster. I don't want to take away control from volunteers who do the visioning. The job is about helping them see their vision and get the work done more efficiently."

Haya and the Jewish Community

Haya might have been an Israeli if it were not for some twists of fate. First, her parents, who were not yet married, each returned to New York from Israel to care for their ailing parents, vowing to make *Aliyah* in the future. (Sadly, this has not happened. They met and married and started a family.)

A child of a secular Jewish household, Haya attended the only Zionist day school in New York and later attended

Bronx High School of Science, where her interests turned to archaeology. Israel again entered the picture: She spent her freshman year at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem—a "transformative" experience—but returned to the U.S. because of a glitch in her paperwork. Subsequently, at Lehman College, she paired her interests in archaeology and anthropology with technical theater. All involved working closely with others and finding creative ways of getting things done, she explained.

After college, Haya joined the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA), where she stayed for the next 23 years. The non-profit organization works on education and advocacy on public issues reflecting Jewish values, supporting community councils around the country. Starting with fundraising, she later ran their computer systems and served as director of administration and programs. "It was the equivalent of being a stage manager," ensuring that the office ran smoothly, Haya explained.

She last served as vice president at JCPA, overseeing dues and allocations processes, assisting in reviewing contracts and grants, training board members, and leading its program for emerging Jewish leaders, among other things.

Haya had no plans to leave the non-profit but then Woodlands—whose board she had joined in 2020—launched a search for an executive director. The Woodlands job both



"One of things that is so special about Woodlands is its culture. Changing it would be a disaster."

— Haya Luftig

combined what she was already doing on a daily basis with the opportunity to effect change at the community level instead of observing those influences from a distance.

Explained former WCT President Andy Farber: "We probably got a dozen resumes. There were a few people who could do the job and one outstanding candidate, and that was Haya. She is somebody who really did know how to talk to a contractor for a buildout and could talk to a contractor about fixing the computer server, could talk to engineers about the HVAC, and who understood postage rules. She knows all of that stuff and has a go-forward attitude."

"Her job is to make the volunteers and thus the organization look good, which is exactly what you want from an ED," Andy said. "We got a gem."

Becoming Cantor Jenna

How Jenna Mark Found her True Vocation

W

By Joel Chernoff

hen Jenna Mark decided to attend Nebraska Wesleyan University for its theater program, her friends and family back home in Texas questioned her choice. After all, it was a Methodist university and she had been engulfed in Houston's Jewish community. But going to college in Nebraska was a key step in her becoming Woodlands' new cantor.

Nebraska Wesleyan—with its one other Jewish student and sole Jewish faculty member—helped her realize how much she missed the Jewish community. While one close friend related that her pastor had said that Jews were “mythical creatures,” her friends were open-minded and curious. “We had some really great theological conversations,” she said.

So when she moved to New York City two days after graduation, she knew that she had to connect with the Jewish community, as well as pursue a career in musical theater.

“I ended up auditioning for *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* at Congregation Rodeph Sholom on the Upper West Side,” Cantor Jenna explained.

At Rodeph Sholom, Rabbi Leora Kaye—a former Woodlands rabbinic intern and now director of rabbinic career services at the Central Conference of American Rabbis—took the aspiring actress under her wing, steering her toward life as a Jewish professional.

Unclear about her future as an actress, she then experienced an epiphany. “I was sitting at a service at Rodeph Shalom. The cantor taught a *niggun* (a wordless melody), and everyone in the congregation started singing. I didn't realize how much I needed that and how healing something like that could be,” she explained. “That's when I started thinking intensely about the



“Through music, we can lift each other up, support each other in times of grief and sorrow, celebrate each other in our joys and simchas, and be present for one another through the day to day.”

—Cantor Jenna Mark

cantorate and how it made so much sense for my life.”

Jenna's Next Mentor: Ellen Dreskin

But before attending the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, she served as an educator at Central Synagogue in Manhattan, where she encountered Cantor Ellen Dreskin, a nationally renowned cantor and teacher—and former interim cantor at WCT and wife of WCT Rabbi Emeritus Billy Dreskin.

The director of Central Synagogue's religious school said they wanted to start a family Shabbat program and assigned Jenna to develop it with Ellen Dreskin. Both were from Houston and had strong ties to Camp Kutz.

“She came to Central the first time she and I met. I had no idea of how to act or what to do or say.” Cantor

Jenna explained. They started the family service, which incorporated parallel adult and kid learning after prayers. “That kickstarted my love of family education.”

Cantor Ellen became Jenna's next mentor. “I learned so much from Ellen in just a year of watching her teach, pray, and lead prayer, as well as interact with people,” she said.

The Inevitability of Woodlands

Along the way, she met and fell in love with her now-fiancé Rabbi Zach Plesent, who served three years as WCT's rabbinic intern under Rabbi Billy's tutelage. Given all her ties to Woodlands, it seems that she was destined to work here.

She explains that she was drawn by the community's strong internal connections, its commitment to social action, and the high quality of its clergy and lay leadership. “I had been around Woodlands for a few years prior to applying for the cantorial position, and it always struck me how incredibly caring and close-knit the community was,” she said.

What's more, “the opportunity to work with Rabbi Mara was also really exciting. Rabbi Mara is a forward-thinking, passionate, and driven rabbi who is at the forefront of Jewish innovation and leadership. Her excitement for partnership and creation was electric, and she and I clicked right from the start.”

Now, Cantor Jenna plans to use music to bring the community even closer together.

“Through music, we can lift each other up, support each other in times of grief and sorrow, celebrate each other in our joys and *simchas*, and be present for one another through the day to day. We can continue to build upon the singing community that already exists and bring in folks who find strength, healing, joy, a sense of self, community in music.”



The Emeriti:

What Are Woodlands' Former Leaders Doing Now?

By Mike Winkleman

By some measures, **Rabbi Billy Dreskin's** Woodlands legacy is as much musical as it is rabbinic. Given his degree in music composition from Brandeis and his pre-rabbinate Off-Broadway musical, it was only natural that his 26-year tenure as Woodlands' rabbi would be punctuated by such musical accomplishments as the ensemble-led *A Joyful Noise*, the experimental *Billy's Months of Music*, and rollicking Purim spiels parodying Broadway shows.

And it should surprise no one that he's spent the year since his retirement polishing up the 40-some pieces he wrote during his 40-year rabbinic career, arranging them, recording them, and working to find homes for many of them on pulpits throughout the Reform Jewish world. At the same time, he's taking lessons in composition, arranging, and voice, "running to catch up" with developments in the field since he turned his focus to rabbinic matters—a focus that helped build a temple that remains, as he puts it, a "truly welcoming community," with a style of worship "that is comfortable, informal, upbeat, energetic, and moving."

After a year of self-imposed exile post retirement, Billy will be back at Woodlands more frequently—at services, teaching, and doing the occasional wedding. But don't expect him to be the last one out the door each time he's here. His time now, he says, belongs to his family and the Jonah Maccabee Foundation.

Cantor Jonathan Gordon says he retired two years ago because "there were things I wanted to do, and I wanted to make sure I did them while I had the ability and the time." And he's held true to that promise. To immerse himself in an art form that's intrigued him since college, he enrolled in a poetry workshop with several accomplished poets and spends hours every day thinking about, reading, and writing poetry. "It's

how I see and listen to the world," he says. And he's reinforced that vision by taking up photography, a skill he last nurtured in his late teens, using his photographs to illustrate stories he wrote for a Southern civil rights newspaper. Similarly, he will use his new photos to illustrate his poems.

He's also had time to pursue a project that has fascinated him since seminary, when a professor told him about a Yiddish opera by Moshe Milner that was performed only once before Stalin shut it down. Jonathan's goal is to acquire the score, make it legible, and have it produced.

Since his retirement, Jonathan has maintained his involvement in *Mussar* (a spiritual approach to Judaism) and the book club *S'forim* Forum. Over the next year, look for him to run a course on the music of the civil rights movement, tying together so many threads of his musically activist life.

Even casual attendees at Woodlands' remote Shabbat services are accustomed to seeing the back of **Harriet Levine's** head as she settles into a front-row seat. But Woodlanders have been seeing Harriet's face not only since she took over the religious school in 1992 but also throughout the years since her retirement in 2013. She's still teaching adult ed, is active in the Israel Committee and the Inclusion Task Force, and has recently rejoined the Woodlands Singers. But her commitment to Jewish life and learning extends beyond Woodlands: Every week she teaches Jewish studies at one of three assisted living facilities in Westchester and joins the residents at two of those facilities to lead Shabbat and High Holy Day services. Other days are filled with her work as VP/membership for the Westchester Chamber Music Society—and by the fulfillment of a long-held dream, learning cello with a teacher familiar to Woodlanders—*Kol Nidre* cellist Peter Seidenberg.

Mike Winkleman is the former editor of Makom.

Above: Harriet Levine, Jonathan Gordon and Billy Dreskin vamp it up in an 'Annie' Purim spiel.

WOODLANDS' FOUNDING

The Place that Our Hearts Hold Dear

By Rabbi Emeritus Billy Dreskin



My name is Billy Dreskin. I've been around Woodlands since 1985 when I came on board as rabbinic intern (a family affair, my wife Ellen was WCT's cantorial intern at the same time). We've heard many of the stories about how

Woodlands began. You are invited to read these stories in Makom.

The flyers posted around Westchester read, "This year maybe you won't have to go to your in-laws for the High Holidays." And this was how it all began. In August 1966, interested folks attended a meeting at the Chase Manhattan Bank in Hartsdale to discuss founding a new synagogue.

By meeting's end, it was decided. For fifty bucks you could be part of Westchester's newest house of worship. And by the time we held our very first service on Friday, Sept. 9, 1966, at Calvin United Presbyterian Church in Hartsdale (now Christ Alive Ministries), the temple's first bulletin listed 60 founding families. By October, a hundred children were attending religious school. We were a real, *bona fide* temple!

By December, membership had

reached 130 families, and the temple had a rabbi, a cantorial soloist, and an organist (believe it or not). The decision had been made to practice Reform Judaism "with much enrichment on the Conservative side." And for the High Holy Days, it was decided "not to interfere with the Rabbi's choice of sermon." Thus, a new chapter in Jewish history began, and it was called Woodlands Community Temple.

From the beginning of our history, we were known as "the crunchy granola temple," a different kind of synagogue and we were proud of that.

By that first December, discussions began about finding a building in which we could grow our community. There was great interest in the old Warburg Mansion (now Woodlands High School), but it wasn't meant to be. So in 1968 they purchased the home of Elizabeth Ann Goertz at 50 Worthington Road (also known as "Pine Acres"). The house served as office space, religious school, and youth lounge.

The New Sanctuary

The founding families wanted to build a 700-seat, High Holy Days-worthy sanctuary that would include wall partitions which could reduce seating to 250 for regular

Shabbat gatherings. When sufficient funding could not be secured, a less elaborate design was proposed, where the sanctuary does double-duty as our social hall. It was mostly economics driving the decisions, but there's something very special about holding religious school, adult learning, social events, and social action events in the space we use to worship and to remind ourselves that all of life is to be lived fully, meaningfully, and with good intention.

The new building was dedicated on Oct. 28, 1973, and served our needs for three decades until size, HVAC, and a perpetually leaking roof persuaded temple leadership that it was time to replace it. (The sanctuary that you currently enjoy was built in 2002-2003. The smaller sanctuary that preceded it was remarkably similar in construct and spirit.)

There were a few truly innovative ideas that were of spiritual importance to the founders. Our sanctuary consists mainly of wood and glass. It's partly why we love this place so much. The design immediately conveys a turn away from the glitziness of other temples, replacing it with a definite preference for informality and comfortability. The many windows remind us how fortunate we are to

live in such a magnificent world, and that what we do inside this building must directly relate to how we live our lives out there. Further, the founders designed a *bimah* (which literally means “high place”) that remained at floor level because they wanted to emphasize the concepts of equality and democracy that would drive the spiritual and communal life of this new synagogue.

Founding member, former temple president, and still current member Jack Safirstein told me that the Ritual Committee wanted minimal separation between the clergy and the congregation. This referred both to the distance from the *bimah* to the front row and how high it rose from the floor. The original sanctuary—now the library—actually allowed the rabbi and his family to sit among the congregants, which soon became a cherished quality of our temple. This is why we have never had a raised *bimah* (except on the High Holy Days when one is necessary for everyone to see).

These enduring design elements—referencing informality, democracy, and our connection with the outside world—reflected our community’s values in 1966 and they continue to reflect those values today. Jack, however, tells a somewhat different story. The truth is, he told me, “Glass and wood were cheap building materials...

A homey, ski lodge feel because that was all we could afford.”

Which begs the question. Are we a synagogue community that was founded upon an uncompromising commitment to (what were then) radically new ideas of member-clergy part-

The many windows remind us how fortunate we are to live in such a magnificent world, and that what we do inside this building must directly relate to how we live our lives out there.

—Rabbi Billy Dreskin

nership, a passion for social justice, and what a half-century later would come to be known as “audacious hospitality”? Or did our progressive, welcoming culture evolve over time, and subsequently find us rewriting our origin stories to reflect this holy, spiritual place we have all come to love? The chicken or the egg, we may never know. But thank God for all the generations of this astonishing, loving community that have built, and continue to build *makom shelibi oheyv*, “the place that our hearts hold dear.”

A Sacred Community

Our sanctuary was always more than its physical structure. What was always most important was what took place within that structure’s glassy walls. In the beginning, cookies for the Oneg were baked by

temple families, religious school classes were taught by temple parents, and even our prayer books were created by temple members. Woodlands was carving out an identity for itself that would be defined by a profound spirit of volunteerism. Everyone helped build the community. This was, and remains, one of the reasons our “crunchy granola temple” is so beloved.

Today, folks are busier than ever. Professionals now make our cookies and teach our kids, but our prayer books are still homemade, as is so much of what we create here.

Volunteering remains the engine that drives the well-being of our temple. It makes belonging to Woodlands more meaningful for each person who asks, “How can I help?”

The Talmud teaches us: *Makom shelibi oheyv* ... the place that my heart holds dear ... *sham ragalai molichot oti* ... there my feet will bring me near.

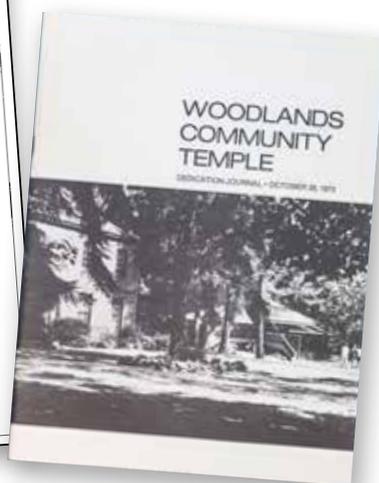
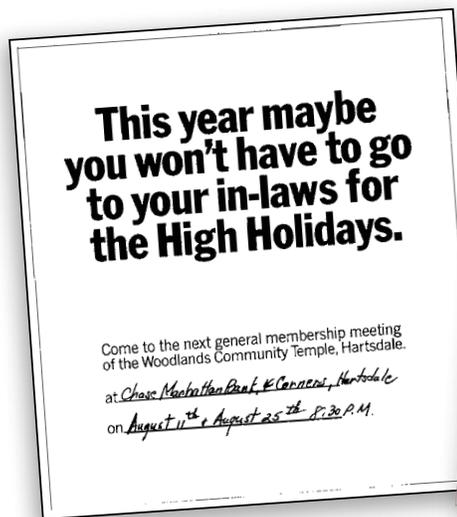
The Hebrew word *makom* has layers of meaning. Yes, it does mean “place” but *HaMakom* (“The Place”) also serves as one of God’s ineffable names. A place, when it is imbued with the best of the human spirit, becomes more than a place. It becomes *kehillah kedoshah*, a sacred community. Such transformation happens when people come together, join hands in honoring the magnificent gift we’ve each been granted of living life in this awe-inspiring universe, and do the work to preserve and enrich that gift for all breathing beings.

Woodlands Community Temple. What began in 1966 as a meeting at Chase Manhattan Bank has become a cherished home of the spirit, true for us today every bit as much as it was for those 60 founding families.

Billy Dreskin served as head rabbi of WCT from 1995 to 2021.

Far Left: Flyer for the first meeting to discuss the founding of a new synagogue.

Near left: Journal from Oct. 28, 1973, for the dedication of Woodlands’ first sanctuary.



Diversity

By Gary Stern

The day of assuming that an American Jew is white, straight, Ashkenazi, and part of a traditional Jewish family is over.

As the non-Orthodox Jewish community in New York and across the nation becomes more and more diverse, a major effort is underway to make congregations and institutions more deeply welcoming and inclusive. The idea is not simply to acknowledge Jews of Color, LGBTQ+ Jews, and Jews from interfaith families, but to make their stories central to Jewish life and Jewish identity going forward.

A Long Overdue Shift

“There is a shift happening in the Jewish community, a long overdue shift,” Rabbi Mara Young says. “To go from saying our synagogues and organizational spaces welcome you regardless of who you are to saying we are going to honor, celebrate, and speak to your multifaceted identity is huge. We’ve got families with different races and cultural backgrounds and Jews who have lots of different identities as part of their lives.”

“It is one thing to identify biases in people who are clearly prejudiced or to see structural racism; it is a completely different thing to see one’s own biases.”

—Woodlands member Alejandro Luciano

Reform Judaism made it a priority long ago to welcome Jews from interfaith families and, somewhat more recently, LGBTQ+ Jews (LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others). A relatively new focus on the need to recognize Jews of Color has jumpstarted a wider conversation about how congregations can be “radically inclusive.” To this end, Woodlands’ LGBTQ+ Task Force recently expanded into an Inclusion Task Force.

One example of this new focus is that Woodlands and other congregations now refer to young people preparing to become a B-mitzvah. It’s a gender-neutral term that includes young men, women, and non-binary individuals.

Jews of Color represent at least 12%-15% of American Jews, according to recent studies. Their number will

only increase, as Ilana Kaufman, executive director of the Jews of Color Initiative, said during a popular Eli Talk (the Jewish equivalent of a TED talk): “My daughter, and your children and grandchildren, are going to be part of a North American Jewish future filled with people of color. Fifty years ago, Jews marched for people of color.” The Jews of Color Initiative is a nonprofit working group to ensure that Jewish institutions reflect this multiracial reality, in part by helping Jews of Color become leaders in their communities.

Alejandro Luciano, whose family joined Woodlands about a decade ago, is Puerto Rican and a Jew by choice. He says that Woodlands was welcoming from the start (“It felt so natural”), and he has occasionally heard congregants say things he considered to be prejudiced. “It’s not specific to Woodlands, but is common in progressive communities,” he says. “It is one thing to identify biases in people who are clearly prejudiced or to see structural racism; it is a completely different thing to see one’s own biases.”

Going forward, Alejandro says, it’s important for Woodlands and other congregations to have open, year-round conversations about race and other issues of identity; to accept that people will make mistakes and misstatements and hopefully will learn from them; and to endorse people identifying those mistakes when made by themselves and others. “The only way to have these conversations is to allow for some vulnerability,” Alejandro says. He credits Rabbi Mara for modeling these approaches. “It’s not always easy to do the right thing, so it’s



Being Radically Inclusive in the Jewish Community

important to see our leaders trying to do the right thing.”

Mona Albala brings a wholly different identity to the Woodlands mix: her mother’s side of the family was Sephardic. She grew up with her mother and maternal grandfather speaking Ladino (also known as Judeo-Spanish). They ate traditional filo-dough-based Sephardic foods, chanted prayers to Sephardic melodies, and even prepared a Seder plate somewhat different from the Ashkenazi plate. “Being Sephardic in an Ashkenazi world, I never quite fit in,” Mona says.

Mona says she would love Woodlands to explore Sephardic traditions to expand inclusiveness. When she told her story to a pre-pandemic class about Medieval Spain led by Educator Emerita Harriet Levine, “the class hung on every word.” And what a story she has: Her ancestors left Spain for the Ottoman Empire during the Inquisition of 1492. Spain recently began granting citizenship to Sephardic Jews with Spanish roots. Mona and her sister became citizens this year. “I got a Spanish passport in April,” she says. “It’s very important to me to reclaim our heritage.”

Welcoming LGBTQ+ Jews

The Jewish community started years earlier on making LGBTQ+ Jews feel more at home. The national group *Keshet* has long worked on nu-

merous fronts for full equality for LGBTQ+ Jews. Reform Judaism as a movement has advocated for gay rights for decades. “We’re there to say loudly and clearly that God made all of us in God’s image and there are no exceptions,” Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, said during a Pride Month event in June. “God made some of us LGBTQ+ and loves us just the way we are.”

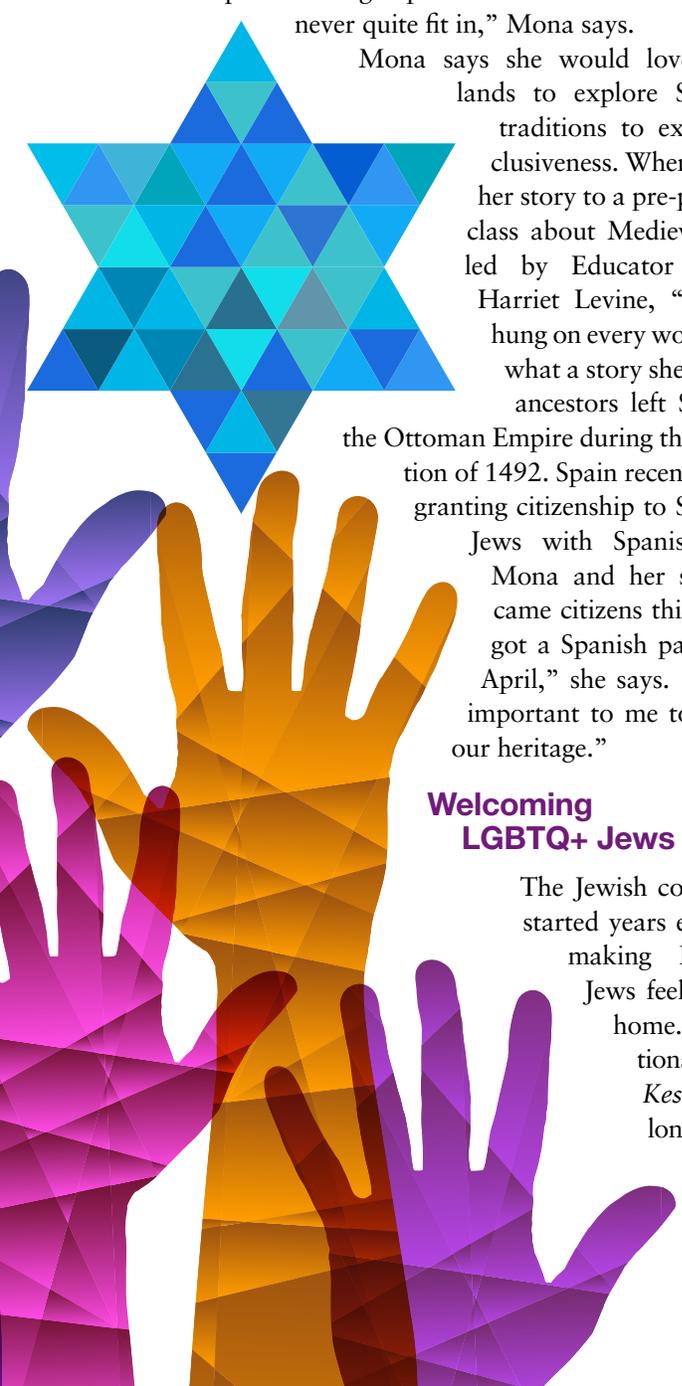
Locally, the Westchester Jewish Council has a committee, Mosaic of Westchester, that holds four annual roundtables about LGBTQ+ inclusion with representatives from around 30 synagogues and organizations. Woodlands held its sixth annual Pride Shabbat service in June. And Corey Friedlander, Woodlands’ *Sh’liakh K’hilah* and a member of the congregation’s Inclusion Task Force, was recently invited by Beth El Synagogue Center, a Conservative congregation in New Rochelle, to speak at their Pride Shabbat service. “Our goal at Woodlands is to weave inclusion into the warp and woof of the fabric of congregational life,” he told them. “We need to take a long-term approach to inclusion work. We recognize that no one event or one sermon can solve everything.”

“Being truly welcoming means making sure everyone is truly heard,” Corey says. “We’ve done great work until now on the LGBTQ+ Task Force. As we expand its mission into the Inclusion Task Force, let’s continue to make sure that we truly hear how our members feel they need to be included and that we creatively and mindfully address those needs. This is the best way to assure that all our members are honored and celebrated in our congregational life.”

When it comes to interfaith families, Reform Judaism has long been welcoming. Since 1983, Reform rabbis have recognized a child of one Jewish parent—mother or father—who is raised exclusively Jewish as a Jew. Woodlands, in particular, has been a congregational home to many interfaith families.

But even in this area, Rabbi Mara says, Woodlands can do more. “We look to honor all members of the family and welcome the non-Jewish partner’s participation. We’re still growing. To me, the most important thing is that couples talk about what they want for the spiritual life of their family. We’ll meet them where they are and see what Jewish life can hold for them.”

Woodlands member Gary Stern has covered religion for The Journal News.





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Cantor Jenna Mark
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Why Woodlands Worked for Us

The Stern-Leóns

Tzedekah through a Multiracial, Multicultural, Interfaith Lens

by Sarah Stern

My husband René initially pushed for the family to join a religious community. He wanted our children to have the experience of community that he had growing up in rural Ecuador. While René is Indigenous (of the Pueblo Cañari), his childhood life was centered on the Catholic Church with Indigenous influences.

We joined Woodlands in September 2019 after receiving many signs that this was our place. When my camp friend Jamie Weiss-Yagoda wrote me that her family had joined, René and I knew it was time to commit. We couldn’t be happier.

René connects to many things in Jewish culture. The value of *tzedekah* reminds René of *mingas* in which neighbors would gather to help one family with a construction project. Similarly, René and his grandfather Antonio would spend some Saturdays plowing the fields of neighbors who didn’t have plow animals. Meanwhile, our Sukkah, which René constructs each fall, reminds him of Ecuadoran harvest huts.

The centrality of food in Jewish celebrations also speaks to him. As a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, René prepares all our family’s favorite Jewish foods from latkes to matzah ball soup and brisket. René has been operating his own catering company, which specializes in kosher-style catering, for 10 years. He is our family expert on how to kosher any kitchen item and what makes an ideal matzah ball.

I have always been drawn to Judaism as a learner and a teacher. I grew up in Bet Torah synagogue in Mount Kisco where I became a Bat Mitzvah and graduated from Hebrew high school. I loved the ethical discussions and the challenge of connecting contemporary issues with Judaism’s sacred texts. My religious school principal, Sheila Adler, first showed me



Top row: Sarah and René. Bottom row: Eli (10 years), Benji (8 years), and Isaac Raymi (18 months).

I could be a teacher when she taught religious school students how to plan lessons.

I have taught world history to Woodlands students at Dobbs Ferry High School, and I am always impressed with their pride in being Jewish and their understanding of their own values and ethical obligations. It’s not that other students don’t have these qualities, but I can see that Woodlands helps children to feel their importance within the community and to apply Jewish ethics in the secular world through meaningful actions. René and I want that for our children.

There have been so many moments when we knew we made the right decision: When I watched our youngest, Isaac Raymi (18 months), dance at the Nefesh Mountain concert; when we helped Eli (10 years) and Benji (8 years) create their elaborate pile of blankets and stuffed animals



René and his father-in-law, Richard Stern, put together the lulavs in the family’s sukkah.

before Jammin’ Shabbat; when Rabbi Mara created a moving virtual baby naming for our pandemic baby; and when we realized that we would never be known as the only family in a non-traditional category.

We have met so many other multiracial, multilingual, and interfaith families as well as other parents of gender nonconforming and neuro-atypical children. Every new connection affirms that Woodlands is a place where it’s assumed that if we are here, we already belong.

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Geri has been a member of Woodlands Community Temple for more than 30 years, and her sons Ben and Duncan grew up at Woodlands.

Geri Eisenman Pell, CFP, MBA, Cdfa

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