

# ***The Beth El Bridge***

Keeping the Jewish Community Connected

Beth El Congregation

Harrisonburg, VA

December 2005

*My dear fellow Valley Jews and Friends:*

***Shalom!***

I hope that you have had a wonderful, bountiful, and happy Thanksgiving holiday (the second, secular Sukkot), full of warmth, love, and good feelings, with all the blessings that are possible.

**From the Rabbi's Desk:**

Our congregational year is approaching the midpoint. Much has been happening, and much more is planned.

**The Calendar and Holidays:**

Rosh Chodesh for Kislev falls on Kislev 1/Dec. 2 this year. That means that Kislev 25 falls on Dec. 26, which gives us the somewhat unusual circumstance of Chanukah beginning the evening of Dec. 25 and running through Jan. 2, coinciding with the usual winter holiday break. I hope you enjoy lighting the Chanukiah (the Chanukah menorah/lamp) during this break from school and work, and that your celebration of the festival of lights is joyous and brings much light to your life and your loved ones!

**Jewish Lifecycle: The Wimpel, Upscherenish, and Thoughts on Educating the Child**

Our abbreviated discussion of Jewish Lifecycle continues this month with a minor side-trip into some less often observed customs and some musings on my part.

**Wimpel:**

The use of the wimpel is a custom that comes from the Jews found in Germanic areas. The custom has been preserved more in literature than in fact, but there still are Jews of Ashkenazic (Germanic) descent who make and preserve these beautiful artifacts as a form of Hiddur Mitzvah (beautifying the commandment).

Pronounced "vim-pel," it is a Torah binder, often traditionally made from the cloth that was used to swaddle the infant for the Brit ceremony. That cloth is cut into strips, usually about eight inches wide, and sewn together to make a long strip, often ranging from as much as nine to twelve feet, which is then enhanced by painting, embroidery, sewing, and other decorative arts. These decorations usually include the name of the child, the child's birthdate and date of brit, the names of the parents, sometimes the names of siblings or other family members, and an inscription in Hebrew (and sometimes also in English or another language) which reads: "The Little one named Boni (baby) of Foni (father) and Moni (mother) was born with mazal on birthdate (Hebrew, and often also secular). May G-d bless him/her to grow up to the study of Torah, to the chuppah (marriage canopy), and to gemilut chasidim (good deeds). Amen. Selah." In many cases, decorative pictures or art work are also incorporated, sometimes illustrating or representing scenes or quotes from the Torah or relating to the name of the child, and in some cases incorporating the child's zodiac sign. A wimpel can be very colorful and decorated, or somewhat plain. It is entirely up to the person or persons making it.

The wimpel is traditionally completed during the first year of the child's life. At the Shabbat nearest the first birthday of the child, the parents come to synagogue and are given an aliyah. When the time

comes to re-dress the Torah, the wimpel is used as the binder, and the child is encouraged to ‘help’ hold and dress the Torah. The parents often recite a special blessing thanking G-d for the gift of the child and asking that G-d be gracious to the child and draw the child near to Torah, to good deeds, and to G-d. The blessing includes the part of what we read on Rosh Hashanah that is drawn from what Hannah says when she brings her child Samuel to Eli in the Temple. The wimpel remains on the Torah scroll until it is next read, and then the wimpel may be donated to the synagogue, but some families have the custom of retaining the wimpel to be used at the B’nai Mitzvah of the child, or even as part of the chuppah (wedding canopy) for that child. The wimpel is a lovely way to add a communal aspect to the celebration of having and raising a child for the first year.

### **Upscherenisch:**

This is a ceremony not too often practiced today in most Jewish communities. It is a combination of a weaning ceremony and a first hair cut! To my understanding, it is followed only in the Hasidic community today, though it could be incorporated anywhere.

We learn that Isaac grew and was weaned, and a public feast was held by Abraham, his father, on the day of his weaning, in Bereshit/Genesis 21:8. The rabbis have calculated that Isaac was three years old at this time. Based on this text, and on child-raising practices in many parts of the world over time, we understand that a child could be nursed until approximately the age of three – not the usual situation in our culture today. (The Talmud, in both BT Yevamot 43a and Ketubbot 60b, encourages breast-feeding for 24 months; even by the time of that discussion taking place, approximately 800 years after the redaction of the Torah to a written form, weaning apparently was not at the age of three.)

Until weaning, the custom developed not to differentiate children based on gender, so that both boys and girls would be treated much the same, dressed the same, and cared for in the same way. In part, this was a practical response – very young children don’t know any differently, and it is easier for the parents to deal with them without having to worry about which gender an infant happens to be. Another reason underlying this is superstition. To avoid the child being affected by demons or by the evil eye, the parents would dress all the young children alike, which would confuse the demons or anyone who would seek to hurt the child, so that they could not pick one child out from among other children to be attacked.

For these reasons, by appearance, boys and girls would not be distinguishable from each other. This meant that young boys (as well as girls) did not receive haircuts and were all clothed the same way in what we today might call dresses. Where pants were the style for men, the young boys did not dress in pants of any kind, as older children and adults did, until after they were weaned, and sometimes not until much later. The thought was that once a child could speak, the child would be able to be taught to recite a prayer, and in that way protect themselves from the demon or the evil eye, at which point the ruse of mixing up the children by having them all look similar was no longer needed.

We have some vestiges of this kind of practice, even fairly recently, in the language of some of our sayings and in plays – “that boy is still in short pants” is one such phrase, and we have the play *The Music Man* not that long ago, recalling knickers as something to be worn before a youngster could move up to full pants.

In the traditional community, or at least some parts of it, including the Hasidim, young boys are still treated the same as young girls until they reach the age of three. At that point, two things occur: first, they are weaned, if they have not already been (most children are weaned quite a bit before this); and second, they are dressed in “male” clothes and given their first haircut, and the treatment accorded them is modified to be in line with that for males. This is called the upscherenisch, and it is a communal celebration – everyone is invited to join in and take a snip at the young boys hair. (This makes me cringe, thinking of the Marx brothers routine with them taking “one snoopa too much!”)

I don’t necessarily advocate that anyone wait to wean a child until the age of three, nor do I suggest that they dress their children all the same. I do think that it might be a meaningful ritual for a family to recognize the weaning of a child in some way, whenever that may take place. Perhaps we should also

*Continued on Page 6*

# Beth El Congregation

# December 2005

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
				<b>1</b> Rabbi's office day.	<b>2</b> Rabbi Service, 7:30 p.m. Bat Mitzvah, Sherri Alt.	<b>3</b> Bat Mitzvah, Sherri Alt, 10 a.m.
<b>4</b> Religious School, 9:30-12:30. Bagel Bar, 9-11:30. Rabbi's office day.	<b>5</b> Board Meeting, 7:30 p.m.	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b> Rabbi's office day.	<b>9</b> Lay Service, 7:30 p.m.	<b>10</b>
<b>11</b> Religious School, 9:30-12:30. Chanukah Celeb. Bagel Bar, 9-11:30. Adult Hebrew, 2:30-4:30. Youth Group, 4:30. Lecture Series, <i>End of Life</i> , THOI, 7 p.m.	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b> Rabbi's office day.	<b>16</b> Torah Study, 6 p.m. Rabbi Service, 7:30 p.m.	<b>17</b>
<b>18</b> Religious School, 9:30-12:30. Bagel Bar, 9-11:30. Book Club, 11 a.m. Adult Hebrew, 3-5. Chanukah Dinner.	<b>19</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>23</b> Lay Service, 7:30 p.m.	<b>24</b>
<b>25</b> <i>No Religious School.</i> Chanukah — First Candle.	<b>26</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>30</b> Lay Service, 7:30 p.m.	<b>31</b>

## News and Notes

### Rabbi's Office Days

Rabbi Joe's office days in Harrisonburg this year are Sundays and Thursdays. Please call ahead for an appointment (434-2744), or email him at [rabbijoeb@hotmail.com](mailto:rabbijoeb@hotmail.com).

### Men's Club

The Men's Club will not meet in December, but mark your calendars for dinner out with the Men's Club on Jan. 11. More details to come.

— Mike White

### Beth El Board

Our next Beth El Board meeting is Monday, Dec. 5, at 7:30 p.m.

### Temple Book Club

Once again we're trying to restart the Beth El Book Club.

Our suggested Book Club reading for December is *After the Apple: Women in the Bible*, by Naomi Rosenblatt.

This book tells the story of 15 women in the Bible. Ms. Rosenblatt's portrayal of these women reflects their struggles with limitations because of their gender, but in spite of that, they are strong, determined and willing to risk their lives to guarantee the survival of family and the continuity of the Jewish people.

We're planning a review and discussion on Sunday, Dec. 18, at 11 a.m. Please plan to join us.

— Mona Wolfe

---

## Religious School Report

As we move into December, the energy level of our Religious School community is multiplying. Roberta is working with a small group of students (each week after Sunday School) on special music for the Chanukah dinner. Ruth Berger, Dara Hall and Hillary Gerson-Krohn are planning the Religious School Chanukah party for Sunday, Dec. 11. The teachers are working on providing written feedback to parents, in early January. All the kids are progressing in the Chai (Judaica) and Mitkadem (Hebrew) curricula.

Why not stop by the Bagel Bar on Sunday morning and join the fun? The kids love the company and its good socializing/no agenda time!

— *Margee Greenfield*

---

## President's Message

*Dear Friends,*

I am just back from the Biennial Assembly of the Union for Reform Judaism and concurrent Biennial Assembly of the Women of Reform Judaism in Houston. I wish there were a way to bottle all my wonderful experiences so that I could share them with all of you. I was privileged to hear excellent speakers — Madeline Albright, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, Ambassador Dennis Ross, to name just a few of the most famous. Among the most moving and notable experiences was the Shabbat service shared by the almost 5,000 Jews who were there. As always, praying and singing with so many others (and who said Jews don't like to sing) was balm for the soul. I was amazed that what was, at first, only a raw convention space with folding chairs, large television screens all around, and exposed pipes across the ceiling quickly became a sacred space.

Equally important was Rabbi Eric Yoffie's sermon in which he announced and explained the initiatives for the coming year. He is a wonderful speaker who is not afraid to preach about things that might be considered controversial. In fact, he spoke for an hour and five minutes (yep, I timed it) and nobody moved, or sneezed, or coughed, or even seemed to notice. In the coming months, when fatigue is not an issue and I have had time to process all that he said, I will be sharing with you the initiatives that he set forth.

In the meantime, I hope you all had a wonderful Thanksgiving and look forward to seeing you all at the next big event on the first weekend in December.

— *Shalom, Janet*

---

## Youth Group Report

The Youth Group — including members Joel, Riff, Ian, and adviser Sherri — recently attended the Fall Kallah in Kensington, Maryland, Nov. 11–13. They had a great weekend and learned all about Kaballah.

The next meeting will be Dec. 11 at 5 p.m. in Staunton. Harrisonburg Youth Group members who would like a ride to the meeting should meet Sherri at the Temple at 4:30.

All members should try to attend. We need your help make plans for the ski weekend scheduled for Jan. 20.

— *Sherri Alt, Youth Advisor*

---

## Donations

Beth El Congregation gratefully acknowledges the following generous donations, received in the past month:

### To the General Fund

In honor of Sherri Alt's Bat Mitzvah: Bill and Leslie Ney.

In memory of Marilyn Goldenthal: Bill and Leslie Ney.

The Congregation received generous donations from the following High Holiday visitors: Pam and Phil Unger, Larry and Evelyn Williams.

For the Library: Harry and Ruth Clayman.

We also received a generous donation from Jessica MacWilliams.

### To the Building Fund

For our annual fund drive: Bill and Leslie Ney, Sheila Padoll.

### To the Yahrzeit Memorial Fund

In memory of his grandfathers, Albert Nash and Eddie Ney: Edward Ney.

In memory of Annie Ney, Bill's grandmother: Bill and Leslie Ney

---

## Yahrzeits for December

1	Sadye Spiro	22	Gladys Ney
3	Alfred Ney		Rabbi Burton Padol
			Sarah Rabinowitz
5	Anna Bloom	23	Albert H. Ash
	Elizabeth Levey		
6	Sabastian Goldsmith	24	Nace Cohen
	Albert Klingstein		
8	Mollie Katzen	25	Theresa Hirsch
9	Max Frankel	26	Amelia Lowener Figgatt
	Elaine Trubitz		Mal Mintzer
12	Rabbi Jacob Schvanenfeld		Joshua Rader Stein
	Barnett Nelson	27	Anna Robinson
	Mollie Feig		
13	Roselea Kohen	28	Josephine Metzger
	Bertha Schvanenfeld		
14	Simon Z. Wender	29	Pearl Rachel Katzen
16	William Austin Loewner	30	Eddie Ney
	Agnes Moore		Doris Kalman
	Simon Ostreicher		Sarah Miller
			Bertha Hammer
17	Carl Ney	31	Lenora Myerberg
18	Louis Hamburg		Sarah Miller
	Rhoda Mintzer		

---

## ***Jewish Lifecycle (Continued from Page 2)***

think in terms of a family or communal ritual to acknowledge the first haircut for our children, or the first time they are wearing clothing that is not made for infants, as well as their first step. These are all developmental milestones that we have not marked in traditional ways in our community, but which may be appropriate to celebrate and acknowledge. If you are interested in such a ritual, please talk to me. Others have been working on such rituals, and I would be happy to assist you to search for something that you would find meaningful.

### **Education of the Child – From the Tradition:**

The Talmud encourages beginning to introduce children to rituals as soon as they can understand the significance (BT Sukkah 42a), and instructs us that a child's education should begin as soon as the child can speak clearly. They are to be taught the alef bet as soon as they are ready.

The first day of school is a time of celebration. Where slates were used, the Aleph (first letter of the alef bet) was often written on the slate in honey, so the child would learn the shape of the letter and associate the taste of honey with learning, making the connection to how sweet learning was. Candy or raisins were given along with school books. All of this was to encourage a child to look forward to and enjoy learning, which may lend support in explaining part of the Jewish community's emphasis on all forms of education as a very high value almost across the board.

The Talmud describes the outline for education of a child as follows. From the time the child can talk, they should be learning the liturgy (by hearing it). By the age of five, a child should be reading and should begin to be taught Torah. By eight, the child should be learning Prophets. By age 10, the child should be taught the Writings (Proverbs, Psalms, the Five Megillot, Chronicles, Job, Song of Songs, Kohelet). At 12, the child should begin the study of Talmud.

At some time before the child is thirteen the father should teach that child how to swim, and should begin to teach the child a trade, or apprentice the child to someone in a trade. After age thirteen, a child that is gifted should be encouraged to deepen their studies of Talmud and to become a scholar and teacher. All children, and for that matter, all Jews should be encouraged to view study as a lifelong pursuit, so that they continue to learn even as adults.

Following this pattern, a child would be fully prepared for the B'nai Mitzvah ceremony (and to participate in the community as a Jewish adult) long before the age of thirteen, and would be studying interesting and challenging material, rather than basic skills, thereby preparing themselves for an adult approach to Judaism.

Unfortunately, this was not the system that existed for most of us, and Jewish education was not well integrated into everyday life, at least in my experience. The sad fact is that a Religious school cannot accomplish this kind of education in the three hours a week available (or even in the six or eight hours per week required in some congregations, as it was where I went as a child). The result is that the level of Jewish education many of us received was very rudimentary, and did not prepare us for life as Jewish adults. Most of us feel under-educated, and have to play catch-up in order to function in the Jewish community – not the happiest situation.

If we value Jewish education for our children, we have to assure that they have access and are exposed to it at home, in the community, and in the synagogue, as well as at religious school. Education of our children must be a priority, provided by all members of the community in partnership. Only in that kind of supportive environment can our children thrive and grow as educated Jews.

*Next month, we will look at the topic of the B'nai Mitzvah.*

*Rabbi Joe Blair*

---

## Report from the Mid-Atlantic Council

As some of you may recall, I am a member of the Mid-Atlantic Council of the URJ, following in the esteemed footsteps of others from Beth El (Joshua Robinson, Jay Funston and Janet Kohen) that have served Reform Judaism in this way. While the purpose of the Council has changed somewhat over time, it continues mainly as an advisory body to the Regional Director, Rabbi Scott Sperling. It also is the main source of volunteers that carry out many functions to support the paid staff—such as planning the regional biennial convention. I am serving on both a standing committee on Social Action and an ad hoc committee on small congregations.

Several items of direct interest to Beth El members were on the agenda of the most recent MAC meeting in DC in September:

- First, there was an upbeat report on the small congregation Kallah held in Lynchburg last spring (at which we were ably represented by Gary Stein). We still await a synthesis of the suggestions that came out of that Kallah and the actions to follow-up on them.
- Second, there have been sincere and successful efforts made to keep down the cost to participants at the next biennial, which will be held in Rockville, MD (e.g., motel room rate of \$89/night). Additionally, more unscheduled time will be available for conventioners, in direct response to the complaint of “over-scheduling” that was heard about the 2004 convention in Norfolk.
- Third, for many complex reasons, we were not successful in getting sufficient funds committed in time to proceed with the purchase of the campsite about which everyone was understandably very excited. Considerable effort by volunteers to contact potential donors yielded nearly \$5 million pledged, but that was about \$1.5 million short of the amount needed to consummate the deal. However, all is not lost. Negotiation of a potential new contract is underway, and while all persons that made pledges have been officially released from their pledges a pledge drive for major donors continues. If you know of someone that might be willing to pledge a large (6 figure!) amount, please let me know and I will pass it along to Rabbi Sperling *tout de suite*.

If there is any message that you would like me to convey back the MAC, simply let me know ([aikconsult@adelphia.net](mailto:aikconsult@adelphia.net) or 433-1898).

— *L’shalom, Andy*

---

### More News and Notes

#### **Sisterhood — Chanukah Dinner**

Sisterhood is preparing for the **Chanukah Dinner**, which will be held on Sunday, Dec. 18. The menu includes vegetarian soup, beef brisket, and, of course, latkes, with jelly doughnuts for dessert. You will be receiving a flyer soon with details.

Members will be wrapping gifts at Barnes and Noble again this year.

Sisterhood is also planning for another **Chinese Dinner** on Monday, Jan. 16 at 6:30, at China Jade. Tickets for the dinner will be available soon.

The Sisterhood will not meet in December. The next Sisterhood meeting will be held on Thursday, Jan. 5, at 6 p.m., at the Temple.

#### **Home Hospitality Needed**

The **Youth Group’s ski weekend** will be held this year on Jan. 20.

Many families will be needed to provide home hospitality for guests. The host family’s responsibility would be to take students home after services Friday night, provide them with a light breakfast Saturday morning, and then bring them back to the Temple.

---

## Adult Education

### Adult Hebrew Classes

The five session Introduction to Hebrew course will conclude in December. Classes are scheduled at Beth El Dec. 11 from 2:30 to 4:30 and Dec. 18 from 3 to 5; and at THOI Dec.12 and 19 from 7 to 9 p.m.

Intermediate Hebrew will begin in January. This is a chance to practice reading Hebrew, to improve your prayer service skills, and to build your Hebrew vocabulary to better understand the liturgy. We will meet at THOI Jan. 13 and 27 from 6 to 7 p.m., and at Beth El Jan. 12 and 26 from 3 to 4 p.m. The schedule for February and beyond will be determined during the first class at each location. There is no cost to members for this course. Please call the synagogue to pre-register or for more information.

### Re-Introduction to Judaism

This course will begin Monday, Jan. 30, from 7 to 9 p.m. at THOI. The full schedule of 15 sessions will be provided at the first class. It is intended to offer an overview of Judaism, and to serve as a reminder for those who have had some or much exposure in past, and as a first introduction for those who have not. This course is a prerequisite for anyone who may wish to convert to Judaism. There is a \$25 fee for this course to cover copying charges, payable at the first session. The course is open to all congregational members, and to members of the public with permission of the instructor. There will be textbooks to be purchased during the course, and several “field trips” will be assigned. Please call for further information, or to pre-register, at 540-886-4091.

### Jewish Lecture and Discussion Series

The second in a three-part series of workshops, part of the Jewish Lecture and Discussion Series, is scheduled Dec. 11 at 7 p.m. at THOI. The topic is “Planning Ahead: Jewish Thoughts on End of Life Preparations – Planning for One’s Own Death, Funeral, And Legacy.” The session will focus on end of life issues and include such things as durable powers of attorney for medical issues and living wills, with the intent that those attending will be able to make some choices and have the means to convey those choices to their loved ones.

The third session will be Jan. 15, from 7 to 9 p.m., and will cover the concept of Ethical Wills. We will discuss the sorts of things that might be included, and try to provide a format to use in writing an ethical will to express a legacy to loved ones.

– *Rabbi Joe*

---

### Rabbi’s Availability and Office Days

Rabbi Joe is in the office on Sundays and Thursdays, and is available by appointment. Simply leave a message at the congregation, or email him to arrange a time to meet. In the event of an emergency, if you can’t reach him through the synagogues, please contact the rabbi at home by phone.

Email: [RabbiJoeB@hotmail.com](mailto:RabbiJoeB@hotmail.com)

Beth El Congregation: 540-434-2744

Temple House of Israel: 540-886-4091

**Home (Emergencies only, please): 434-971-4741**