

The Beth El Bridge

Keeping the Jewish Community Connected

Beth El Congregation

Harrisonburg, VA

January 2006

My dear fellow Valley Jews and Friends:

Shalom!

I hope that you are having a wonderful, bountiful, and happy Chanukah, full of light, love, and joy, with all the miracles and blessings that are possible.

From the Rabbi's Desk:

The secular new year is upon us. As they say in Israel, Simchat Yom Sylvester! L'chaim! (Happy secular new year! To Life!) Any excuse is good enough for a party!

The Calendar and Holidays:

Rosh Chodesh for Tevet is Dec. 31 and Jan. 1 this year. Tevet will run from Jan. 1 to 29, followed by Rosh Chodesh for Shevat, Jan. 30. The only holidays in this period are the concluding days of Chanukah, which runs until sundown Jan. 2, and the Fast of the 10th of Tevet, an optional fast (depending on the state of peace or persecution) for the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, leading to the destruction of the first Temple.

Jewish Lifecycle: The B'nai Mitzvah

Our very abbreviated discussion of Jewish Lifecycle continues this month with a widely known celebration, the B'nai Mitzvah (masculine plural meaning Children of the Commandments: singular male is Bar Mitzvah, singular female is Bat Mitzvah, and plural female is B'not Mitzvah).

First I should say that there is nothing anyone does that makes them a B'nai Mitzvah. It is a status — no different than the age of majority (18) in American law. One achieves it simply by surviving to their thirteenth birthday. Everything else is merely the celebration of that milestone in the life of the individual.

So there is no Jew past the age of thirteen years that is not a B'nai Mitzvah! No need to feel left out or lament that you did not have one. Many people did not have a celebration, but that has no effect on their status. And anyone can choose to celebrate a B'nai Mitzvah at any time after the thirteenth birthday, so if you are interested in having a B'nai Mitzvah, there is no reason not to do so. Let's start planning for it now! It is *never* too late!

The B'nai Mitzvah ceremony is not biblical in origin! No mention of it appears in the Tanakh (Bible). Clearly, it is a coming of age ritual, marking the acceptance by the community of the individual as eligible to participate in all the rituals and to accept honors such as ALiyah (being called up to the Torah and reciting the blessings over it), serving as Ba'al Koreh (Torah reader), or as Shaliach Tzibur (Prayer leader for the congregation). Traditionally, it marks the moment in time when an individual is subject to the Mitzvot (Commandments), can serve as a valid witness, and can make an oath and enter into an enforceable contract.

Originally, and still, technically, it is primarily a change in status, not very different from becoming eighteen years old today. One would automatically gain certain legal rights and become subject to legal obligations, but there was little formal celebration or occasion to mark the moment. Most Jews were educated sufficiently to lead prayers and even to read from the Torah, so there was not a specific accomplishment to mark with a celebration.

The special and celebratory nature of the ceremony that we know today came into existence somewhere between the 14th and 16th centuries in Germany and Poland, and spread from there. In part, the B'nai Mitzvah came to be seen as marking a level of education — an accomplishment; more than leading prayers or reading from the Torah, it was a time when persons achieving this status would demonstrate learning and show that they were ready to take their place in the community. Today, this is still true among some groups, particularly the Hasidic Orthodox community, in which a young man will give an extended Devar Torah (a talk or teaching based

on the Torah or Talmud) to show their accomplishments in these areas. This is also true of the Chatan (bridegroom) in these communities — he is expected to give a Devar Torah in advance of the wedding.

In the less traditional Jewish communities, such as ours, the B'nai Mitzvah celebration is a chance for the young person (or adult, as the case may be) to demonstrate that they are sufficiently educated Jewishly to participate in the life of the community and to be a part of the communal ritual of worship.

The minimal level of demonstration is simply to be called up for an adult honor, usually an Aliyah (to come up to the reading stand and to recite the blessings for the reading of the Torah).

Since leading prayers was something most Jews could do, it also became common for the B'nai Mitzvah to take that role on for the day of celebration for at least some portion of the service. If capable, the B'nai Mitzvah might also read from the Torah and/or the Haftarah (selection from the Prophets).

The custom of a Devar Torah continues, so we see the B'nai Mitzvah at most celebrations delivering a speech in the form of a Devar Torah address to the congregation.

Often the parents of the B'nai Mitzvah would offer a blessing. One of the traditional blessings that has an odd sound to our ear is She-petarani meyancho shel zeh/zot (that has made me free — meaning free of responsibility for the conduct/sins — of this child; now that the child is responsible for him/her self with regard to religion and the Jewish community).

In more traditional settings, the B'nai Mitzvah boy (in these settings it would always be a boy) might also wear a Tallit (Prayer Shawl) and Tefillin (Phylacteries) for the first time at or just after his Bar Mitzvah, though this varies by community quite a bit.

As with any Jewish celebration, a B'nai Mitzvah ends with a Seudat Mitzvah (a festive meal celebrating fulfillment of a commandment). The type, style, and elaborateness are all up to the parents, depending on their means, their desires, and their taste. However, one thing that has not changed much: there are still members of the Jewish community that have more money than taste. In the Middle Ages, the rabbis enacted decrees called sumptuary laws. These laws restricted excessive conspicuous spending and wasteful consumption, and attempted to curb the elaborate and ostentatious feasts that had come about in some communities. The laws restricted the size and costliness of the feasts at celebrations, the dress and jewelry that could be worn, and who and how many could take part in the feasts, including requiring that anyone at the feast must have attended the religious service! The Lithuanian decree of Sept. 4, 1637 opened with these words:

“Inasmuch as people are spending too much money unnecessarily on festive meals, every Jewish community and settlement that has a rabbi is expected to assemble its officers and rabbi to consider the number of guests which it is suitable for every individual in view of his wealth and the occasion, to invite to a festive meal....”

In light of the recent New York Times story on a Bat Mitzvah at which the young lady wore a designer dress that cost \$32,000, exclusive of her jewelry, and it was reported that the party and the cost of entertainment totaled close to \$500,000, this is still an area that is problematic for some. (Would that we all needed to worry about reigning in our impulse to spend!) Fortunately, I have not seen this tendency in our community, and I hope I will never. This sort of blowout is not in keeping with a religious rite of passage that marks the beginning of commitment to the community and to the commandments. As they say, keep the emphasis on the Mitzvah and not so much on the Bar!

I would be remiss if I did not comment on the topic of B'not Mitzvah. The Bar Mitzvah ceremony was always for males — women did not take leadership roles in congregational worship in most communities over most of Jewish history. It was only 76 years ago now that the first Bat Mitzvah took place. Judith Kaplan (daughter of Mordecai Kaplan, later the wife of Ira Eisenstein) had her Bat Mitzvah ceremony at the Society for the Advancement of Judaism in New York City, where Mordecai Kaplan served as rabbi. Slowly, other young women also had a Bat Mitzvah there, and then at some other congregations. Sometime in the 1960's some Reform congregations began to offer this ceremony, and in the mid to late 1970's it began to appear in Conservative congregations. More recently, Orthodox congregations have incorporated a form of Bat Mitzvah, though young women are not allowed to read from the Torah in most of these settings. I am delighted to say that we are fully egalitarian and encourage all, male or female, to take part to the fullest extent possible in a B'nai Mitzvah, and to celebrate their connection to Judaism and the Jewish community.

Next month, we will continue with the topic of Confirmation.

Rabbi Joe Blair

Beth El Congregation

January 2006

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1	2	3	4	5 Rabbi's office day. Sisterhood Meeting , 6 p.m., Temple.	6 Rabbi Service , 7:30 p.m.	7
8 Religious School , 9:30-12:30. Bagel Bar, 9-11:30. Rabbi's office day. Youth Group , tba.	9 Board Meeting , Temple, 7:30 p.m.	10	11 Men's Club Meeting , 6:30, Dave's Downtown Taverna.	12 Rabbi's office day.	13 Lay Service , 7:30 p.m.	14
15 Religious School , 9:30-12:30, Bagel Bar, 9-11:30. Rabbi's office day.	16 Sisterhood, Chinese Dinner and Auction , China Jade, 6:30 p.m.	17	18	19 Rabbi's office day.	20 Rabbi Service , 7:30 p.m. Ski Weekend , Youth Group.	21
22 Religious School , 9:30-12:30. Bagel Bar, 9-11:30. Rabbi's office day. Adult Hebrew , 2:30-3:30.	23	24	25	26 Rabbi's office day.	27 Lay Service , 7:30 p.m.	28
29 Religious School , 9:30-12:30. Bagel Bar, 9-11:30. Rabbi's office day.	30 Introduction to Judaism I , THOI, 7 p.m., contact Rabbi Joe.	31				

News and Notes

Rabbi's Office Days

Rabbi Joe's office days in Harrisonburg this year are Sundays and Thursdays. Please call ahead (434-2744) or email rabbioe@hotmail.com for an appointment.

Men's Club Meeting

The Men's Club will meet for dinner at Dave's Downtown Taverna on Wednesday, Jan. 11 at 6:30 p.m. New and prospective members *are welcome!* **Please RSVP** to Mike White as soon as you can.

Sisterhood: Chinese Auction

Sisterhood will meet Thursday, Jan 5, at 6 p.m., at the Temple, Everyone please bring a salad to share!
We will host another **Chinese Dinner and Auction** at China Jade on Monday, Jan. 16, at 6:30 p.m. We will be selling tickets soon, which will

include dinner and 10 free tickets to place in cups to win gifts of your choice. Please mark your calendars.

We had a great time last year, with many people winning great gifts!

Help Our Youth Group

The Youth Group met in Staunton Dec. 11 to work on our annual **ski weekend**, coming up 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.

Please contact Sherri Alt if you can help.

The next Youth Group meeting is Sunday, Jan. 8. We'll send out emails about place and time.

Thanks to all who helped us with donations of cleaning supplies and books for our projects!

Donations

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

To the General Fund

In honor of the Bat Mitzvah of Sherri Alt: Ruth and Harry Clayman, Elliot and Thea Golub, Anne Mintzer, Kate and Alan Neckowitz, Chuck Slott.

A generous High Holiday visitor donation was received from Joshua and MaryBeth Neckowitz.

To the Anne Mintzer Window Fund

In honor of the Bat Mitzvah of Sherri Alt: Cindy Baron and Bridget Bonnet, Lisa and Kevin Giovanetti, Andy and Janet Kohen, Linda and Peter Kohn, Becky and Les Mintzer.

To the Beth El Sisterhood

In honor of the Bat Mitzvah of Sherri Alt: Bo and Sandi Rose.

To the Temple Youth Group

In honor of the Bat Mitzvah of Sherri Alt: Dave and Shirley Merlin, Bo and Sandi Rose.

To the Building Fund

In honor of the birth of their fifth grandchild, Lilly Sophia Minskoff, born to Rob and Dottie Minskoff: Esther and Jerry Minskoff.

To the Yahrzeit Memorial Fund

In memory of her husband, Rabbi Burton Padoll: Sheila Padoll.

In memory of Bill's grandfather, Alfred Ney: Bill and Leslie Ney.

YAHREZEITS FOR JANUARY

1	Bertha Hammer Margaret Stein Isadore Pfeffer Dora Brill	9	Baby Spiro	19	Harry Weiss
2	Bertha Wise Samuel R. Clayman Eleanor Stoloff	10	Paul Miller Anna Weiss	20	Sophia Wurtzberger
3	Lester Kahn Samule Ney	11	Pearl Loewner Gravely Isadore Iseman Verne Slater	23	Beulah (Bootie) Klingstein
4	Mary Helbraun	12	Baby Klingstein	24	Fannie Wise Nathan Gelman
5	Emma Hirsch Isaacs	13	Bruno Stein Gerald Greenfield	26	Shirley Baron Leroy Loewner
6	Leopold Wise Max Hirsch Elsie K. Cohn Richard Banker	14	Rose Levine	27	Henry Robinson
8	Leonard Hirsch Rosa Isaacs Lillian Hamburg	15	Hulda Iseman Sam Weiss	28	Abe B. Zindler, Sr. Jay Funston
		16	Sadye Robinson	29	William Stein Minnie Zindler Finger
		17	Beatrice Winoker Marjorie Lichtenstein	30	Vera Levine
				31	Lessie Hirsch Baum Shirley Goodman Saletan

President's Message:

“Hooking Up” — Sex and Our Young People

Sex isn't new! And it's definitely a strange topic to be included in a Temple president's message. Or is it? Last month in my message to you I promised to relate some of the things that Rabbi Eric Yoffie proposed as his 2006 initiatives during his Biennial Shabbat sermon. There were many things to be gleaned from and discussed in his sermon, but perhaps none so fundamentally critical to the soul of our Jewish youth as this newest trend called “hooking up.” Rabbi Yoffie tackled this issue in his usual clear, straightforward, concerned manner always mindful of the Jewish principles involved.

He said, “On the one hand, our congregants take parenting seriously.... On the other hand, our parents are overworked and overwhelmed...they sometimes lose confidence in themselves. They become reluctant to tell their children too much because they fear that they will steer them in the wrong direction. The subject of sexuality is a prime example. Our kids desperately need our direction in this area, but too often we do not provide it. Teenagers experimenting with sex is hardly new...but what is happening now is radically different. Today we have the Internet — which means that sexual material is more available to our kids than ever before. Popular culture, meanwhile, continues on its downward spiral, exposing us to ever more sexually explicit images. And in the midst of all this, our kids reach puberty a full two years earlier than they did a century ago. And what is the result? **A growing number of *middle school students* are sexually active, and oral sex is both prevalent and widely accepted. Most striking of all is a social ethic known as ‘hooking up,’ that severs sex from any pretense of a relationship. ‘Hooking up’ can refer to different kinds of physical contact, but it always means a casual, no-strings-attached sexual encounter.**”

Rabbi Yoffie continued by citing study after study showing that the communication gap between parents and their kids is huge. This despite the fact that parents say they talk to their kids regularly. And **parents who are absolutely certain that their kids are not having sex are wrong about half the time.** He continued saying that all of our Jewish institutions are failing kids in this area — camps, youth groups, and synagogues. Though we do a good job of policing behavior, we are not doing a good job teaching the values of our Jewish tradition.

The following statement was made by a Jewish teenager in one of our congregations: “I have the opinion that (my Judaism) should have a lot to say about my relationship with a guy. It's not just whether or not to have sex. What about honesty? What about communication? What about touching? What about respecting and being respected? No one helps you with this. The Torah has all these confusing teachings. Which parts really apply to life today?”

Much more was said by Rabbi Yoffie about the need to convey to our children the lessons of Torah — that “the guiding principle of sexuality in the Jewish tradition is *K'doshim tih'yu* — “You shall be holy,” which means that sexuality is linked to blessing, commandment, and God. To convey this lesson the Union has created a six-session course for Bar and Bat mitzvah-age students in our religious schools. A second course for incoming high school students will be introduced at the NFTY Convention in February 2007.”

As I write this message to you I am transported back to that congregation of 4,000-plus, who sat in absolute stillness and listened to Rabbi Yoffie's frank discussion of tensions and

pressures affecting our youth that lead to a devaluing of the loving mutual relationships that make sex an experience of holiness. He said, “We are not naïve. We do not promote abstinence from all forms of physical contact. We talk about the kinds of sexual expression that teens who care about each other might consider. But we do take on the issues of oral sex and hooking up. We tell both boys and girls that sex is not about controlling or servicing the other. And we tell girls in particular that their worth is not defined by what they do for boys. For nearly half a century, the Reform Movement has dedicated itself to promoting the equality of our women and all women. But this is worth nothing if Jewish girls define their worth by how they please boys. A positive approach to sexuality must not rely on casual sexual encounters that leave girls feeling used and degraded and boys ending up numb to feeling.”

Let’s let our kids know that we are not blind to the pressures that lead them to casual sex, that Judaism does have a lot to say that is meaningful and relevant, that we are willing to talk with them about this subject openly and compassionately. I hope that our synagogue, which is so progressive in so many ways, will consider these new course options for our children and implement them where appropriate. May we all go from strength to strength united in Jewish principles.

For Rabbi Yoffie’s entire sermon go to <http://www.urj.org>.

Janet

More News and Notes

Thanks from Sherri

I would like to thank everyone who helped me celebrate my Bat Mitzvah Dec. 3.

It was truly the best day of my life, and I was so happy to have everyone share the celebration with me!!

Sherri Alt

Cell Phone Information

I am working on the new Congregation List. To keep up with trends, I am including **cell phone numbers** in the new list. For those who wish to give others that option for contacting them, please send me your cell phone number. Also, please also let me know if your home or email address has changed.

Contact Judy Freudenthal about any changes you’d like to make for the Congregation List. Call 867-5648, or email jfreudy@aol.com.

Please do this as soon as possible — the Congregation List will be finalized very soon.

Thank you, Judy

Report from the Board

Beth El welcomes our **new members**: Judith and Stuart Liss, Sarah Stein, Evelyn and Larry Williams.

In honor of Beth El Congregation’s donation of books from our overstock of religious school materials, which we provided to a family that is Jewishly homeschooling their two daughters in Germany, the family planted **a tree in Israel** recognizing our generosity.

For your information: The Board is working on plans to establish a **Quiet Sanctuary Space** for parents and children for use during worship services.

Linda Kohn

Adult Education

Adult Hebrew Classes

The five session Introduction to Hebrew course concluded in December. Intermediate Hebrew is beginning 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 Beth El on the 22nd of January from 2:30 to 3:30 p.m. and 23rd at THOI from 6 to 7 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 I

This course will begin Monday, Jan. 30, at 7 p.m., at THOI in Staunton. 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 even quite a bit of) exposure in past, and as a first introduction for those who have not studied the topic before. This course is also a prerequisite for anyone who may wish to convert to Judaism. There is a \$25 fee for this course to cover photocopying 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 (Rabbi Joe). 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

There is no session of this series scheduled in January. Please be on the watch for upcoming topics.

Parashat Hashavuah

The weekly Parashat Hashavuah (weekly Torah portion) discussion takes place at noon on Fridays at THOI. All members of both congregations are invited to bring your lunch and join the discussion. No prior knowledge of experience required.

Limud Torah

About once a month at Beth El there is a Torah Limud (Torah learning) session at 6 p.m. prior to services. The next one is scheduled for Feb. 17. Again, all members are invited to join us to share opinions and talk about matters of Torah. You can bring your dinner and eat while we talk.

A Possible Trip to Israel

Rabbi Joe has begun exploring the idea a congregational trip to Israel. He has found that it is possible to arrange a 10-day to two-week tour, at a price of about \$2,500-2,700 per person, for 20 or more participants. No schedule or itinerary is yet planned, as this is a very preliminary exploration of the idea. If you might be interested in such a trip, and would like to talk about it, please be in touch with Rabbi Joe so he can gauge the level of interest.

Rabbi Joe

Religious School Report

The energy level at religious school is off the charts.

We had an early Chanukah party on Dec. 11, planned by Ruth Berger, Dara Hall and Hillary Gerson-Krohn. Roberta led the students in Chanukah songs (an event that doubled as a rehearsal for the Chanukah dinner performances at Beth El and THOI). Latkes, and other goodies and crafts filled the tables. Rabbi Joe regaled everyone with a Chanukah story. What a great event! In lieu of a gift exchange, students brought books to donate to the "Reach Out and Read" program.

We are still very happy with the Chai and Mitkadem curricula. The students are working their way through the levels and the oldest students (Gimmel and Daled classes) are really excelling in Hebrew. We're so proud of them.

As always, we invite you all to join us at the bagel bar and Herbie's Breakfast Grille on Sunday mornings (9ish to 11:30ish).

— *Margee Greenfield*

Stained Glass Window Project

The final rendering of the stained glass window project — the Anne Mintzer Fund — is available for viewing in the social hall. Please take a moment to view this drawing. It is the culmination of much hard work by the committee, which met many times with the artist to perfect their combined views.

Thanks to Joan Funston, Sandi Rose, Linda Kohn, Rabbi Joe Blair, Janet Kohen. Your hard work is much appreciated.

Now is your chance to help complete the work of this dedicated committee. We are about a third of the way to our goal of \$25,000. Please consider a donation to the fund. Every donation, no matter how large or small is critical. Anne's 93rd birthday is soon here. Please consider a donation to the stained glass fund in her honor. It will mean a lot to her.

— *Janet Kohen*

Vote in World Zionist Organization Elections

Don't miss your opportunity to make a difference to world Judaism, and to assure that the voices of viewpoints other than Orthodoxy are heard in Israel.

Register now and **vote** in the elections for the World Zionist Organization **before** Feb. 28. Forms are available at the Temple, or you can register online at www.urj.org.

It takes just a few minutes of your time and \$7 (\$5 for students). When you receive your ballot, be sure to **VOTE!**

If you have any questions, please ask me, or your congregational officers.
Help to set the internal agenda for Israel at this crucial time in its history.

— *Rabbi Joe*
