

Feature

Jewish women nurture, celebrate, and nourish thru food work*Mary Bilyeu, staff writer****Rena Basch, Locavorious***

Although she had no background in the world of food other than “working at a local ice cream shop as a young teenager,” Rena left a career in materials science and engineering at Ford to commit herself to supporting sustainable agriculture. After purchasing an



Rena Basch *locavorious.com, 276-5945*

initial CSA share and also getting involved in Ann Arbor Township’s efforts to preserve farmland (she’s been the township Clerk since 2004), Rena had found her mission: she created Locavorious, which offers shares of frozen fruits and vegetables that are picked up at various locations around town, such that customers can eat local produce even through the winter. “With a Locavorious subscription, you get delicious, healthy and locally grown food ... plus you help achieve a larger mission of promoting sustainable food systems, reducing the energy consumption and carbon footprint of current food distribution, and preserving family farms. Every package of food includes the name of the farm it comes from, the farm’s location and the date of harvest.”

A devotee of “cooking, eating, gardening and browsing at farmers markets,” Rena, her husband Jeff, and their two children are members of the Reconstructionist Havurah, which places significant emphasis upon *tikkun olam*. This tenet has “guided (Rena’s) desire to change the current industrialized and unhealthy food system.” Growing up in the Washington, D.C. area, for many years her extended Jewish family “had Shabbat dinner every Friday night with (her) dad’s side and got together with mom’s side of the family for kosher hot dogs almost every Saturday night.” Although Rena’s immediate family did not keep kosher, “knowledge of that meaningful, purposeful way of eating creates an awareness of the ethics of eating, our responsibility towards the animals we raise for food, and our stewardship of the land and water that grow our food.”

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Community

American politics and the health of the environment

Jonathan Cohn, special to the WJN

Judaism is my faith but it is not, strictly speaking, my specialty. So when I was asked, recently, to share my thoughts on Jewish thinking and the health of the planet, I decided I should start by consulting the most sacred text of all: Google. I typed in “Jewish,” “health,” and “world.” That yielded entries like *The Lowfat Jewish Vegetarian Cookbook*, *Is it immoral to be overweight?*, and *Healthy Broccoli knishes*. From this, I concluded that food is even more central to Jewish identity than I realized—helpful insights, perhaps, but not really relevant to issues of planetary survival.



Jonathan Cohn

So I turned next to Aura Ahuvia, rabbinic intern with the Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Havurah. She suggested I consider modern interpretations of the Eden story, where people are instructed to “care for all life” rather than simply dominate over nature. This was more helpful. She mentioned a passage that sets the rules for wartime, advising soldiers not to uproot olive trees as they fight—a signal, in other words, to show respect for non-human, but still living, creatures. She also told me about the concept of “interbreathing,” the idea that we, quite literally, breathe in what the trees breathe out, and vice versa. And that, by extension, our souls are part of a much broader ecosystem, to which we are all connected and for which we were all responsible.

That resonated with me—a lot. As a few of you may know, I’ve spent much of the past decade learning, writing, and speaking about health care reform in our country. While the debate over reform is often about simple, concrete measures of well-being—How expensive are your premiums? Which doctor

can you see? At its core, the debate has always been about responsibility, whether it should be individual or collective.

Up until the 1930s, medical care and health was thought to be purely an individual responsibility. People paid for themselves. Those who could not were at the mercy of charity.

But a revolution in medical care—the one that brought us anesthesia, the sanitary technique, and other innovations—also made it too expensive for one person to afford; so, interest in distributing the burden across the population began to grow.

The idea behind this is simple. We are all susceptible to illness and accident. We could all be crippled financially, as well as physically, if left to our own devices and resources. But if we take responsibility for one another—if we all do our part, if we all contribute—then we can all be protected. We can all be secure.

The recent Affordable Care Act sought to put the principle of shared responsibility further into practice. But the debate is not over. Many want to repeal the Affordable Care Act and replace Medicare, our existing program for people over 65, with a voucher-like program. For better or for worse—I would argue for worse—these efforts represent an attempt to move away from shared, collective responsibility and back to a more individualistic notion of society.

As it happens, we’re having the same debate about the environment. For most of human history, the planet’s well-being was an afterthought. The world was ours to use as we please, to make use of, to exploit for our own development. Like that older interpretations of Eden, we were the masters and the world was our servant. But in just the last few decades, we’ve become aware of our mutual dependence on the planet, whether for nourishment, shelter, or life sustaining air.

Once again, we are presented with what the social scientists call a collective action problem. When our water is fouled, our air

is dirty, and our planet is heating, we all suffer. But we can fix it only through collective action, by seeing ourselves as partners, with each other and, yes, with all of the other living things on earth.

Each of us can, and should, do our part. We can recycle, purchase environmentally favorable foods, and reduce our carbon footprints. But as I think through this political debate, and the one about health care, I also think there’s another way we need to remember that we are part of a greater world. And by that, I mean the greater political world.

These days you hear a lot of disappointment and frustration with politics. And here in this community, those sentiments are frequently the byproduct of high expectations after the election of 2008. The achievements since that election have seemed insufficient and flawed—an economic recovery package that didn’t produce a growing economy, a universal health care law that isn’t fully universal, a financial regulation initiative that won’t do very much regulating, just to name a few.

Meanwhile, the current political environment seems absolutely toxic, with misinformation routinely ruling the day—and our lawmakers unable to handle even routine matters of government business. There is a poison in the air today, contaminating our discourse just as surely as it is contaminating our lungs.

Rabbi Modechai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism once said that religion is as much a progressive unlearning of false ideas concerning God as it is the learning of the true ideas concerning God. In politics today, there’s a lot of unlearning to do.

It’s easy to blame our elected leaders for these failings, and to some extent, that’s fair. But politics, like policy, is also a matter of collective responsibility. I’ve heard so many people complain about the state of politics, many of these people are part of our Jewish community. What I don’t hear is people doing something about it.

And so I put the question to you directly: Are you taking action? Have you written your representatives in Congress? Have you organized a rally? Have you bothered to learn about the issues, so that you can be a source of information, and guidance, for people who aren’t?

That last part is particularly important. For all of the money spent on political advertising, for all of the calculation that goes into political strategy, actually getting people to change their minds is incredibly difficult. But when somebody hears a new argument from somebody they know and they trust—a friend, a family member, a neighbor—they really do start to think.

A lot of people in our community already do these things, I know. But many haven’t. And many that do are so dispirited they are ready to give up. I hope that changes. What’s happening at the grassroots, at the neighborhood level, is as much a part of our political failure as anything that’s happening in Washington, on either end of Pennsylvania Avenue. We need better leaders, sure. But we need better followers too.

It’s easy to forget sometimes, given the din of daily life, but we are all very lucky. We live in the greatest country in the world. Not a perfect country, by any means, but one that laid out the basic ideals of liberty and democracy, then spent the next 250 years trying, fitfully and slowly, to realize them. And we have the tools to keep improving. In the grand view of political development, this is paradise. This is Eden.

But this paradise requires us to maintain it—to nourish it. If we don’t, it will be gone forever. ■

Jonathan Cohn is a senior editor at The New Republic magazine. This article is based on comments he shared at the 2011 Rosh Hashanah services of the Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Havurah.

Campus

Dash Moore receives prestigious national book award

Kimberly Kunoff, special to the WJN

University of Michigan Professor of History Deborah Dash Moore has been named recipient of the National Jewish Book Award for *Gender & Jewish History* (Indiana University Press, 2011) in the category of Anthologies and Collections.

The Jewish Book Council made the announcement in January. Other recipients include Pulitzer Prize-winning author Art Spiegelman for *Metamaus* and Israeli novelist Aharon Appelfeld, whose *Until the Dawn's Light* gains him a third National Jewish Book Award.

Gender & Jewish History, co-edited by Marion Kaplan and written in honor of Paula Hyman, a founder of Jewish gender studies, is a collection of essays from such noted scholars of Jewish History as Beth Wenger, Deborah Lipstadt, Rebecca Korbrin, and Marsha Rozenblit.

"Indiana University Press congratulates editors Deborah Dash Moore and Marion Kaplan and the extraordinary group of contributors to *Gender and Jewish History*, whose outstanding scholarship, inspired in different ways by the work of Paula Hyman, brought this amazing volume to life under Deborah's and Marion's able guidance," attests Indiana University Press Director Janet Rabinowitch.

"We at IU Press are thrilled that this excellent book, an enduring tribute to Paula's memory, has been recognized by a National Jewish Book Award. We are honored to be its publisher."

"The book and the award are a tribute to Paula Hyman—the field that she inspired and the students she mentored," acknowledged Deborah Dash Moore, director of the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies and Frederick G.L. Huetwell Professor of History.

The winners of the 2011 National Jewish Book Awards will be honored on March 14 at a gala awards ceremony to be held at the Center for Jewish History in Manhattan. The awards ceremony, which begins at 8 p.m., is free and open to the public.

As the longest-running North American awards program of its kind in the field of Jewish literature, the National Jewish Book Awards is designed to recognize outstanding books of Jewish interest. In addition to the above-mentioned winners, awards are given out this year in 14 categories.

A complete list of the 2011 National Jewish Book Award winners and finalists is available at the Jewish Book Council's website. ■



Deborah Dash Moore

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AARH takes one of its own as its first rabbinical intern

By Marcy Epstein

Sometimes I must remind myself that the Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Havurah (AARH) has a living history. Now is such a time. This summer holds particular significance for the Havurah as one of our members, Aura Ahuvia, makes a more formal transition into our service for one year as a rabbinical intern.

Ahuvia has worked and worshiped in the Ann Arbor Jewish community for many years. For the AARH, Ahuvia has handled simchot, holiday cycles, Shabbat, education for adults and children, myriad other blessings and concerns. There is more to see than meets the eye, always, inviting a long and mindful look.

Ahuvia, with her husband Aaron, moved to Ann Arbor in 1991 to find little Reconstructionist presence here, something that felt important to them to create. Scoping things out, they invited a group to their home. In the early days of the Havurah, these friends searched for ways to connect creatively with like-minded people within Jewish tradition. Her professional path was so different back then. She sold college textbooks then changed gears to complete one of the last master's degrees in journalism at the University of Michigan. As they had Isaac and Jonah, she started a parenting magazine and organized her first Jewish event for the Havurah, tot Shabbat, as a way to unite her identities as a thinker, mother, and Jew.

This Aura Ahuvia—unlike the person who today conducts *Shabbatot shira*, playful *niggunim*, and holiday cant—never sang, never touched a guitar, never imagined herself a lay-leader. Yet she became aware of a passion for growing community. This passion burgeoned as she started serving as program director at Beth Israel Congregation and became active in CAJE, the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Educators. She began to ask herself: What sets people on fire? How to connect this fire with their Judaism?

Meanwhile, back at the Havurah, several strong lay leaders had left, and Ahuvia joined Deb Kraus in training to lead services for adults as well as for their children. We are a participatory and primarily lay-led community. Our values and practices are derived both from Jewish tradition and the complexity of contemporary influences; liturgy and ritual does not always come easily to us, because we embrace widely and meet Jewish responsibility head on, full heart.

Ahuvia and Kraus brought much to the Havurah through the years. Ahuvia was teaching herself guitar chords, years away from finger-picking—“I couldn't bar an F!” The opportunity to lead coincided with her time at CAJE and her first musical retreat with Hava Nashira. It was as though a veil was lifted from her eyes. What if she learned even more? What if what she ventured could make a difference? What might services be like if we brought music, theological idea, and other powerful vision behind prayer into the midst of our community? What if this pursuit became her job?

This has been a ten-year journey for Ahuvia, full of lessons and relearning. Five years ago she took a two-year intensive lay leader's training called DLTI (Davennan Leadership Training Institute), taught by Rabbis Marcia Prager and Shawn Zevit. They helped her to

deepen her skills tremendously. She went expecting to hone her public speaking in front of a worshipping crowd. The teachers of DLTI broke open the prayers for her more deeply,



Aura Ahuvia

because leading was about deepening the prayers with others and for others.

Some of her most valued friends from DLTI have stayed with her, pursuing cantorial, rabbinical, or pastoral programs. They, like Ahuvia, came from wildly different backgrounds and trajectories, united in a love of knowledge and connection. She thought, as she registered for the program that DLTI was the epitome of the path, offering her a taste of the Divine, like a rabbinical cul-de-sac or a forbidden bar of chocolate. One taste, and she'd be done. Many of us know that candy bar. It whet her appetite. And the cul-de-sac, she discovered, was an irregular road that many others were already on.

Ahuvia's path of becoming a rabbi started with several years of wrestling just with the application to a Renewal rabbinical program. Her transition has never been easily decided. She was aware of the heft of her decision to be a rabbi, and to this day she worries about living up to the image of what a rabbi should be. She had to rethink her previous conception of a rabbi, the iconic righteous scholar sitting in a junior chair right below God. This wasn't the image of what she wanted for herself or for Jewish community.

She had to make room for another image of rabbi. What does being a rabbi bring to a community? In pursuit of this answer was room then for herself, wherein she could look to part of her own answer, to bring this question to the fore of every day. In the end, she couldn't forbid herself from becoming a rabbi for today's Jewish community. She felt compelled to the intense learning, tempted to the full participation of every part of her, not just her brain and spirit but also her behavior and attitude. Training with our Havurah is supporting exactly that sort of engagement.

And it has been a growing experience, as Ahuvia accepts that the label rabbi has enough space for plain human beings. The role of rabbi is breaking open for Ahuvia, her way of perceiving the changing needs for rabbis in community. She wants to be part of that conversation, not the voice but a voice. What is the rabbi's role today, unlike 100 years ago? What began once as simple membership in the Havurah grew into thinking about these community questions day in and day out, a central focus.

This year with us in this new capacity brings from her wishes for collaboration, forgiveness, strengthening, and growth in community. She feels this internship to be an honor and a privilege, but at the same time a weighty responsibility. Sometimes this heft scares her, because she wishes our congregation to continue its fuller formation, in the next years, for example, developing a *chevra kadisha*. It is an important function for the larger Ann Arbor Jewish community to have a burial society, but more important, she is awed by doing things right and well. In order to be here for us, Ahuvia plans to look a lot of things up; whenever she worries that a student rabbi has some sort of a priori “perfect knowledge”, she tries to remember that she is still a student and that seasoned rabbis worth their salt also check their sources.

Avodah (worship) will be a core value of Ahuvia's practice with the Havurah this year. Working with prayers, particularly, is to her like “adding water to the dust”—it is what breathes life into them. She regrets the old experiences many of us have of prayers dry as dust, “Prayer should not be boring.

There is too much there,” she explains, “The challenge of our generation is to find what breathes life into our prayer, [this way] giving our children and grandchildren their own real paths toward prayer and Torah.” Providing spiritual leadership for the *beit sefer*, conducting a variety of rituals, building Jewish community; as the AARH grows, Ahuvia feels a permission to be constantly creative in her duties. She revels in the leeway to try new things out in order to bring the group closer to its beliefs and values. She trusts, in her Havurah family, that even if things go wildly bad, somehow it will make a good story.

Ahuvia hopes to help facilitate new friendships and ideas, even new groups of like-mindedness: a men's group, a Jewish book group, Hebrew class. In the same spirit, she hopes to support people exploring their own spiritual paths. In all, Ahuvia feels an excitement in supporting collective growth from her own person, professional and familial, as the county's Reconstructionist presence explores yet another dimension of ourselves, of community, and of relationship. ■

Havurah to offer year-long Learning Services series

From now until next spring, the Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Havurah will be offering a series of Learning Services that explore different aspects of the Shabbat morning service, and prayer in general. Led by rabbinic intern Aura Ahuvia, the services will entail a sizable measure of time for discussion and creative exploration of concepts and historical periods. No prior knowledge of Hebrew is required, and the Learning Services are open to all members of the community. Services will be held on the first Saturdays of the month at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Ann Arbor, from 10 a.m.—noon. For further information, call Aura Ahuvia, 975-9045, or AuraAhuvia@comcast.net.

Session 2, Oct. 3

Postures Toward God. Why do we stand, sit, and bow at various points during the service? This session will explore these stances as well as related prayer objects such as *tallit*, *tefillin* and *kippah*.

Session 3, Nov. 7

Matbeah haTefillah. Did you know there's a “warm-up section” in the prayer service before formal prayer is begun? Or that prayer services conclude with a turning from inwardness to outwardness toward the world? Learn the deep structure of the Jewish prayer service. Cross-denominational similarities and differences will also be explored.

Session 4, Dec. 5

The Sources of Tefillah I: Characters. Who are the individuals and groups that contributed to the contents of the *siddur*? What did they stand for? How did they think? Learn about the major contributors to the *siddur* at this session.

Session 5, Jan. 2, 2010

The Sources of Tefillah II: History. Now that we've been introduced to who

contributed to the *siddur*, in this session we'll learn why. In what historical context did our contributors live? What hardships did they endure, and what blessings did they enjoy? How did these influence their writing?

Session 6, Feb. 6

The Shema. Why does this prayer stand at the center of Jewish faith? How can we unpack its theology? This session seeks to understand the Shema on multiple levels

Session 7, March 6

The Amidah. Why is this prayer regarded as the peak of the service? How is it qualitatively different than the prayers which precede and follow it? How can we work with it in a more meaningful way?

Session 8, Apr. 3 (first day after conclusion of Pesach)

The Torah Service. How did it evolve into its current form? What was its original intent? Why is it seen as the highlight of the service? How can Reconstructionist communities address the challenges this service poses, including making its deeper meanings more apparent and felt?

Session 9, May 1

The Prophetic Voice. Where is the voice of the prophets heard in the course of a prayer service? How does it compare and contrast with the other voices found in the *siddur*? Where is prophecy's place today?

Session 10, June 12

Siyyum, or end-of-year celebration. The year of Learning Services concludes with a fuller davening experience, including incorporation of participants' original compositions. Includes time to reflect on what was learned throughout the year.

Jewish Book Festival

JCC 20th Annual Jewish Book Festival hosts Local Authors Fair and Brunch *A Celebration of Our Community's Creativity*

Halye Aisner, special to the WJN

The Jewish Community Center of Washtenaw County's 20th Annual Jewish Book Festival will host a local author's brunch on Sunday, November 18 at 10 a.m. The Local Authors Fair and Brunch: A Celebration of Our Community's Creativity is an opportunity to hear about new books from talented authors living in the Ann Arbor area. Each author will discuss their book and answer questions. A complimentary light brunch will be served. The event is sponsored by the Huron River Press and there is no charge to attend.

Alicia Kent

Alicia Kent is the author of *African, Native and Jewish American Literature and the Reshaping of Modernism*. What does the modern era look like to those labeled "not modern" or "traditional"? Refuting claims that their art was "old world" and "primitive," African, Native, and Jewish American writers in the early 20th century instead developed experimental strategies of self-representation that reshaped the very form of the novel itself.



Alicia Kent

Uncovering the connections and confrontations among three ethnic groups not often read in relation to one another, Kent maps out the historical contexts that have shaped ethnic American writing in the Modernist era, a period of radical dislocation from homelands and increased migration for these three ethnic groups. Rather than focus on the ways others have represented these groups, Kent restores the voices of these multicultural writers to the debate about what it means to be modern.

Alicia A. Kent is associate professor of English at the U-M Flint and board secretary for the Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Havurah.