

AARC to use Project-Based Learning

Margo Schlanger, special to the WJN

The Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation will introduce Project-Based Learning (PBL) into its K-6 religious school curriculum, starting Fall 2015. An inquiry- and

authenticity, creativity, and ongoing inquiry and evolution of Jewish practice.

When Behrman House Publishing, one of the leading producers of Jewish educational materials began introducing PBL into its

enough with Jewish tradition to feel free to innovate, adding their own links to the *goldene kayt* (golden chain) of Jewish civilization.

PBL is a familiar approach from many elementary school science classrooms, but is

materials, New CAJE conferences for Jewish educators over the past few years have showcased using PBL in Jewish classrooms.

AARC has hired its member Clare Kinberg, former editor of *Bridges: A Jewish Feminist Journal*, as Beit Sefer Director for the 2015-16 school year to begin implementation of the new approach to teaching. Kinberg will also continue in her position as Temple Beth Emeth librarian. "I am very excited to work with families to implement project-based participatory learning into our Beit Sefer," Kinberg says. "Questioning has always been the basis of Jewish learning, so combining the contemporary teaching methods of inquiry, experiential and project based learning in the Jewish classroom is such a natural." Kinberg explains that the AARC's Beit Sefer curriculum will explore Jewish ethics, texts, history, and practice, and that students will also learn Hebrew language skills. For more information on AARC's Beit Sefer, go to <http://aarecon.org/what-we-do/learning/religious-school/>. Enrollment forms are posted there, as well. ■



A volunteer from the Huron Valley Humane Society and an adoptable dog

innovation- based teaching method, PBL is a perfect fit for a Reconstructionist religious school. AARC's Beit Sefer is a small supplementary school, open to congregation members and non-members; it meets at the Ann Arbor Jewish Community Center on Sunday mornings. The school's goal is to embody the values of Reconstructionist Judaism: community,

catalog about three years ago, the press quoted Reconstructionism's founder Mordechai Kaplan to explain the value of the approach. If Judaism is to thrive, Kaplan wrote, "it must again break the narrow frame of a creed and resume its original function as a culture, as the expression of the Jewish spirit and the whole life of the Jews." AARC likewise seeks to inspire its students to be knowledgeable and comfortable

perhaps less familiar in religious education. PBL lessons begin with a driving question, something the students feel they need to know. The teacher then guides the students through a journey of discovery using a variety of resources. Students choose how they will present the information they have discovered; the culmination of each project is sharing it with a larger audience. In addition to Behrman House curriculum



Clare Kinberg

Introducing the AARC School (Beit Sefer) staff

Emily Eisbruch and Carol Lessure, special to the WJN

The Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation (AARC) offers an innovative and nurturing religious school (Beit Sefer) for students ages 4–14.

“What I hear over and over again, from parents and students alike, is that the AARC Beit Sefer is a place where each child can find his or her own connection to Judaism,” explains Rabbi Michal Woll, Beit Sefer director. “We have a wonderful and diverse community and that diversity enriches us, individually and collectively. I think our teachers bring a similar diversity in background, both Jewishly and educationally and will be great assets to the school. I am looking forward to building an even richer program, engaging parents and

other community members in parallel and joint learning and bringing our studies out of the classroom into the community.”

The AARC Beit Sefer meets each Sunday morning during the school year at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Ann Arbor. Here’s an introduction to the AARC’s Beit Sefer’s outstanding teaching staff:

Karen Pollens, head teacher, has seven years of religious school teaching experience. In the past, she ran a home-based daycare center for 15 years and had a career as a neonatal nurse. She teaches the youngest students. Pollens has five children of her own and became a member of the AARC last year. She will be backing up Rabbi Michal with

administrative and other duties.

Judy Blumenthal teaches the middle group with a goal of giving them a fun, educational experience. She brings to us a background as an assistant teacher at Beth Israel Congregation, as a counselor and leader at various camps and most recently as coordinator of daycamps at Camp Moshava and Habonim Tavor. Blumenthal is pursuing a degree in early childhood education and development at Eastern Michigan University.

Ben Meiselman joins the Beit Sefer staff as the teacher of the oldest students. Meiselman has many years of leadership experience in the Habonim movement as well as teaching religious school in the Greater Washington

D.C. area. He is eager to infuse the classroom with games, activities and discussions that will help students appreciate our shared history and tradition as well as prepare them with the tools to define their own relationship within Judaism and its practice. Meiselman has returned to Ann Arbor to continue graduate studies in pursuit of a PhD. in economics.

To learn more about the Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation and the Beit Sefer, contact Rabbi Michal Woll at ravnichal@aaarecon.org. Rabbi Michal looks forward to getting to know any families in search of the right educational fit for their kids, and will be happy to reply to all inquiries. ■

Congregations

Youth discover Judaism via Reconstructionist approach

Carol Lessure, special to the WJN

A boy wears a crown and another boy dons a black hat. The audience thinks: “Here comes another Purim Spiel.” But while the one with the crown is named Ahasuerus, he is the “King of the Playground.” And the one with the black hat is a familiar playground nemesis, the instigator, feeding his friend’s ego and telling tall tales about the other children. Oh, and his name is Haman. Thus, young people began their version of the Purim story for the Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Havurah annual

Purim celebration. Their original play reframed the familiar story as a playground drama complete with bullies, peacemakers and the ones daring enough to tell it like it is, a girl called Esther and her brother, Mordechai. Through the play, young Jews were offering their take on the story and bringing the Megillah alive for both children and adults in the audience.

The students were putting into practice the teachings of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, who promoted the idea that to make Judaism relevant to each succeeding generation they must have in-depth knowledge of Jewish traditions and teachings and encouraged to discuss, dissect and evolve these practices to make them meaningful to their lives.

Rabbi Kaplan’s ideas have influenced the establishment of many new Jewish traditions and encouraged changes throughout modern Judaism. His teachings form the basis of the Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Havurah religious school. Led by rabbinic intern Aura Ahuvia and head teacher Brian Duchemin, the school seeks to provide students with Jewish cultural literacy while instilling a sense of discovery and curiosity as well as the ability to interpret Judaism so that it will have meaning to them.

The curriculum of the school, called “Beit Sefer” or House of Learning, is tailored to how children learn at different developmental stages with a focus on building community, participation, and personal spirituality as well as critical thinking skills. The school uses music and experiential learning to engage its students. Teachers seek to accommodate students wherever they may be at in their Jewish learning allowing for different backgrounds and family compositions.

This approach is particularly noticeable in the self-paced Hebrew program. The older students are divided into small knowledge-based groups based on their ability in Hebrew, rather than age. The students work in small groups at a comfortable, but challenging, rate and are able to receive one-on-one attention from teachers and teaching assistants. The Hebrew program has helped students who begin their religious education during upper elementary or middle school still successfully prepare for their bar or bat mitzvahs.

Meanwhile, the youngest class, the *Ketanim* (or “little ones”), engage in experiential, active learning incorporating Torah stories, holidays, and Hebrew into activities such as puppets, playacting, songs and dances. A favorite of the students is yoga style movements where children shape Hebrew letters out of their bodies and acting out new Hebrew words associated with that letter.

Jewish learning for the middle class, *Yeladim* (“children”), focuses on the context of Jewish history, prayer and stories for middle-elementary school-age students. The class engages in deeper discussion of holiday rituals and traditions. The students are encouraged to master what they learn by inventing creative ways of retelling and connecting these elements of Judaism.

The oldest class, the *Gedolim* (“large ones”) encourages self analysis and expression, modeling the Jewish tradition for in-depth intellectual engagement. Upper-elementary to pre-bar / bat mitzvah age students engage in in-depth discussions while they wrestle with their own solutions to ethical or moral issues. This class might hold a mock trial, write and perform an original play or explore alternative value and ideas about the nature of life—and then discuss their choices.

All students come together in the middle of their morning for *Shirah* – a singing session led by Aura Ahuvia – to instill a sense of community, joy of prayer and knowledge of common songs sung during Shabbat services.

“The discussions are great,” says Livia Belman Wells, “We discuss a lot of politics but our teacher brings us back to the subject matter eventually.” Livia is one of several students who have continued attending Sunday morning classes while she prepares for her bat mitzvah. ■



Aleph Bet: Peter Cohn, Carl Gombert, Deron Lessure, teacher Sophia Blumenthal, Lucy Tobier, and Lior Cooper

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Jonathan Cohn, special to the WJN

Everybody knows that religious school is boring—everybody, that is, except Geoffrey Berdy.

It is an ordinary Sunday morning in early January. And Berdy, who runs the local Reconstructionist *Beit Siefer* (school), has a full lesson planned for his students. There will be singing, introduction to a Jewish holiday, plus some instruction in Hebrew—a few words for the youngest ones, more sophisticated material for their older ones.

But before Berdy gets to that traditional fare, he has something else in mind.

It's time for "Torah yoga."

Standing at the front of the class, Berdy turns his shoulders and feet inward, as if he were a set of the sacred scrolls. He beckons the students to do the same and they oblige, standing up from the rug where they've been sitting and—one by one—assuming the same position. "Breathe in, nice and easy, and now breathe out," Berdy says, as the kids inhale and exhale as one. Then, following Berdy's lead, they unfurl themselves with Zen-like fluidity until they are all standing feet apart, hands high in the air.

It's not the first time Berdy has started off a class with yoga. He figures it's a good way to relax the kids and put them in the mood for learning, which is no small feat given their ages. (Some are just five years old.) But this week, yoga is also part of the official curriculum. After the kids are done pretending to be Torah scrolls, Berdy teaches them what yoga masters call the "tree position." And that's appropriate, he says, since the holiday of Tu B'Shvat—Judaism's celebration of trees—is coming up soon.

A discussion of trees follows. When Berdy asks the kids why trees are important, hands shoot up. "They give us oxygen," says one student. "They give us shade," says another. Then a third student volunteers, "they have roots, like families." Bingo—that's exactly where Berdy wanted this discussion to go. Soon Berdy is recounting a Talmudic fable about an elderly man who plants a seedling, knowing that it won't blossom into a tree until long after he's died. But the man does it anyway, Berdy explains, because his ancestors have done it for him—and this is a way of passing on tradition and strengthening the community over time.

It's not the most conventional way to teach children about Judaism. But, then, Berdy doesn't want to be conventional—and neither do the people who hired him.

When the Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Havurah—the local Reconstructionist congregation—set out to upgrade their religious school a year ago, they sought a director who would create a program consistent with Reconstructionism's broader philosophy. They wanted a director who would take the Jewish faith seriously, but teach about it in a fun, innovative way—somebody who would honor tradition even as he modernized it. In Geoff Berdy, they seem to have found just such a person.

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Now 35 years old, Berdy has strong local ties: He was born at Detroit's Sinai Hospital and spent much of his childhood in the area. He also has an undergraduate degree from Michigan State University, a fact he hopes all of his friends in Ann Arbor won't hold against him. But Berdy's eclectic background also includes time abroad—some of it in Great Britain and some of it on a kibbutz in Israel. And he credits that experience with broadening his horizons: Among his best

friends during his grade school years in London was a fellow student at who happened to be Palestinian. Together they founded a group called M.E.M.O.: "Middle Eastern Minorities Organization," in which they wrote letters to Middle East leaders urging them to initiate dialogue.

Although Berdy likes to think of himself as something of a "religious rebel," he grew up in the Orthodox tradition and always had a strong sense of Jewish identity. He was one of the only Jewish students at that London school. (He ended up playing Joseph in the nativity play.) Later on, the years Berdy spent in Yeshiva turned him on to Jewish education—particularly the concept of *lishmah*, or learning Torah for its own sake. As an undergraduate at MSU, he helped start a Jewish Student Union, in response to a planned visit by Louis Farrakhan. He would go on to spend his last undergraduate semester at Hebrew College, in Newton, Massachusetts.

For many years, Berdy says, his family and friends figured he was destined to become a rabbi. And Berdy admits he thought about it. But he eventually chose a different academic path: pursuing a master's in theology at Harvard's Divinity School, where—in addition to studying under scholars like Cornel West and Elie Wiesel—he delved deeply into issues surrounding the philosophy of education.

It was around this time, he says, that he began to think a lot about the disconnect he perceived between contemporary Judaism and its past. Concepts like *lishmah* were fading from the Jewish community's collective consciousness, he says, with only the orthodox keeping them alive. And the practice of the faith was increasingly top-down, with rabbis increasingly adopting the exalted position of priests—preaching down to their congregations rather than engaging with them. "Rabbis came to prominence during the Second Temple period, probably as a reaction to the priests, who had been dominant," Berdy explains. "Rabbis couldn't absolve sins—they were just spiritual teachers, bringing people closer to God by their own knowledge and powers of persuasion."

According to Berdy, this relatively democratic model of faith, in which anybody with the right training could lead a congregation, befit a religion that was dispersed and constantly on the run. (Berdy notes that, in this respect, Judaism's evolution closely resembled the evolution of African-American churches, where anybody who learned scripture could lead a congregation.) Today, he says, that's changing: "With the institutionalization of religion, the Jewish community has given over too much of the responsibility of Jewish learning to rabbis. Part of my personal mission is to foster the notion that we can all be Jewish teachers and lovers of Jewish learning, even with a limited background."

During his years at Harvard, Berdy says, he also became fascinated with the relationship between the Jewish faith and technology. Jews "really were the first virtual community," Berdy says. And he's only half-joking: After all, for hundreds of years Jews were scattered about the world, united only by a common text—one that passed from tablet to parchment and then to book. "People in Spain were writing to Maimonides in Egypt," Berdy notes. "Communities were connected by tradition, across national boundaries, and not through hierarchy the way, for example, the Catholic Church was."

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All of that is fine and well. But what do all these heady concepts have to do with Sunday School?

Quite a lot, it turns out. While in Boston, Berdy had started working at a local Jewish school. Later, after marrying a woman he'd first met at Michigan State, he returned to the Detroit area—and became program director at Ann Arbor's Beth Israel congregation. "It was a wonderful start," Berdy says. "I liked the congregation very much. It's a special place and it gave me an introduction to Ann Arbor."

In 2006, Berdy got an offer to direct education and outreach for the Toledo Board of Jewish Education, a job he still holds today. It's a job that requires Berdy to "wear many hats":

Berdy—who is a fan of Montessori-style education—says the "kids get it right away." They tune out when a teacher hands down doctrine. But when a teacher makes them think for themselves, by participating and asking questions, they engage—and start to love learning for its own sake, which is the very definition of *lishmah*. "In many cases the analytical thinking embedded in Jewish learning has been sucked out," Berdy says. "That's the heart of the Jewish tradition. We want to create critical thinkers right off the bat."

And once the students get used to this style of learning, Berdy argues, they can really run with it. Older children, he says, can use the same skills



Geoffrey Berdy leads a group in song at the Reconstructionist Havurah Retreat

Among other things, he serves as vice president for Judaic studies at the David S. Stone Hebrew Academy, which is Toledo's Jewish day school. But even with the multiple jobs—not to mention a one-year-old son, Lev—Berdy had time for one more commitment.

That's where Ann Arbor's Reconstructionist Havurah comes into the story. It had been offering religious classes for some ten years or so—first in the homes of families, later at the Jewish Community Center of Washtenaw County. But with the congregation growing, its board decided it was time to hire a fully credentialed teacher. It wanted somebody with extensive experience in Jewish education but also somebody comfortable with their approach to faith: "Our curriculum comes out of the Reconstructionist approach to Judaism," says Deborah Field, who is head of the Havurah's education committee. "We are supposed to learn about the tradition, study it in its historical context, and then make decisions as a community and as individuals about how we relate to that tradition—which aspects we adopt, which we adapt, which we forgo, and so on."

Those ideas led the Havurah to Berdy, whose classroom style closely matches that philosophy. He asks questions more than he answers them; he leads discussions rather than giving lectures. Berdy teaches about the Talmud and the Torah, but he's constantly encouraging the children develop their own interpretations of the text. He explains how different Jewish cultures from around the world celebrate holidays, careful never to suggest one method is better than the other.

That's asking a lot of initiative and self-direction out of some very young children. But

to direct their study of the Torah as they prepare for bar and bat mitzvah, picking and choosing the parts of the text that interest them the most. "We don't want kids having cookie-cutter bar mitzvahs," Berdy says. "We want them to have their own interests and a strong sense of their own identity." This style of education inevitably tolerates—indeed, it embraces—a large diversity of opinion when it comes to fundamental matters of faith and spirituality. But that, says Berdy, is entirely consistent with Reconstructionism and, more generally, Judaism's tradition of spirited debate over the meaning of text.

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One other focus of Berdy's classroom is teaching about the importance of serving others in the community, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. In one of this year's earliest sessions, Berdy had all the students make boxes for Tzedakah out of construction paper. The boxes now reside in the kids' homes; every week, they collect donations that they bring to the school on Sunday.

I know from personal experience—my son is a student in the class—that the kids see the exercise as both exciting and meaningful. Filling the box is a game, yet they understand why they are collecting the money and what it will eventually mean to the people who benefit from it. But then, that's exactly the way Berdy and the Reconstructionist Havurah like it. They want learning about Judaism to be both fun and meaningful. ■

Jonathan Cohn, a senior editor of the *New Republic* and the author of *Sick: The untold story of America's health care crisis—and the people who pay the price*, is based in Ann Arbor.