

The Synagogue at Malden Bridge

Kislev-Tevet-Shevat 5763 Vol. IV, Number 1 November/December 2002

Where We've Been and Where We're Going

by Lydia Kukoff

As we mark our third year, we can reflect on many milestones in the life of our young community. We began, ten households strong, with the vision of creating a vital Jewish community in our area. We embark on this new year with almost 70 member families, and our conviction that Jews express their Jewishness in different ways is stronger than ever. It was always our hope that our community would be inclusive—a tent open on all four sides. This year we've begun to realize that goal by continuing to develop multiple points of entry: ritual/liturgy; culture; social action; and learning.

Ritual

Our Ritual Committee developed a service that is accessible to those with less Jewish background and meaningful to those with more. They chose a new siddur and machzor which enhanced the prayer experience through better English translations, and more transliterations and commentary. Or Rose led several Shabbatonim and served as a resource to the community. But the thrust of Or's teachings was always

the empowerment of our own community to participate more fully, both as leaders of the service and as worshippers. Four of our members now take turns leading weekly Shabbat services. (A tape of the service is available so that everyone can familiarize themselves with the prayers and melodies. Please contact Bernie at 766-7389.)

Program/Culture

Program/Culture continues to be an important expression of who we are, as well as a means of outreach. As a result of our film series, we now have an impressive library of films of Jewish interest. A screening of *The Fighter* at the Crandell, became an important event for the larger Chatham community, and *Golda's Balcony* at *Shakespeare and Company* was a sellout. Our "Conversation Pieces" continued to bring people doing creative work into dialogue with our community, and we established our first book group.

Communication

As long as we are doing so many things, we need to be talking about them, and this year we came to recognize the importance of establishing and maintaining good lines of communication within the SMB commu-

nity. To that end, we created our first members' directory, which will be updated periodically. Our weekly email updates are reaching a bigger and more engaged audience, and the mailing list for our newsletter continues to grow.

Religious School

Recruiting children of religious school age continues to be a challenge for us. Despite this difficulty, last year we had two levels of classes, plus Family Congregation. Programs included a beautiful Chanukah celebration; Gleanings a day of picking vegetables on a farm and bringing them to a soup kitchen; a Tu b'Shvat seder; and a family dinner in the sukkah. It's our hope that if we direct our efforts toward programming for families with young children we will increase the ranks of our Hebrew school.

Cemetery

As we move into this new year, we have a beautiful location in the Chatham Rural Cemetery for a Jewish cemetery, available to all Jews

The Synagogue at Malden Bridge is located at the Wesley United Methodist Church in Malden Bridge, New York at the intersection of Albany Turnpike and Shaker Museum Road.



in the area. Our focus now is on designing our cemetery and establishing support to maintain it.

The Larger Community

Another exciting aspect of the growth this year at SMB has been our emerging identity as part of the larger Chatham/Columbia County spiritual community. On 9/11, we participated in a communal commemoration and were featured on the front page of the

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local newspaper. Today, when local churches organize an interfaith event, like the services that ring in the secular New Year at Chatham's First Night, SMB is an integral part of the planning.

Moving On

When I first wrote this article it was twice as long as it is now because I included the names of the many, many members who made everything happen. We are a community of workers, and we owe our success to the efforts of everyone. We have lots to do in the coming year. Our social action agenda needs to be developed and implemented. We are beginning to think about a permanent home. But perhaps our most pressing challenge is to engage more members to become actively involved. Currently, we are reorganizing committees and you will be hearing more about how you can help. We are a community of full-timers and part-timers, but at SMB we are all volunteers. Our growth and vitality depend on the gifts of time, energy, and spirit of each of us.

Commentary

The Aleinu

by George Carey

The ancient and beautiful prayer, The Aleinu, became our banner of devotion to our God during the anguishing days of the Medieval Crusades. When the Second Crusade was proclaimed in 1144, the fanatical Cistercian Monk Radulph set forth urging Crusaders from the Rhineland to avenge themselves upon the so-called crucifiers of Jesus—the Jews—before departing for the Holy Land to fight Muslims. A three decade bloodbath ensued. By 1170, the anti-Semitic virulence infected the hitherto relatively quiet Loire Valley of France. In the Spring of 1171, for the first time in France, accusations of a blood libel were brought against the small Jewish community of Blois.

The outcome was inevitable. The entire community numbering 34 men and 17 women was burned at the stake on May 26, 1171. Ephraim ben Jacob of Bonn, a contemporary observer, tells us that as they were burned they sang the Aleinu as a final Kiddush Ha Shem, a sanctification of God's name—"at first quietly, then rising in volume," until the terrible end. He saw it as the ultimate achievement of Kavanah (focussed concentration) and Devekut (clinging to God). From that time forward, the Aleinu became a beloved part of the daily service as a tribute to the heroism of these martyrs, and Simcha ben Samuel—a student of Rashi— included it in his Machzor Vitry. It symbolizes loyalty to Judaism in the face of the most terrible persecution. The prayer was edited and expanded from more ancient texts in the 3rd century CE by Rav, a founder of the Babylonian academy at Sura, Persia

as a part of the Rosh Hashanah Musaf service. Mystics believed that Akiva ascended to heaven reciting the Aleinu. It asserts our duty to praise and glorify God, and then (a probable vestige of Temple practice) to bow and prostrate ourselves. Finally we celebrate God's uniqueness as the One and Only God. There is good reason to believe that a form of the Aleinu goes back at least as far as The Great Assembly (ca. 500 BCE). The inspired melody belongs to a 12th century CE tradition called the "Mt Sinai Niggunim."

We acknowledge our close relationship to God saying, "*Sh'lo sam chelkeinu ka'heim, v'goraleinu k'chol ha'monam. V'anachnu kor'im...*" (Who has not made our portion like theirs, nor our lot like that of the masses. And we bow...). Rav's text originally included after "...monam," "*She'heim mishtachavim l'hevel va'rik u'mitpal'lim el Eil lo yoshia. V'anachnu korim u'mishtachavim lifnei haMelech, Melchai haMelchim...*" (for they bow down to emptiness and vanity, and pray to a god who cannot save, and we bowand prostrate ourselves before the King of Kings...) This was taken to be a hostile comment on Christianity and Islam, despite the fact that Rav lived in Persia, a non-Christian country—and three centuries before the creation of Islam. I feel that one of the benefits of saying our traditional prayers in Hebrew lies in the possibility of honoring the poignant experiences of our predecessors as they are embedded in these faint sounds of ancient prayers through "Liturgical Archaeology."



Community

by Karen Levine

The morning before Kol Nidre, Fred Rheingold, Alan Gelb and I went to visit a local nursing home. A rabbi from Albany had told Fred about a few Jewish residents and asked if anyone from our community would consider making a holiday visit, so the three of us set off bearing honeycake, challah (courtesy of Zvi Cohen), and a shofar, not quite knowing what to expect.

The first woman we saw shooed us off. "They always made fun of me. Go away. I don't want any," she said. The second could barely hear us, but she and Fred managed to connect around common acquaintances in Nassau, and as soon as we cut into the challah and honeycake, a happy crowd gathered round to help with the celebration. A third woman was fast asleep in front of the TV. As we left her side we noticed a Jewish name on one of the doors and knocked, to find a fiftysomething year-old hippie, with an electric guitar propped next to his bed. He appeared to have taken one-too-many

acid trips, but once we began talking, he recalled his Bar-Mitzvah in Albany. One of the women we encountered really stands out, however. In fact, I don't think I'll ever forget her. To begin with, she was genuinely delighted to see us. She'd had surgery six weeks earlier, and was regaining her strength in the nursing home in hopes of returning to her daughter's house. Her involvement with Judaism had been minimal, but she was happy to have a piece of honeycake. Then Fred asked if she'd care to hear the shofar.

"Oh," she said, "do you think it would be allowed?" Fred assured her that he could play it very softly, and he began. "T'kee-ah." The moment she heard the sound her eyes welled with tears. "Oh my," she said. "I don't remember the last time I heard that sound. I was a little girl...with my father." Fred continued through all of the calls and when he finished she reached out to embrace each of us. "Thank you," she said. "I can't tell you how much this means to me. Thank you for reminding me that I'm a Jew. I was born a Jew and I'll die a Jew. No one can take that from me."

Over the course of the next few days,

each time I heard the call of the Shofar I thought of this woman. At SMB, when Yehuda and Ben Hanani blow into the ram's horn, we are privileged to actually hear music. Over the years, however, Yehuda has talked about the sound of the shofar as being much

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more than music. He's talked about it being an ancient wail that reaches as far back as the Jewish people can reach, and reverberates in our souls. Nowhere was that more evident than in the room at Barnwell, our local nursing home, as we prepared to usher in the New Year, 5763.

Editor's note: We have discussed the possibility of more regular visits to Jewish residents at local nursing homes. If you're interested in participating, call me at 392-5109.

Microcinema

On **January 25** at **7:30 PM**, we will be showing the recent feature-length documentary **Paragraph 175**, which explores an historically overlooked subject: the Nazi persecution of homosexuals. The makers of **The Times of Harvey Milk** and **The Celluloid Closet** follow historian Klaus Muller as he gathers testimony from some of the only known gay survivors of the death camps still living. "Exquisite...powerful"-*The San Francisco Chronicle*.


On **March 22** at **7:30 PM**, we pay homage to our heritage with our annual screening of a Yiddish film. This year it's **Tevye**, the Sholem Aleichem tale of the dairyman with the daughters but without "Sunrise Sunset" or "If I Were a Rich Man." Filmed in 1939 on Long Island, it stars Maurice Schwartz, the Orson Welles of the Yiddish theater, in what is arguably his greatest performance.



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Ascend aloft unto God on high,
To convey that which my tongue cannot express—
All that lies deep hidden within my heart...."
—The Old Prayer Book

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We are delighted to introduce our new bookplates. They offer an opportunity to honor friends and family—and the *mem-ory* of friends and family—while at the same time supporting the Synagogue at Malden Bridge. Each bookplate costs \$36. You can specify if you'd like it to be placed in a Siddur, a Chumash, or a High Holiday Machzor. Just fill in the coupon below and mail it to **The Synagogue at Malden Bridge Box 18, Malden Bridge, New York 12115.**

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Point of View

Zelig to the Rescue

By Martin Kace

In early autumn of 2000, I suffered a Spinal Cord Injury in a logging accident. Since then, I have been paralyzed from the chest down and am confined to a wheelchair. Though I have managed to resume a productive life, nothing is the same—neither for me nor my family—as it was before my accident. Getting out of bed, showering and dressing is an ordeal. What once took 15 minutes now takes me 90. My day can be ruined by a too-narrow doorway; my evening dashed by a step too steep into a restaurant or a theater manager who argues that inaccessibility has been grandfathered in by some arcane piece of legislation. As a result, and in my zeal to walk again, I've developed a new interest in science, with Stem Cell Research at the top of my list.

For those of you who have not been following the controversy around stem cell research as closely as I have, here's a brief primer on the issue:

Remember Woody Allen's "Zelig", the story of a man who would obsessively adapt to his surroundings? Stem cells are the Zelig's (minus the neurosis) of the human body. They are "neutral" cells—without a cause, tabula rosa—until they

find their way to a tissue culture, be it organ, gland, bone, or muscle, at which point they lose their neutrality and become part of that tissue. Stem cells have the potential to repair virtually any system within the human body. In laboratory experiments, stem cells have been found to regenerate nerves, livers, muscles and even brains. Their regenerative power is simply enormous.

The most pliable and productive stem cells are found in the embryos. Not to be confused with a fetus, which already is composed of highly

be the result, not Zelig plus Charles Manson or Anna Nicole Smith.

(Ironically, the President has stated that using aborted embryos would foster the advent of "Embryo Farms" which would exploit women. They would, in his mind, lead to long lines of young, uneducated women turning up every two or three months to sell the undifferentiated fruits of their wombs to the interests of filthy capitalists. Kind of makes one wonder about the special kinds of feminists giving him advice, doesn't it?

The number of disorders that can ultimately be impacted by future stem cell therapies is

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differentiated cells, the embryo is a cluster of human cells that have not yet differentiated – in other words, they are all Zelig's. Other sources of stem cells have been found in adults, but they are not nearly as numerous or "pure" as those derived from embryos. Once these cells are collected (their most plentiful sources being discarded embryos from abortion clinics), they can be activated to reproduce in a laboratory petri dish. Zelig squared, Zelig cubed etc. would

enormous, ranging from stroke to cancer, from heart disease to emphysema. Beyond this, a cluster of such debilitating disorders as Parkinson's Disease, MS, Alzheimer's, ALS (aka Lou Gehrig's Disease), Juvenile Diabetes and Spinal Cord Injury would be the first to benefit from this research. The reason for my interest is evident, but the truth is that the reach of the application of stem cell research is so great that nearly every American knows



someone whose life might be touched by it.

So where's the rub? To some extent, the controversy was triggered by a word. In August, 2001, Active Cell Technologies of Waltham, Massachusetts launched the mother of all semantic wars over the word "cloning," with their announcement that they had successfully *cloned* a human embryo. Within a month, a bill was passed that not only outlawed the cloning of a human being, but outlawed embryonic cloning for therapies and research as well. In one fell swoop, the passage of this bill brought religion into the House of Representatives and both shortened and limited innumerable lives. In an effort to *protect* Americans from evil science run amok, the House managed to criminalize the receipt or importation of stem cells derived from cloned embryos. On a practical level, what this means is that if Christopher Reeve were to go to Sweden for a transplant and come back to the US on his own two feet, he could be brought up on criminal charges. Reeve has said that he would turn himself into authorities, starting with US Customs, for breaking the law in this manner. Debate over this bill, known as the Brownback bill (for Senator Sam Brownback of Arkansas, who introduced the unadulterated House bill, HR 2505 to the Senate) has been postponed many times, because President Bush has vowed to veto any bill but Brownback's, and the pro-therapy side of the Senate does not yet have

enough votes to overturn that veto. And so, it languishes in the Senate, just as many of us who might benefit by its passage are forced to languish.

In the *real* America, opposition to therapeutic cloning comes from three sources: Orthodox Catholicism, the Religious Right, and the extreme left. We are all familiar with the arguments put forth by the first two; that life begins at conception. As to the left,

entists with Snidely Whiplash moustaches or fishnet stockings and stiletto heels has supplanted our reason and decency. Our representatives, ever on the hunt for an opportunity to dumb an issue down, owe a great debt to Drs. Mengele and Frankenstein.

So you can see why I've come to personalize this legislation. In any disaster, large or small, we always think of the dead, rather than the injured.

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Deaths are our marker, and perhaps rightly so. But usually the number of persons injured is in excess of those killed. Even so, the injured have little place in our thoughts. The injured, we think, are lucky to be alive. That is our excuse for the pettiness that allows all of us, and I put myself at the top of that list, to be pur-

suers of closure, not able to live in the moment if the moment comes with some thorns in it. After all, we can move forward after the death of a loved one, or a great disaster. Chronic injury or disability or the toll time takes on all of us is much more demanding. They hold back the intimate circle of family and friends, and ultimately increase discomfort for all involved.

there is anxiety about the advent of Globalism and Corporate Dominance over the very stuff of human life. With all respect to these views, Judaism, Islam, Mormonism and Secularism do not concur, whether on grounds of what constitutes human life, the importance of saving existing lives, or just common decency. In Judaism, the sanctity of existing life is put above all else, and I am grateful not to have to face the dilemma posed by Catholicism.

We need to bear in mind that stem cell research is not a good intention that paves the road to hell; it paves the path to saving lives and rescuing hurt, broken and troubled ones.

Along with that, the popular image of the evil science of Hitler-Mengele, or the fictitious Transylvanian underground sci-



Coming Up

Chaunkah...Shabbaton...& more...

•Our second annual Chanukah party will be held post-Chanukah, on December 14th at the home of Annette Schickman in Old Chatham. Please call Annette at 518-794-8542 to let her know if you'll be attending and so that she can let you know what to bring.

•A Shabbaton with Or Rose on February 7 & 8th. Kabbalat Shabbat services on Friday night at 6:30PM. Shabbat morning at 9:30AM. We'll also do a study session on Sunday morning at 10AM location to be announced.

LOOKING FOR DONATIONS:

•Canned goods for the Chatham Silent Food Pantry

•Old cell phones to be reprogrammed for emergency use for the elderly and for shut-ins.

Collections boxes will be in the Synagogue for both. Please bring in what you can.



The Synagogue at Malden Bridge
Box 18, Malden Bridge, New York 12115

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