HAPPY CHANUKAH!

Jewish Observer of Central New York

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December 2026

From the Editor



Barbara Davis

There is an aspect of the Chanukah story that doesn't get enough attention. It is not the miracle of the oil. It is the moment ***before*** the miracle, when the Maccabees returned to a desecrated Temple, surveyed the wreckage of everything they held sacred, and then, against all reason and against all the evidence before their eyes, decided to light what little oil they had anyway.

They did not know a miracle was coming. They simply refused to let the darkness win.

We are living in a year of significant anniversaries. 2026 is the 250th anniversary of the moment that a group of men gathered in Philadelphia and put their names to an affirmation that would change the world: *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness*. Those words were radical then and they are still radical today. For Jews, who had wandered the earth for millennia searching for a place where they could simply live, those words were a hope and a promise.

The promise was not perfect. It has been tested and contested and sometimes betrayed. But it endured. Because of that promise, Jews came from the countries of the world where they had no rights and no freedoms and were not equal and built lives in America. They built communities with synagogues, schools and federations. They came to places like Central New York and said: Here is where we will make a life.

The Jewish Federation of Central New York is a major part of that life. Many think of the Federation solely in terms of fundraising. But Federation and its annual campaign are something far more profound. Federation is doing what the Maccabees did. We look at what we have—which is never quite enough, which is always a little less than we need—and we choose to light the oil anyway. We are betting on the miracle.

Because Jewish continuity is a miracle. It has always been a miracle. Every generation that transmits this ancient inheritance to the next, every family that holds a seder, every young person who celebrates becoming *b'mitzvah,* who goes to a Jewish camp, a day school, supplementary school, Jewish high school or Hillel, is enacting something statistically improbable and spiritually astonishing. We Jews are numerically small. The forces that have worked against our survival are historical and sadly, they are still present. And yet here we are. Still lighting candles. Still singing. Still arguing beautifully about what it all means. Still trying to raise money so we can keep going.

The Jewish Federation of Central New York does not exist in spite of that; it exists ***because*** of it. It exists because people in every generation looked at the Jewish community and said: This is worth fighting for. This is worth making the phone call, the meeting, the gift, the commitment. The children in our Jewish schools are worth it. The older folks in our senior programs are worth it. The young adults and the families finding their way to Jewish life are worth it. The ties that bind us to Jews in Israel and around the world are worth it.

On this 250th anniversary of America's founding promise, we Jews in Central New York have a particular obligation to honor what this country gave us: the freedom to be fully Jewish and fully American at the same time. Not forced to choose. Not required to disappear. Not tolerated at the margins but welcomed into the great national story. We owe it to those who came before us, who built this community with their hands and their hearts and their sacrifices, to ensure that what they built does not diminish on our watch.

The candles of Chanukah are not meant to illuminate the inside of our homes. The rabbis were specific about this: we are to place them where they can be seen from the street. We must publicize the miracle, *Pirsumei nisa*. The light is not for us alone. The light is a declaration to the world that something sacred survived, that something worth preserving is still here, that we are still here.

As we kick off the 2027 Federation campaign and celebrate Chanukah this month, as we commemorate 250 years of American history, let us be the light in the window. Let us give generously, and recruit others to give generously, and tell the story of what Jewish community does—for the lonely, for the lost, for the young, for the old, for the searching, for the certain. Let us be stubborn about it, the way the Maccabees were stubborn, the way our ancestors were stubborn, the way every Jew who ever lit a candle in the dark was stubborn.

The oil, tradition tells us, lasted eight days. The tradition has lasted far longer. Let us keep the lights burning for many more generations to come…. And on the third night, come to the Federation Campaign Kick-Off celebration and let us join in singing the wonderful music of Jewish American composers who turned the promise of America into song, a gift of light to all who hear it.

Chag Urim Sameach!

ERRATA: The article about the book *Shield of David* in the November issue of the *JO* was erroneously attributed to Robert Glatter. Mr. Glatter did NOT write this article. [His review of the book will appear in an upcoming issue]. The *Jewish Observer* regrets the error.

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Federation's Marketing Paradox

Every strong brand is built on something you can walk into, see, or use. A museum has galleries of art. A JCC has a pool and a day care center. A day school has classrooms full of children. A senior residence has a building where people live. These institutions market a place, a service, an experience—something tangible enough to photograph, tour, and point to.

A Federation has none of that. It has no building people can visit for programming, no client roster, no social services. It doesn't run a camp, a lunch program, or a supplementary school. But it funds the organizations that do. Its "product," if it can be called that, is an allocation: money raised from the community, redirected back into the community through other people's buildings, other people's staffs, and other people's names on the door.

This creates a genuine marketing problem, not just a perception problem. Traditional marketing sells something. A Federation has no "thing"—only a function. It is the process, not the outcome. When a donor's gift funds a scholarship, a camping experience, or a counseling session, the visible good is attached to the agency that delivers it, not to the Federation that made it possible. The Federation's success is, by design, largely invisible—it disappears into the success of everyone else.

That invisibility is often mistaken for irrelevance. Donors can see what the JCC does. They can't as easily see what the Federation does, because what the Federation "does" is the JCC, the day school, kosher meals on wheels, the mikvah and dozens of agencies both local and national, plus emergency campaigns, overseas partnerships, and the community-wide planning that no single agency can do alone. The Federation's value is the sum and the coordination, not any one visible part.

The honest marketing challenge for Federation isn't to invent a product it doesn't have. It's to make the case for the function itself—collective responsibility, communal infrastructure, the ability to respond quickly in a crisis, the reach to support causes too small or too specialized for any single donor to fund alone. That's a harder story to tell, but it's the true story, and it's the only one that actually describes what a Federation is.

And that is exactly why your gift to the Annual Campaign matters so much. We cannot give you a tour of what your dollars are making possible, unless we took you all over Jewish Central New York. We are asking you to fund a mechanism, not a monument — to trust that your gift becomes a hundred quiet acts that ensure the safety, functioning and future of our community.

If you have already given to the 2026 Federation campaign—thank you. You gave without needing to see the tangible benefit of your generosity, and that is exactly the kind of generosity on which this community depends.

If you have not yet given, December 31st is nearly here. Please don't let the invisibility of the Federation's work be mistaken for its absence. Somewhere in this community, right now, your gift could make the difference between a need going unmet and a need being quietly, dependably answered. Please make your donation before the year closes. It is an investment you can make in something with no building, no plaque, and no name of its own—and yet everything to show for it.



Syracuse Stage presents *The BOOK CLUB Play*



A comedy about books and the people who love them will be presented by Syracuse Stage from January 27 - February 14, 2027.

The BOOK CLUB Play has been described by *The Washington Post* as: "authentically amusing... a comedy of modern literary manners."

Group rates for Syracuse Stage productions generally are open only to groups of ten, but for this production, book clubs of six members are invited to attend at the special reduced group rate. Tickets start at $35 at SyracuseStage.org/BookClub. ***Contact Tracey White at Trwhite@syr.edu or 315-443-9844 to book a group.***


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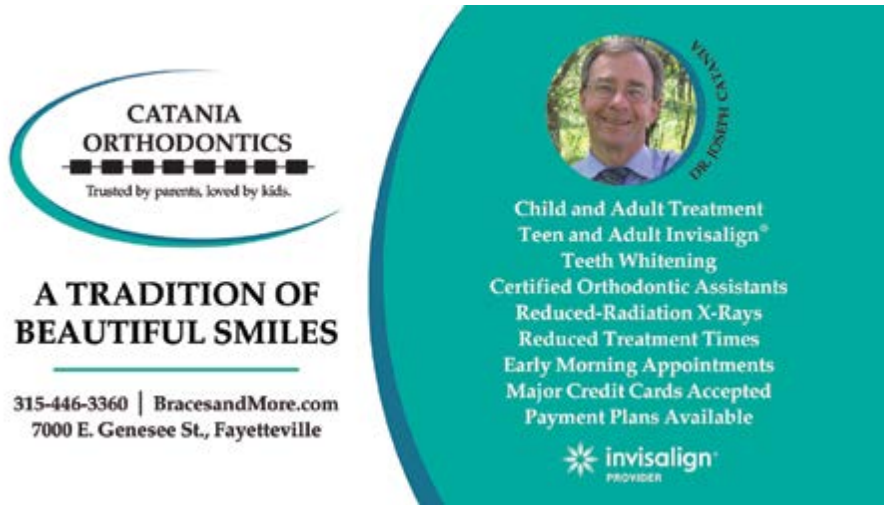
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D'VAR TORAH

The Torah: More Questions than Answers

by Rabbi Evan Shore, Shaarei Torah Orthodox Synagogue of Syracuse



God tells Abraham to take his beloved son Isaac and kill him: "Offer him as a burnt offering." The next morning Abraham hastens to do God's bidding. I wonder if Abraham slept that night. Did he toss and turn, wondering why God commanded him to slaughter his own son? Did he wonder about God's contradiction, having promised him that Issac would be his successor in bringing about a great nation to become a blessing to all humanity? Did he consider arguing with God about the gross immorality of what he was bidden to do, as he successfully had done when God had told him of the scheduled destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah? Or perhaps, Abraham was so devoted to God, having blind faith, that he slept well, perhaps even content that he would be obeying God's extreme demand, thereby proving his loyalty to God.

How old is Isaac when he is brought to be sacrificed? Is he a young child not aware of his fate, filled with childlike unwavering faith in his father? Perhaps he is a teenager, obeying his father, but somewhat recalcitrant? When he asks his father, "Here are the firestone and the wood for burning, but where is the sheep for the burnt offering," is he asking an innocent question or is it filled with suspicions about this strange trip that he and his father are taking? If Isaac senses the purpose of the trip, how does he feel about it? Is he content or overwhelmed by the sheer personality of his father and incapable of action that could potentially spare his life?

We are not party to the thoughts, the emotions, the ruminations of the characters. We have just the skeleton of the story.

Much of the power of this and other Torah stories, and one reason we read these stories year in and year out without their becoming tiresome, is due to what is not in the story, that we only have the skeleton of the episodes. When we read these episodes we fill in the blanks, we ourselves become an integral part of the drama. The stories become alive for us as we read ourselves into the story. We think how would we react to the challenges. The story and characters then become for us contemporary and alive. The Torah is not an ancient book, but very much contemporary speaking to the issues that beset us. They are our stories enacted through the narratives of millennia ago.

Our own moral insights are the essence of the story. The Torah introduces the story: "Sometime afterwards God put Abraham to the test." We are not told after what. More importantly and key is that God put Abraham to the test. The Torah does not tell us the purpose of the test, or if he passed or failed. Using our own experiences and insights we decide the purpose of the test and if he passed or failed. Was the test designed to place Abraham in a most terrible position to test his fealty to God? Or is Abraham tested to determine if he has internalized God's life-affirming values? In other stories we have witnessed both behaviors. In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah Abraham demonstrated God's life-affirming value. In the story of the expulsion of Ishmael and Hagar, Abraham demonstrated fealty to God. What is the nature of this test? Using our own value system, we create the purpose of the test and determine for ourselves whether Abraham passed or failed.

The Torah is a living book for us. We stand in dialogue with it as we strive and struggle, as we take our own questions and our own dilemmas and weave them into the narrative of the Torah. The Torah is an everlasting book.

Playmakers by Michael Kimmel

Reviewed by Norm Weiner

If you think about it, you may already know that a group of first-generation immigrant Jews created the American movie industry in the early part of the 20th century. Think Louis B. Mayer, the Warner brothers, William Fox. (If you didn't know this, or want to learn more, try to find a copy of Neal Gabler's book *An Empire of Their Own*.) What you may not know is that the American toy industry was also created by a group of first-generation immigrant Jews. There's the Michtom family (Ideal Toys), the Hassenfeld brothers (Hasbro), Joshua Lionel Cohen (Lionel Trains), the Handler family (Mattel). In his excellent book Playmakers, Michael Kimmel explores the world of childhood in the 20th century through, as the sub-title has it, the lives of "the Jewish entrepreneurs who created the toy industry in America."



When he was a child, Kimmel, a SUNY Stony Brook Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Sociology, discovered that his great-great uncle Morris Michtom founded the Ideal Toy Company. As an adult, he started researching his family history. As he delved, he "always came across another story to be told," not just of the Michtoms but also of the Hassenfelds, the Handlers, Lionel Cohen, and others. He realized that this was a story beyond a family memoir but, perhaps more importantly, a story of Jewish immigrants and how they helped develop the concept of childhood in 20th century America.

Kimmel starts with the creation of the Teddy Bear, around 1903, ostensibly by Rose and Morris Michtom, Russian-Jewish immigrants who had a candy store in Brooklyn. The Teddy Bear's popularity was such that its production evolved into the Ideal Toy Company. Before long, Ideal expanded to produce dolls.

In 1903, three brothers from Kishinev—Hillel, Herman, and Henry Hassenfeld—settled in Providence, Rhode Island, where they began selling cloth remnants. Eventually, they started turning the remnants into pencil cases. Soon, one brother set up a company to make the pencils, and the other two brothers expanded from pencil cases to toy doctor and nurse bags. This became Hasbro. (Full disclosure: My mother, no relation to the Hassenfelds, managed Hasbro's purchasing office for many years.)

Joshua Lionel Cowen (nee Cohen) was born in 1877 on New York's Lower East Side. His parents had emigrated from Suvalk in Poland. He was, as Kimmel describes him, "fascinated by engineering and science." In 1900, he founded the Lionel Corporation, and produced his first electric train in 1901.

You're probably most familiar with the Handler family. Ruth Moskowitz was born in 1916 to a Jewish immigrant family from Poland. In 1938, she married Elliot Handler, son of immigrant Ukrainian Jews. In 1945, they started a company manufacturing and selling furniture made from plastic. With a partner, they named the company Mattel. In 1947, they began making furniture for doll houses. (Ruth and Elliot had two children, Barbara and Kenneth. Get it?)

Unfortunately, the book's subtitle is somewhat misleading. You won't find much about the lives of these and the many other immigrant Jewish entrepreneurs who did indeed create America's toy industry. What you will find, however, is a thorough and well-written history and discussion of the evolution of "childhood" in 20th-century America, supported and encouraged in large part by the toy industry. Prior to the 20th century, there was no such thing as childhood, thus few if any toys. Children were raised to learn their adult roles—boys to become providers, girls to become wives and mothers.

For a variety of reasons, this really began to change with the post-World War II Baby Boom. Families were moving to the suburbs, to single-family homes with children's rooms and yards to play in, which meant more room for toys. And families had more money to spend on toys.

Through the writings of child psychologists and "parenting experts", the idea spread that childhood was a special time, a time of growth and development, of exploration, of play – all supported by children's toys, books, and games. As Kimmel puts it, "The 1950s was the decade of the child."

Kimmel points out that all this was encouraged by the department stores, which sold the toys, and especially by television, which advertised them. Both venues, Kimmel notes, were also largely created by first- or second-generation immigrant Jews.

The book continues to trace the concept of "childhood" into the 1980s. Its conclusion: "First generation Jews created American childhood." The question of course is: Why them? Kimmel explores a number of factors. One is that these men and women were poor outsiders. They were excluded from mainstream culture and employment, but they aspired to escape poverty and to assimilate, so they created their own work and took risks that others did not, in pursuit of the American Dream.

But the same can be said of other immigrant groups. What distinguishes what Kimmel calls the "Yiddish Jews" from the others? Kimmel's answer is "rootlessness"—the Jewish history of never having a permanent home, of being constantly suppressed, of having to move from place to place. The first generation of immigrant Jews saw America as a permanent place, a secure place, a place they could call home, a place where they could pursue their dreams—the American Dream.

Playmakers is a well written work. It can get slightly repetitive, and it spends more time on the Michtom family than on any of the others, which isn't surprising, since, as I noted earlier, Kimmel is a family descendant. Nonetheless, it reads easily, without any academic drag. I recommend it to anyone interested in toys, childhood, and American-Jewish entrepreneurship in the 20th century.

Norm Weiner is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Sociology at SUNY Oswego.



Celebrating Luminaries at The Mizpah

The candlelit setting of The Mizpah in downtown Syracuse was the perfect backdrop for the Federation's Luminary Society celebration of generosity.

Campaign Development Officer Anick Sinclair organized an elegant evening that brought together the Federation's most devoted supporters for an unforgettable night to savor a delectable kosher dinner prepared by 518 Catering of Albany. The meal was paired with a fascinating lecture by Robert Searing of the Onondaga Historical Association, which traced the history of the landmark building in which the gathering took place. Owner Mike Green then spoke about his role in restoring The Mizpah, sharing the vision and effort that returned this downtown treasure to its former grandeur.

The evening concluded on a sweet note when Tom and Julie Cerio invited guests up to their beautiful and incredibly spacious penthouse apartment for dessert, offering a rare glimpse of life above the city.

Campaign Chair Megan Coleman Sykes thanked the participants for their steadfast support of the Federation, saying, "As the Luminaries of our community, you are the heart and soul of making everything we do possible. Your deep commitment to sustaining and strengthening Jewish life is inspiring. You are the beacons of light, critical to ensuring our Annual Campaign is successful—so it can support the many Jewish agencies that take care of our community." She summed up the evening's theme by saying, "Thank you, Bright Luminaries, for leading the way."



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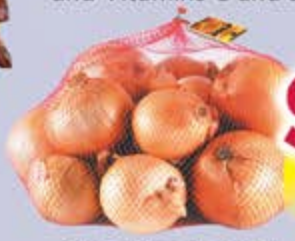

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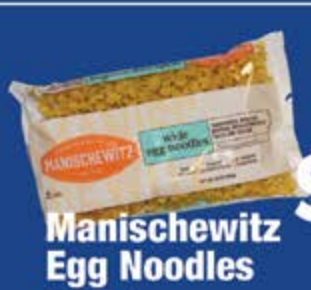

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Jews and Toys

For much of the 20th century, the founders, executives, designers, wholesalers, salesmen and department stores that sold toys were overwhelmingly Jewish. The Teddy Bear, Barbie, Mr. Potato Head, G.I. Joe, electric trains, the Game of Life, Transformers and many other toys that defined childhood were created by Jewish immigrants and their children.



The first **Teddy Bear** was sewn by hand in the back room of a Brooklyn candy store owned by Russian Jewish immigrants Morris and Rose Michtom. In 1902, cartoonist Clifford Berryman published a drawing of President Theodore Roosevelt refusing to shoot a tethered bear cub on a hunting trip. Rose, a skilled seamstress, stitched a small plush bear which Morris set in their store window beside a sign reading "Teddy's Bear." (He also sent a sample to the White House and secured Roosevelt's blessing to use the name.) The bears sold as fast as Rose could make them, and the Michtoms founded the **IDEAL NOVELTY AND TOY COMPANY**, which grew into one of the largest toymakers in the United States. It produced the **Shirley Temple doll**, the **Magic 8-Ball**, **Betsy Wetsy**, and distributed the **Rubik's Cube** in America.

Rose's original bear now resides in the Smithsonian.









The **MATTEL COMPANY** began in the Los Angeles garage of Ruth Handler, her husband Elliot and their partner Harold "Matt" Matson. The company name fused Matt and Elliot; Ruth's name went unmentioned, even though she became the company's first president in 1945. The Handlers gambled half a million dollars to become the first toy company to sponsor television advertising aimed directly at children (on Disney's *Mickey Mouse Club*), fundamentally changing how toys were sold. Then Ruth created **Barbie** (1959), named for the Handlers' daughter Barbara. Ken followed, named after their son. Elliot's contribution was **Hot Wheels**.





Joshua Lionel Cohen, the son of Jewish immigrants from Germany, was an inventor whose early patents included a photographic flash igniter and Navy mine fuses. His electric train began as an animated promotional display for a shop window. When customers wanted to buy the train instead of the merchandise, **Lionel Trains** were born. Joshua changed his surname to "Cowen" to deflect antisemitism, named the company after his middle name, and by the 1950s was the largest toymaker in the world.



In 1923, three brothers from Ulańów, Poland, Henry, Hillel, and Herman Hassenfeld, founded Hassenfeld Brothers in Providence, Rhode Island, selling textile remnants. They moved from fabric scraps to cloth-covered pencil boxes, then to pencils, and then to toys. A shortening of "Hassenfeld Brothers" to "**HASBRO**" became the name of the company that brought **Mr. Potato Head**, **G.I. Joe** and **Play-Doh** to American children. During the war years, the Hassenfelds also worked to rescue and employ fellow Jews from their hometown of Ulańów.



Bertha "Beatrice" Alexander Behrman's family ran a doll hospital. When World War I cut off the German porcelain parts, Bertha sewed a cloth Red Cross nurse doll to sell. Its success rescued the family firm, and she founded **MADAME ALEXANDER DOLLS** in the early 1920s. She pioneered collectible dolls based on books and movies. By the 1950s, **Madame Alexander** was the leading doll company in the world. She gave generously to the Jewish Theological Seminary and other causes.



There were many other Jewish giants in the toy world: Louis Marx built **LOUIS MARX & COMPANY** into the world's largest toy firm of the 1950s. His knack for redesigning single mechanism into dozens of products earning him comparison to Henry Ford; *Time* put him on its cover. **EDDY (ADOLPH) GOLDFARB** was a one-man invention factory credited with some 800 toys over a long life, among them **KerPlunk**, **Stomper** and **Yakity-Yak Talking Teeth**. **REUBEN KLAMER**, the son of Romanian-Jewish immigrants, modernized Milton Bradley's **The Game of Life**, held credits on some 200 products, and even designed the phaser rifle for *Star Trek*. **DAVID GOTTLIEB**'s firm shaped modern **pinball** and **RALPH BAER**, who fled Nazi Germany, is called the "father of video games" for the **Magnavox Odyssey** and the memory game **Simon**. **CHARLES LAZARUS** founded **Toys "R" Us**.





A Syracuse Physicist and His Toys

Anyone who passed through the Syracuse University physics building in the 1960s and '70s remembers the toys. There were tops that refused to fall over, birds that drank, magnets, gyroscopes, music boxes, wind-ups—hundreds of them, stored in the basement and hauled upstairs by a short, twinkling professor whose undergraduate lecture course, "The Physics of Toys," filled the auditorium to capacity year after year. His name was Henry Levinstein, and the story behind the toy collection is far less playful than the collection itself.

He was born **Heinrich Levinstein** on December 4, 1919, in Themar, a small village in Thuringia, Germany, where his father Moritz was the local Jewish religious teacher and the family home doubled as the Jewish community center. In 1935, at fifteen, Heinz was sent to New York to live with uncles. His parents stayed behind. On Kristallnacht, the mob that swept Germany ransacked the Levinstein home and sent Moritz to Buchenwald. He was released but later found dead just outside the village. His gravestone marks the last Jew ever buried in Themar, a place where Jews had lived for more than a thousand years.



Charles Andrews Elementary School science fair under his youngest stepson's name, Henry won second place with an exhibit on the early history of recorded sound. In 1965, he took the blue ribbon with a demonstration of electric light that included a bulb powered by a grapefruit. He began giving toy lectures at Syracuse high schools, and before long "The Physics of Toys" became a celebrated course for non-science majors at SU.

Levinstein earned a doctorate in physics at the University of Michigan, taking an English class with the poet W. H. Auden, who said Levinstein had "no literary talent whatsoever," but gave him an A for effort. In 1947 Henry came to Syracuse as assistant professor of physics. With Air Force funding he built one of the country's premier infrared-detector laboratories. In 1961, he and his student Sebastian Borrello discovered mercury-doped germanium, which led to the first long-wavelength infrared imaging systems flown by the Air Force and Navy. One colleague called him "the patron saint of infrared detectors in the United States."

His toy collection lived in the basement of the physics building, and Levinstein built up from yard sales, flea markets, toy stores, mail-order catalogs, and the occasional act of friendly larceny. Alumnus Peter Bratt, remembers bringing his three-year-old son Jeffery to the lab with a new gyroscopic top that popped upright whenever it was knocked down. Henry had to have it for the toy room; Bratt handed it over. Little Jeffery rode home wailing, "That man stole my top."

Toys came almost by accident. In 1962 Henry married Betty Strauss, the widow of a close friend, and proposed by asking whether she would "like to take care of four boys instead of three," becoming an instant father to her sons. A year later, entering the

In early 1984 a massive heart attack cut Doc's heart function by nearly ninety percent. He took up a walking program at the Y and cheerfully showed anyone who asked the pacemaker he regarded as one more excellent gadget. He died in 1986, but his name lives on in the national Levinstein Award for lifetime contributions to infrared detector technology and in the Henry Levinstein Fellowships that still support Syracuse physics graduate students each year.

Please Look After This Bear



He is the most beloved bear in the world, and he begins his story alone—a small bear on a suitcase at a London railway station, with a handwritten label round his neck: "Please look after this bear. Thank you." The Browns cannot leave him there; they take him home, name him for the station, and a classic is born. Few readers know the bear was nearly real. Paddington came out of one of the saddest times of the twentieth century.

Michael Bond grew up in Reading, west of London, where the railway station received children that Britain had agreed to save. Between 1938 and the outbreak of war, nearly ten thousand unaccompanied children, most of them Jewish, were taken out of Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Danzig on the Kindertransport. Their parents were not allowed to come. The first transport, in December 1938, brought two hundred from a Berlin orphanage destroyed on Kristallnacht. They arrived clutching a single suitcase, wearing labels printed with their names because no one waiting knew their faces. Many never saw their parents again.

Bond saw them and never forgot them. Nearly twenty years later, on a Christmas Eve, the young BBC cameraman noticed a single toy bear in a shop near Paddington Station. He bought it for his wife and began to write *A Bear Called Paddington*. Paddington's story, the suitcase, the label, and the journey to strangers who might not take him in is the story of the Kindertransport. Bond even modeled Mr. Gruber, Paddington's closest friend, on his literary agent, Harvey Unna, a Jewish refugee from Hamburg who had fled the Nazis.

Paddington stands in for these children. They were not bears and no kindly family was guaranteed for them at the other end of their journey, but thousands of British families did read the wish on the label and made it come true.





New Spin on the Dreidel

As every American Jewish child learns, the four Hebrew letters on the dreidel—*nun, gimel, hey, shin*—stand for *Nes Gadol Hayah Sham*, "A great miracle happened there," a yearly reminder of the small cruse of oil that burned for eight days in the rededicated Temple. It's pretty amazing: a toy that teaches Jewish history while it spins.

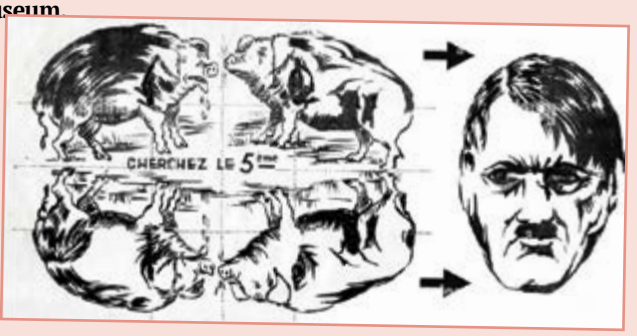
But if one follows the little top back far enough, it leads not to Judea but to the taverns and parlors of early-modern Europe. There, gentiles spun a four-sided top called a *teetotum*—from the Latin *totum*, "all"—in games of chance, often around the Christmas season. Each side bore a letter that served as a shorthand for the rules. In German-speaking lands the top became a *trendel*, its four faces reading *Nichts* (nothing), *Ganz* (all), *Halb* (half), and *Stell ein* (put in). Yiddish-speaking Jews, living cheek by jowl with those neighbors, adopted the game and transliterated the German gambling instructions into Hebrew letters that fit the same sounds: *nun* for *nisht* (nothing), *gimel* for *gants* (all), *hey* for *halb* (half), and *shin* for *shtel arayn* (put in).



As the game traveled to Jewish communities that no longer spoke Yiddish, the letters lost their plain meaning and gained a holy one. Someone looked at *nun, gimel, hey, shin* and read into them *Nes Gadol Hayah Sham*. A set of gambling abbreviations was reverently turned into a declaration of faith. And then Hasidic masters noticed that the four letters add up in *gematria* to 358, the same number as the word *Mashiach*, Messiah. What began as a roll of the dice ended as a declaration of faith, which may be the best new spin of all.

Toys and the Shoah

Of the roughly one and a half million Jewish children murdered in the Holocaust, many had, until the very end, a doll or a bear. The toys that outlived them are gathered in the collections of *Yad Vashem* and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.



Some provided comfort. Sophie Turner-Zaretsky carried a stuffed bear through the war—through a hidden Catholic identity in occupied Poland, then to England, and finally to the United States. She named it "Refugee," for what she and her mother were. For more than fifty years she kept it: a silent witness, she said, to her own survival.

Some were hiding places. Claudine Schwartz's doll, "Claudette," had precious stones sewn inside it by her mother, who sold them one at a time to buy food and shelter. Claudine did not learn until after the war what her doll had been carrying. In 1938, a young woman named Helena Fuchs used a stuffed toy monkey to smuggle money out of Vienna.

Some were instruments of resistance. In the French underground, Judith Geller received a hollow wooden toy duck used to move documents past German checkpoints. A teddy bear now in the Washington museum was used to conceal anti-Nazi cartoons; an animal-themed board game called "Puzzle of the Pigs" circulated as anti-Hitler satire. Historians call this non-armed resistance, defiance small enough to carry in a coat pocket.

And some were, heartbreakingly, just play. In the Theresienstadt ghetto, an older inmate hand-drew a Monopoly-style board game called "Ghetto" to explain to the children where they were. It was passed from child to child, each one handing it on as he or she was deported east, until only a few remained to keep it. A boy in the Warsaw ghetto cut paper dolls in the shape of Tarzan. Imprisoned artists carved puppets for a children's theater whose makers and audience were, most of them, murdered. *Yad Vashem* has gathered such things into exhibitions whose titles say everything: *No Child's Play*; *Stars Without a Heaven*.

There is one more figure who belongs here, because his life ran straight through the darkness and out the other side. Henry Orenstein was sixteen when the Germans invaded Poland. He survived five Nazi camps, saving himself and his brothers at Budzyń by gambling that registering as nonexistent "scientists" would buy them time. It did. His parents, a sister and a brother were murdered. He reached America with nothing, found work in a factory, and one day noticed an overpriced bride doll in a shop window and decided he could make a better one. He became one of the great toymakers of the century—Topper Toys, Suzy Homemaker, and finally the Transformers — and gave much of his fortune, quietly, to other survivors and to the Jewish poor. "The Nazis took away his childhood," one magazine wrote of him, "so he taught the world how to play."

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Chanukah at Valley Forge

It almost certainly didn't happen. Washington's diaries don't mention it. No contemporary letter records it. The earliest written traces of the story appear nearly a century after the encampment at Valley Forge, and the historians who have followed the trail treat it as a legend whose transformations are more interesting than its facts.

Still, here is the story.

In the brutal winter of 1777-1778, with the Continental Army starving and freezing in the Pennsylvania hills, General Washington was walking the camp at night. He came upon a young private hunched over two small flames, murmuring words the general did not recognize. The soldier, a Jewish immigrant, looked up and explained: it was the first night of Chanukah, and he was lighting candles as he had been taught in his father's house.

Washington asked what the holiday meant. The soldier told him about Antiochus, who had outlawed Jewish practice and defiled the Temple. He told him about Judah Maccabee and his band of farmers and shepherds who refused to submit, who took on the most powerful empire of their day with no reasonable expectation of winning, and who somehow won anyway. He told him about a small jar of oil that lasted eight days when it should have lasted one.

The general listened. Then, according to legend, he placed a hand on the soldier's shoulder and said that he too faced a cruel enemy who offered only resistance or submission—and that perhaps a ragtag army could prevail after all. Then he walked on into the dark.

Embellishments have accumulated over the generations. In some versions Washington later sought the soldier out and presented him with an engraved gold medallion. The historical figure most often attached to the story, the Philadelphia surgeon's mate Philip Moses Russell, did serve at Valley Forge and did receive Washington's commendation, but nothing in the record links him to a menorah.

So why tell the story?



Because sometimes a story has meaning even if it never happened. Jews have been telling each other the Chanukah story for more than two thousand years, and the historical Maccabees were complicated men whose victory was followed by dynastic feuds and Roman conquest. We tell the story anyway, because the meaning we have derived from it—that a miracle can happen, that a small people can refuse to disappear, that the light we kindle in dark times matters, that resistance can outlast empire—is true even when the surrounding facts are unverifiable.

The Valley Forge legend belongs to a particular American Jewish moment: a community of recent immigrants looking for a place in the founding myth of their new country and finding it in the candlelight of a freezing December night. Jews, like so many immigrants, were embedding themselves into the story of America. It is one of the places where the Chanukah story and the American story meet.

Hanukkah at Valley Forge
by Stephen Krensky

Reviewed by SHDS Sixth Graders Ophri Goren and Ben Lavine



This story takes place during the Revolutionary War, and it was not what we expected. It's different from any other Hanukkah book we've ever read. We were surprised that there were no kids in the story. The story is short and meaningful. We loved the pictures; they are handpainted and realistic. The illustrations are very detailed, and the author and illustrator must have done a lot of research– the soldiers and their equipment are very realistic. George Washington is depicted as a very kind and caring person. We would recommend this book to second grade and up. The vocabulary is at a high level, so parents could read it to their children. Reading this book about Hanukkah can teach you about other parts of history you might not know about, like the Revolutionary War. The book pulls together themes of hope, miracles, and resistance to enemies who wanted to control them.

Commemorating October 7th



Judaism considers remembrance a moral obligation, refusing to let catastrophe fade into abstraction. Marking the anniversary of the massacres of October 7th together this year at 450 Kimber Road helps to sustain communal solidarity, counter rising antisemitism and denial, and pass the story of this terrible day on to the generations that will need to carry it forward.



Backlit by the beautiful mural of Jerusalem in the SHDS sanctuary, sixth grader Ophri Goren read her thoughtful essay, "Paths to Peace," during the school's October 7 memorial program, sharing a powerful message of hope, unity, and the importance of working toward a more peaceful future.

The Syracuse Hebrew Day School also held a meaningful memorial program to reflect on the strength and resilience of the Jewish people. The morning began with a moving ceremony in the SHDS sanctuary, thoughtfully prepared by students under the guidance of Phyllis Zames, Director of Jewish Curriculum. The Day School was honored to welcome special guests and community leaders from Christian Brothers Academy, Manlius Pebble Hill, and the Central New York Regional Representative for Governor Kathy Hochul, who joined students, faculty, and staff in remembrance and solidarity. Following the ceremony, the adult guests gathered in the school library for an intimate and meaningful conversation facilitated by Phyllis Zames and Rabbi Shore. Hadas Golan Kord, an Israeli member of the SHDS faculty, shared her personal experiences and perspective, opening the door to thoughtful questions, honest dialogue, and a deeper understanding of the lasting impact of October 7th on Israelis and Jewish communities around the world. The morning was a powerful reminder of the importance of remembrance, education, community partnerships, and standing together in the face of antisemitism. Through opportunities like these, SHDS continues to foster understanding, strengthen relationships, and inspire hope for the future.

A Security Fund for the Jewish Community of Central New York

The Jewish Federations of North America recently released new data confirming what every synagogue, school, and community institution already knows: the cost of keeping doors open safely has never been higher. American Jewish communal security spending has surpassed $1 billion a year for the first time—a 33% increase over just two years ago, driven by a threat environment that shows no sign of easing.

Central New York is not exempt from this reality. The Federation and its partner agencies are now spending in the hundreds of thousands of dollars annually on guards, cameras, access controls, and emergency preparedness—funds that, in an ideal world, would instead support Jewish education, eldercare, and programs that bring the community together.

As FBI data confirms, Jews remain the most targeted religious group in America relative to their population. This is not a temporary spike to be weathered. It is the new and permanent cost of Jewish communal life—and it demands a permanent solution.

Why a Board Restricted Fund

Security costs recur every year. Grants and one-time appeals do not. Right now, the community meets each year's security bill through the operating budget—competing, year after year, with every other communal priority.

A board-restricted Security Fund changes that equation permanently. Invested prudently, a fund generates a reliable annual payout—conventionally about 5%—that can be directed to security needs in perpetuity, without new fundraising each year and without displacing other Federation priorities.

A $100,000 fund produces roughly $5,000 a year—meaningful, but not transformative. A million dollar fund produces approximately $50,000 every year, indefinitely, providing a dependable base for guards, technology, training, and emergency response across the community's synagogues, schools, and agencies.

The Goal: One Million Dollars

The Magen Circle is asking eighteen founding donors — a fitting number, as 18 is the numerical value of *chai,* Hebrew for "life"—to come together to establish the Jewish Community of Central New York Security Fund of one million dollars.

Giving levels double at each tier, starting at $25,000, so that every gift—at every level—carries equal significance to the founding circle. Each pledge may be paid over five years, making even the top levels accessible without a single large payment.

Giving Level	Total Gift (5-Yr)	Annual Payment	Number of Donors	Level Total
Guardian	$200,000	$40,000/yr	2	$400,000
Protector	$100,000	$20,000/yr	2	$200,000
Sentinel	$50,000	$10,000/yr	2	$100,000
Founder	$25,000	$5,000/yr	12	$300,000
Total			**18 donors**	**$1,000,000**

Every gift, at every level, becomes part of the permanent foundation of this fund. Founding donors will be recognized in perpetuity as the individuals who ensured that the Jewish community could gather, worship, learn, and celebrate safely for generations to come.

The Ask

The Magen Circle of eighteen is open to new members. A gift—whether $25,000 or $200,000, paid over five years—will never again need to be re-raised. Once fully funded, it will work for the community every year, without exception, for as long as the fund exists. It is a pleasure to note that two donors are already in place at the Founder level and two at the Sentinel level.

Security should never be the reason a family stays home from services, or a school hesitates to hold a program outdoors. With the support of donors, it won't be.

For more information or to discuss a gift, donors should contact Barbara Davis, Interim President/CEO, Jewish Federation of Central New York at bdavis@jewishfederationcny.org or at the Federation office, 315-445-0161.

NEWS FLASH: The Magen Circle had raised over half of its goal at the time the *Jewish Observer* went to press.

Federation Announces New Program for Young Adults: Tribe CNY

Tribe CNY, sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Central New York with support from the Jewish Community Center, was created for adults ages 25 to 45 who want a warm, low-pressure way into Jewish life. No experience is required, and no membership or dues. The group is led by Jake, a former ballet dancer, and Raven, a former belly dancer, who bring movement, music and a welcoming spirit to everything they plan. Rabbi Evan Shore will serve as Federation liaison.

Tribe CNY will present three events in 5787, each built around Jewish values, and each designed to leave guests wanting to come back.

The first program will take place on the third night of Hanukkah, December 6th. Participants will gather at 450 Kimber Road to assemble housewarming bags of food and household items for Syracuse families who have been moved into Howard's House, temporary housing for families who are having lead is removed from their homes. Lead poisoning is a serious public health concern in Syracuse, with aging pipes and housing putting thousands of families at risk. For Tribe CNY, the project is tzedakah in its most direct form: a chance to do something concrete for neighbors in need. After doing this project, Tribe CNY will join the Federation's exciting concert in honor of America's 250th birthday, with joyful songs by Jewish American composers, performed by talented locals.

On March 21, 2027, Tribe CNY will turn to Purim with an adult costume ball, with games, music, dancing, and prizes for the best costumes, as well as a tzedakah component supporting a local food pantry. Jake and Raven will weave dance into the evening. Organizers have taken care to schedule the party so it does not compete with megillah readings in synagogues or with the JCC's Purim Carnival. Purim, they note, is the ideal holiday for a first encounter as it is fun, social and generous.

On April 5, 2027, Tribe CNY will present *The Scribe,* Jesse Bernstein's funny, pointed and thoughtful one-man show about the tradition of the Torah scribe, the person who still writes the sacred text by hand. A reception will follow with Bernstein, to discuss his show with guests in a relaxed setting.

All Tribe CNY events are open to all at no charge, with registration required for security reasons. Tribe members are encouraged to bring a friend or partner. Whether a longtime member of the community or a new arrival, Jewish or Jew-ish, an attendee at other Jewish events or someone who has avoided them in the past, Tribe CNY's invitation is the same: come and connect.

Details and registration for each event will be announced in the coming weeks. Anyone who would like to help plan or volunteer with these or other Tribe programs is encouraged to reach out to Federation Interim CEO Barbara Davis at bdavis@jewishfederationcny.org.

Israel Symphony Orchestra Trio Conquers Syracuse

by Rabbi Vicki Lieberman

In the 1960's there was a saying: *It will be a great day when our schools get all the money they need and the Air Force has to hold a bake sale to buy a bomber.* Turns out diverting funds from education to defense is not only an American strategy. Israel's wartime budget has forced deep cuts across much of civilian life including Israeli orchestras, theaters and artists.



Last month, our Syracuse Jewish Community joined forces across agencies and congregations to support the Israel Symphony Orchestra (ISO) by hosting their Rishon LeZion String Trio Concert in October. The evening was made possible by a generous grant from the Philip L. Holstein Community Program Fund of the Jewish Federation of Central New York. This grant enabled the students from The Rabbi Evan Shore School for Jewish Teens to attend the concert.

Unabashedly, the trio is touring to raise money for its orchestra to continue its mission of educating and entertaining. The trio is comprised of three extremely talented and well-trained musicians; each shared their story of how and why they play with the ISO. Violinist Olga Kornev emigrated from war-torn Ukraine; violist Katrin Spiegel studied with Yitzak Perlman; cellist Michal Beck worked in Germany for ten years and returned to Israel in the wake of October 7th. It was an honor to meet them, hear them and fall in love with them.

The trio and their manager Doron Alperin, himself a violist with the ISO, were perfection. Just like an orchestra is more than the sum of its musicians, the Trio is more than three players. The trio is Israel. Their energy, their stories, were inspiring. They were so appreciative of the welcome they received from Syracuse. They were fortified to see the dozens of teens in the audience.

In addition to the community concert, there was one private fund-raising concert on their tour, also in Syracuse. There the musicians were close enough to touch. As one attendee said, "I loved seeing their faces, how their hands held their instruments, the emotions on their faces." Another said, "This has taken a concert to the next level."

The Trio played classical works, and as the ISO also plays for the Israeli Opera, they played a medley of popular opera pieces, followed by a medley from *Fiddler on the Roof*. The arrangements were flawless, seamlessly moving from one melody to another. They joyfully played some of the most popular and iconic Israeli folk tunes. The audience clapped and sang and the energy was palpable.

At both concerts, Doron introduced each piece or medley, describing its importance to the ISO. He explained the important work of the orchestra and thanked the many people who had generously contributed to it. As emcee, he was a wonderful balance of information and humor. Cantor Robert Lieberman and I were fortunate enough to work with Doron in the months leading up to these concerts. Each Zoom, phone call, or email made us more enamored of this amazing person who wanted to insure successful concerts in Syracuse. Each interaction brought out more of his stories about his history, his family, and their whereabouts on October 7th. He is a violist who is now a front man for the ISO needing to ask for money, donations, *tzedakah.* It is not a role he takes lightly. Fundraising was not in his wheelhouse. It was a joy to know our community generously donated to the ISO and the private concert yielded even more donations—including one person who asked for their check back so they could write a bigger one.

In 1963, Leonard Bernstein said the following at the United Jewish Appeal of Greater New York: "This will be our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before." The Israel Symphony Orchestra, with its touring groups in the United States, is living Bernstein's statement. Despite the hardships of war, despite the challenges of meeting the needs of the free concerts, they perform for Holocaust survivors, gifting students' instruments, integrating new immigrant musicians. They are devoted to ensuring the future of classical, operatic, folk and new music in Israel.

HADASHOT TOVOT

GOOD NEWS! GOOD NEWS! GOOD NEWS!



David R. Hootnick, M.D. Receives 2026 Distinguished Academic Achievement Award from the University of Vermont School of Medicine

The University of Vermont College of Medicine has honored Dr. David R. Hootnick with its Distinguished Academic Achievement Award, presented to alumni in recognition of outstanding scientific or academic achievement.

Dr. Hootnick has been a practicing orthopedic surgeon in our community since 1976 and is a professor at Upstate Medical University, where he holds appointments in the departments of Orthopedic Surgery, Pediatrics, and Cell and Developmental Biology. His academic and research interests focus on congenital limb deficiencies and the processes of embryonic maldevelopment.

His work has challenged the conventional CDC classifications of birth defects, demonstrating that widely used international classification of disease systems do not accurately reflect the underlying biology of limb maldevelopment. This research has contributed to a more nuanced understanding of how most congenital lower limb developmental anomalies occur.

Nigeria's Jewish Summer Camp Raising a New Generation of Leaders



Nigeria has more than 100 synagogues bu no resident rabbi—a gap Camp Sarah, a Jewis summer camp in Abuja, is working to close b raising up the country's next generation of Jewis leaders. Moshe Hezekiah Nwafor, 28, co-founde the camp with Debbie Isser, an American who moved to Nigeria in 2021 for World Bank work. Nwafor is the son-in-law of Rabbi Moshe Saks of Temple Adath Yeshurun, married to Rabbi Saks's daughter, Eliana.

The two founders met by chance: searching for a synagogue after her move, Isser found a WhatsApp number for Nwafor's congregation, and he arranged for someone to bring her to a Sukkot celebration. That encounter grew into a partnership. Isser began bringing suitcases of donated prayer books and tallitot from the U.S., and after consulting with congregation elders, she and Nwafor, who worked as a traveling Jewish teacher among Nigeria's scattered communities, decided against sending Nigerian children abroad to camp. Instead, they built one at home, naming it Camp Sarah after Isser's mother.

Nwafor's own history illustrates just how scarce Jewish resources are in Nigeria: at his bar mitzvah, the country had only a single Torah scroll. Today he estimates there are about ten. Without a shochet to provide kosher meat, his community relies mainly on fish and vegetables.



Now in its fourth year, Camp Sarah hosts 80 campers and 20 staff for two weeks, blending familiar camp activities—relay races, color war, trivia, skits—with adaptations shaped by local conditions, from challah baked in a charcoal-heated sand oven to songs accompanied by Nigerian instruments like the konga drum and shekere.

Nwafor has also used the camp to challenge some of the gender norms he says have limited women's religious leadership in Nigerian congregations, a limitation he attributes partly to cultural expectations and partly to the community's historically thin access to formal Jewish instruction. Last year Camp Sarah held its first women-led service, repeated again this summer, and some female campers have told him they'd like to become rabbis themselves. "That's something you don't see here, but I'm like, 'why not?'" he said. "Just go for it."

Beyond religious education, the camp's mission has expanded to include vocational skills—soap- and candle-making, crocheting—aimed at giving young Nigerian Jews paths to income alongside their Jewish learning.

What If Prayer Weren't Intimidating?

The Books of Rabbi Oren Z. Steinitz

Most rabbis write sermons. Rabbi Dr. Oren Z. Steinitz, spiritual leader of Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra Shas, writes books that help others lead and pray. He writes out of the conviction that Jewish practice belongs to the people who show up for it, and that the right resources can lower the barrier to entry without lowering the standard. "I started creating these resources to address specific needs in the Jewish community," he explains. "As someone who came to observance in his twenties, I know that starting a spiritual practice can be scary. Often, when people want to add spirituality into their lives, they simply don't know where to start. If you open a regular siddur, for instance, just looking at the amount of text in a Shacharit service can seem really overwhelming, and many people give up before they even start. These books are tackling such issues and basically show people that Jewish practice is 'not in the Heavens,' it is a lot more accessible than you might think."



The rabbi's best-known work began with a simple observation. The triennial Torah reading cycle is widely used in Conservative synagogues, but no Chumash had clearly organized the readings in a user-friendly format. His three-volume *Triennial Chumash* fills that gap. It follows the cycle that has become the standard in the Conservative movement, with each week's reading clearly delineated for congregations, Torah readers, and educators. One colleague praised its large type and easy-to-follow organization of *aliyot*. She noted that regular Torah readers often struggle with tiny print and with how to combine double *parshiyot*.

A quieter loss inspired Rabbi Steinitz's second book. Declining Jewish literacy and the "professionalization" of prayer leadership mean that fewer synagogue-goers have the skills of *nussach,* the traditional modes and patterns of liturgical music. The rabbi's *Nussach Made Easy*, co-authored with Amnon Seelig, presents the Friday night service in Ashkenazi *nussach*, adapted to non-Orthodox *siddurim*. Most sections come with several variations, so beginner prayer leaders can mix and match them and gain confidence in creating their own style. The e-book embeds recordings of the examples. The aim is to return prayer leadership to the community, and readers say it works. Reviewers describe it as a welcome addition for beginners, students, and congregants looking to brush up, and one praised its plain-English instructions and clear explanation of the underlying scales.

Rabbi Steinitz is just as concerned with prayer at home. *The Seven Minute Shacharit: A Workout for the Soul* starts from an honest problem. A standard siddur can feel overwhelming and time-consuming, and many people fall into an "all-or-nothing" mindset and give up on daily prayer altogether. His answer is an abbreviated, egalitarian service that remains halakhic. It is suited to beginners and skilled daveners alike, on the premise that spiritual practice takes practice. The project has since grown into a *Complete Seven Minute Prayer Collection* and a Seven Minute Siddur app with audio for *Shacharit, Mincha*, and *Ma'ariv*. Users have taken to it. Rabbi Laura Duhan-Kaplan wrote that a short service lets her slow down, think about the words, and discover new layers of meaning, even when she takes longer than seven minutes. A reader who grew up in an Orthodox synagogue and could "speed daven" also said the book helps slow things down and connect the words to personal prayer. Another called it a useful resource for days when joining a minyan is not possible.

Rabbi Steinitz also writes for the people who stand on the bimah. The *High Holy Days Survival Kit* is a practical field guide for rabbis, cantors, and lay leaders who lead Conservative High Holy Day services. It offers checklists, common pitfalls, and "Nobody Tells You This" insights on page turns, ark openings, timing, shofar cues, and accessibility, from *Rosh HaShanah* evening through *Ne'ilah*. It assumes the liturgy is already in the reader's hands. Its purpose is to help leaders present it with confidence and a focus on the congregation's experience. *Your High Holy Days Companion* serves worshippers, and his catalog extends further with an edition of *Megillat Esther* and a set of Hebrew vocabulary flashcards.

What ties these books together is a way of thinking that goes back to the rabbi's doctoral research at the University of Calgary. There he asked whether the internet was creating a new kind of religious discourse. His books answer the question by putting well-made resources directly in the hands of worshippers, readers, and lay leaders. Each of his books, published by his own independent Hamotzi Press, is written with halakhic seriousness and openness to the non-Orthodox world, and each assumes that ordinary Jews can rise to meet the tradition when given the right tools.

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Ruth in Shadow and in Light

by Sally F. Cutler



Reviewed by Chana Meir

In the prologue to Sally F. Cutler's novel *Ruth in Shadow and in Light,* we meet Ruth as an elderly Jewish woman lying in the snow as she waits to freeze to death. This intriguing scene leads the reader into an engaging recounting of Ruth's life as it plays out against the background of deep family secrets and the changing landscape of the United States in the mid-20th century.

Ruth, as a child, lives with her widowed father, aunt and uncle, and two brothers in a Brooklyn brownstone that is both her father's medical office and the family home. Her father is an immigrant, proud of the place he's made for himself in his new land. Her elder brother, Marvin, is steadfast in accompanying his father to religious services and studying Torah; her younger brother, Joey, fiercely rebels against their father and everything he represents. The characters are well-drawn, and through their speech and mannerisms, we quickly come to feel as if we know them.



When Ruth is informed, at age four, that her mother has died, she is kept away from the funeral. She insists on a black ribbon, which she hangs on her bedroom mirror, and notes, poignantly, that she "had planned to show it off to her mother when her mother came back." After Marvin dies in WWII, and her father, aunt, and uncle are killed in a horrific accident, Ruth is left alone in the brownstone, increasingly troubled by doubts and half-remembered clues from her childhood that start her on a journey leading to shattering revelations.

Each chapter in *Ruth in Shadow and in Light* is introduced with a timeframe, from "Winter 1930" to "Summer 1948." With a light touch, Cutler reflects the changes taking place in both Judaism and the country during these mid-century years. Intelligent and curious, Ruth is intrigued by her suitor Mendelson's journey from deeply observant yeshiva teacher to student of world religions and rebel against his upbringing. A second suitor, Phineas, is outside the Jewish milieu but Ruth discovers they also have much in common.

Cutler paints a richly textured picture of Jewish life at the time, including sprinkling in Yiddishisms that reflect their use in common speech but are never overdone. As Ruth's suspicions around her family's secrets increase, Cutler controls the suspense, pacing revelations in such a way that the reader is uncovering the truth right alongside Ruth. Several times Cutler leads us into Ruth's powerful and uncanny dreams, which reflect both her increasingly complex emotional landscape and nudges from her subconscious. The writing, reflecting Cutler's background as a poet, is fluid and elegant. With its blend of history, mystery, and transgenerational drama, *Ruth in Shadow and in Light* is an original and satisfying read.

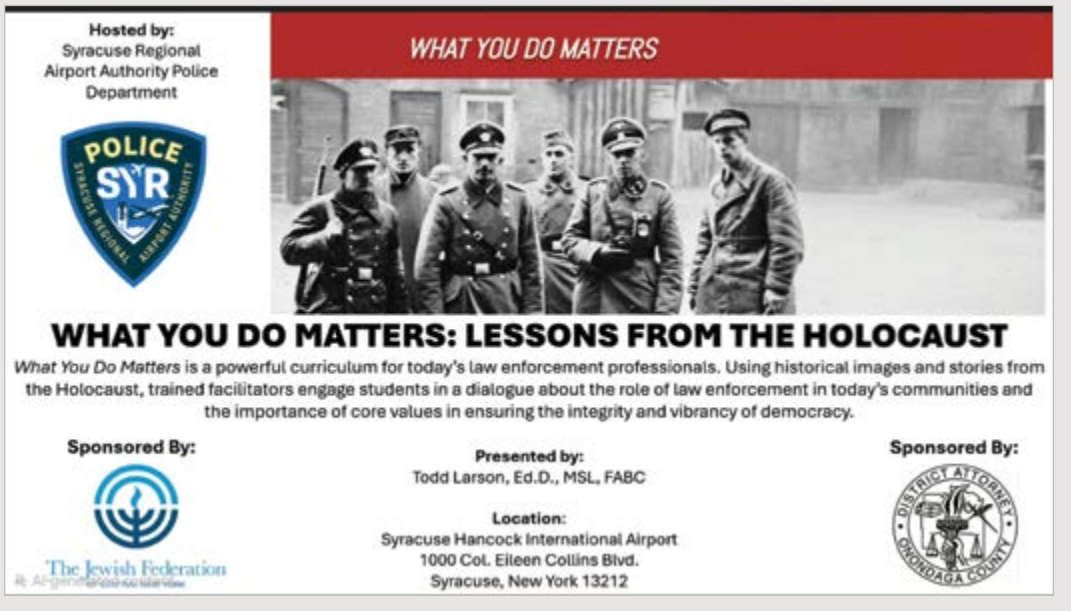
8 Nights a Week: Beatles Shabbat Service



The congregation that hosted a Billy Joel Shabbat, Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra Shas, will be hosting another rock 'n' roll service on Friday, December 4th at 6 pm.

CBS-CS's Hanukkah celebration begins with a special *8 Nights a Week: Beatles Shabbat Service*, featuring tunes such as "Yellow Submarine," "With a Little Help From My Friends," "All You Need is Love" and more. The social hall will be transformed so attendees can traverse the world of the Beatles. Although the Beatles were not Jewish, their music is timeless and serves to connect communities across generations, borders, and faiths. This program was inspired by one of CBS-CS's younger members, Charlie, whose love of the Beatles was just as infectious as the light of the *chanukiyah*. Services will be led by Rabbi Steinitz's Lonely Hearts Club Band. CBS-CS will celebrate Hanukkah, Shabbat, and Liverpool's finest musicians all in one festive evening. A Hanukkah meal will be served, including brisket, latkes, sufganiyot, and more winter fare. ***RSVPs are encouraged at tinyurl.com/beatles-shabbat.***

What You Do Matters



What You Do Matters **program is a powerful curriculum for law enforcement professionals.** Using historical images and stories from the Holocaust, trained facilitators engage students in a dialogue about the role of law enforcement in today's communities and the importance of core values in ensuring the integrity and vibrancy of democracy. Federation co-sponsored this program with the Onondaga Country District Attorney in October.

A Dollar & A Dream: Give Fitness a Try at the JCC for Just $1

by Ashley Schmitz



A new year brings new opportunities, and for anyone who has been thinking about getting more active, the Sam Pomeranz Jewish Community Center of Syracuse is making it easier than ever to get started. Beginning December 14, the Neulander Family Sports & Fitness Center will bring back its popular Dollar & a Dream promotion, giving first time gym members the chance to try the JCC for just $1.

For those who join in December, the $1 membership includes the remainder of December and all of January for free. Those who join in January can enjoy one full month of membership, to the day, for just $1. With plenty of time to explore the facility, try different classes and discover what works best, members can take their fitness goals for a test drive without making a major commitment right away.



The savings don't stop there. Participants who complete their Dollar & a Dream trial will receive an exclusive offer for a discounted one-year membership, making it easier to turn a one-month trial into a long-term fitness routine.

From strength training and cardio to dance and weightlifting, the Neulander Family Sports & Fitness Center offers a variety of ways to stay active and make fitness a part of everyday life. With Dollar & Dream, there's no need to wonder if the JCC is the right fit, it's an opportunity to explore the facility, experience its welcoming atmosphere and discover everything it has to offer. "I love that we are again running this promotion leading up to the New Year," said Membership Director Nick Finlayson. "To see new people visit our inviting atmosphere and state-of-the-art fitness facility for the very first time and experience all we have to offer is truly magical. As the best kept secret in town, people of all fitness levels tend to come and stay with us indefinitely."



The promotion is available to first-time gym members only and excludes pickleball, personal training and TRX classes. ***For a full list of classes or to learn more about the Neulander Family Sports & Fitness Center, visit jccsyr.org/fitness-center. Those ready to take advantage of this limited-time offer can contact Nick Finlayson at nfinlayson@jccsyr.org for more information or to sign up.***

JCC Fitness Spotlight: Reformer Pilates Classes

by Ashley Schmitz

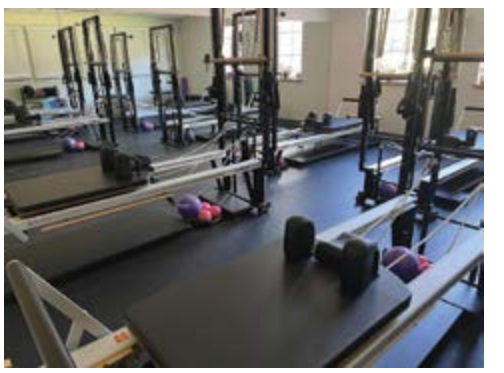
Reformer Pilates has found a new home at the Sam Pomeranz Jewish Community Center of Syracuse, providing a fun environment to build strength, improve flexibility and add something new to their fitness routine. The JCC's small-group Reformer Pilates classes offer a personalized, supportive workout experience using the Merrithew V2 Max Reformer and the internationally recognized STOTT PILATES® method.

Unlike traditional mat Pilates, Reformer Pilates uses adjustable spring resistance to create a full-body workout that focuses on core strength, stability, mobility, balance and mindful movement. Each 55-minute class is limited to just four participants, allowing instructors to provide individualized guidance, help with proper form and modify exercises based on each participant's experience and abilities.



Leading the Reformer Pilates classes is Sue Lowitz, a seasoned Pilates instructor since 2012 who has trained in STOTT PILATES®, Balanced Body, and Polestar modalities. With more than a decade of experience, Sue brings a knowledgeable and personalized approach to each class, helping participants feel confident while learning how to use the Reformer effectively. Those who enjoy Sue's instruction and are looking to complement their Reformer training can also catch her during the JCC's Mat Pilates classes on Mondays and Wednesdays.

The Reformer program has continued to grow in popularity, and due to high demand, the JCC has adjusted and expanded its schedule. Classes are offered throughout the week, with 9:00 am and 4:30 pm classes on Tuesdays, 11:30 am and 5:30 pm classes on Thursdays and a weekend session on Saturdays at 9:00 am. The varied days and times give participants more opportunities to fit a class into their busy schedules.



Reformer Pilates sessions are available to both JCC members and non-members, with members receiving the best value. Members can purchase a single session for $39 or save with the JCC's discounted class packages: five sessions for $180 or ten sessions for $325. The ten-session package offers $65 in savings compared to purchasing sessions individually, providing a great option for those looking to make Reformer Pilates a regular part of their fitness routine. Non-members can purchase sessions for $45 each, making a JCC membership an even more valuable option for those planning to attend regularly while also providing access to the JCC's other fitness amenities and programs.

Whether someone is brand new to Pilates or looking to take their practice to the next level, the JCC's Reformer Pilates classes offer a welcoming way to build strength, move with intention and receive personalized instruction in a small-group setting. ***For more information or to purchase a session and schedule a class, please visit jccsyr.org/fitness-center/#reformer-pilates-training.***

CBS-CS

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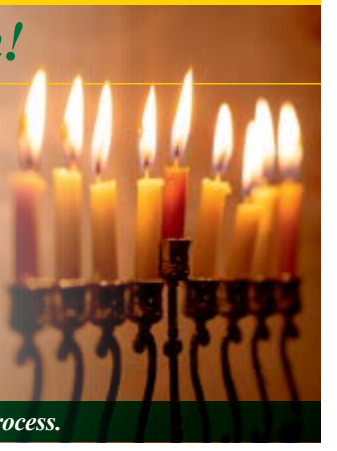

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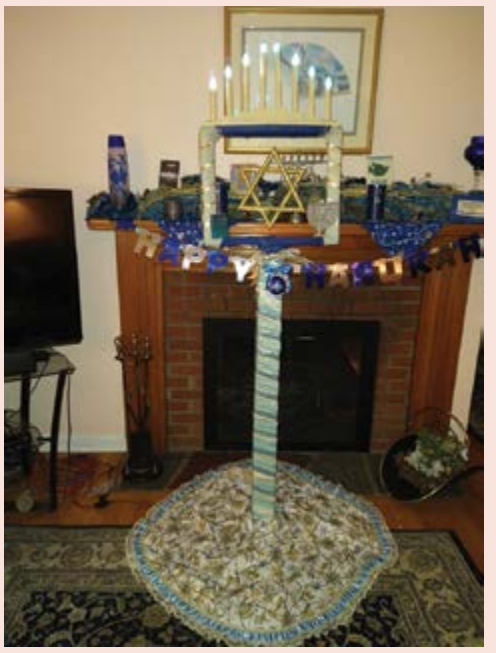
This column features businesses owned by members of our community, as well as artists and musical programs and is generously sponsored by RAV Properties.

Holiday Lights

by Cheryl Gordon Wolfe

When I was a child, every Christmas Eve my father would put my mother and me into the car and take us for a drive around the neighborhood to admire the Christmas light displays. Almost every house was decked out in strings of tiny white or colored blinking lights outlining doorways, windows and roof lines, wrapped around pillars and tree trunks, and spread across the bushes. Often there were tiny reindeer on the front lawn, or Santa in his sleigh on the rooftop next to the chimney.

Once in a while I would spot a tiny electric menorah in a window, in an otherwise darkened house. It seemed lonely and overwhelmed by all the surrounding neighborhood Christmas glamour. When I said so, my parents gave each other that private, secret look which always meant they were sharing a common thought silently.



One Christmas Eve, I spotted a tall evergreen tree in a front yard completely covered with tiny blue lights. I was certain that this was a Jewish home because everyone knows that blue is a Jewish color. The Israeli flag is blue and white and Chanukah gift wrapping paper and holiday cards are blue. No doubt about it then, this was a Jewish household, and I said so, excitedly, to my parents. Again, I saw that secret look pass between them.

The next morning, I found my father busy at work in the garage, surrounded by scrap lumber and nails. "What are you doing?" I asked "You'll see. Go away now," he replied with a secretive smile.

That night, the first night of Chanukah, we gathered in the dining room to light the holiday candle (just one for the first night) and recite the prayers. Then we sat down to my father's homemade potato latkes (the very best I have ever eaten anywhere), and I listened to him reciting the story of Chanukah, the Maccabee victory and the miracle of the oil.

When he finished, he took me by the hand and led me into the living room. All of the lamps were turned off, but the room was illuminated by a soft blue glow emanating from a 6-foot-tall menorah, decorated with three different shades of blue crepe paper ribbons and a glittering gold Star of David. At the very top shone an electric candelabra, with 8 arms, each gleaming with an electric blue light. (We always had all 8 lights lit every night because it was so beautiful). What I saw for the first time that evening was wondrous.

"I've never seen anything like it!" I exclaimed. "And you never will," replied my father. "It is one of a kind. I made it for you. Instead of giving you one Chanukah present for each of the nights of the holiday, we will place them all together under the menorah and you can open them on the first Sunday morning of the holiday. This way, when your Christian friends brag about their Christmas trees loaded with presents on Christmas morning, you will have your own story to tell."

That was 64 years ago, and every year since we proudly put up the 6-foot menorah, have a party to redecorate it with new crepe paper ribbons, and place our gifts for one another at the base, below the blue glow.

This family Chanukah tradition is very special, because it taught me to appreciate and celebrate my own Jewish heritage; and because my father made it just for me—out of scrap lumber and love.

2026 Hannah Solomon Award Luncheon Honors Myrna Koldin



The Greater Syracuse Section of the National Council of Jewish Women held its 51st Annual Hannah G. Solomon Award Meeting on October 25. Founded in 1893, NCJW is the oldest Jewish women's grassroots organization in the country. Guided by Jewish values, it works to improve the lives of the most vulnerable women, children, and families.



The Hannah G. Solomon Award is presented annually by the Syracuse Section to an individual who has changed the lives of others through her leadership efforts and service. This year's honoree was Myrna Koldin, recognized for her work with senior adults in a variety of capacities.



Two special awards were also presented. The Bertha Frensdorf Scholarship Award was presented by Connie Semel to LPN Christine Crump, who works at Menorah Park to help her continue her studies toward her RN degree at Onondaga Community College. A check for $3600 for the Federation's Magen Circle Security Fund was presented by Ellen Weinstein to Federation board chair Nan Fechtner in honor of Susan DeMari, the 2025 Hannah Solomon honoree.



The Hannah Solomon luncheon also raises funds for the CNY Diaper Bank, the Beard School and InterFaith Works' coat drive, with matching support from the Pomeranz, Shankman and Martin Charitable Foundation, Inc.



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EZKERA

RAE GOODMAN (NEE HUBERMAN)
October 1, 2026

It is with great sadness that we announce the passing of Rae Goodman (née Huberman), on October 1, 2026, at North York General Hospital in Toronto, at the age of 93.

Beloved wife of the late Allan Goodman for 67 years, loving mother to Cecelia (Ellis) Goodman, Sharon and Ralph Mestwarp, and Anne and Mike Cuttler. Proud and devoted grandmother to Cynthia (Brian), Rebecca, Samantha, Anthony, Deborah (Dan), Jenna, David and Jacob, and loving aunt to her many nieces and nephews. Predeceased by her parents David and Rebecca Huberman, all her siblings Leon and Charlotte Huberman, Solly and Sandra Huberman, Shirley and Walter Roll, and her nephew Rabbi Irwin Huberman.

She will be profoundly missed by everyone who knew her.

Birnbaum Funeral Service

MARK JEFFREY KAITZ
October 2, 2026

Mark Jeffrey Kaitz, 70, passed away on October 2, 2026 at Boca Regional Hospital, Boca Raton, Florida. He was born on June 3, 1956 in Syracuse, New York. He was predeceased by his parents Harris Sarkin, Shirley Sarkin Kaitz and 2 brothers, Steve Sarkin and Alan Sarkin.

Mark earned a bachelor of arts degree and later worked for a call center in South Florida. Recently a resident of Century Village in Boca Raton, Mark enjoyed pool activities and participating in the recreational center shows.

Always fond of his past in Syracuse, Mark attended his Jamesville Dewitt class reunions and followed local news. His heart lay with Syracuse family members and he was especially fond of his aunt, Lois Goldberg.

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CHRIS SMITH
October 9, 2026



Chris Smith, 46, passed peacefully with his family by his side on October 9, 2026 in the comfort of his home. Born in Philadelphia on June 29, 1980 to David Smith and Donna Bacchi-Smith, he had been a resident of Syracuse for almost 20 years. Chris had fought a valiant battle with colon cancer for just over 5 years.

He was a graduate of Cornell University, and earned his law degree from the University of Texas at Austin. He was a practicing real estate attorney in N. Syracuse. Prior to establishing his law firm in North Syracuse, he was an ADA in Minnesota.

Chris was a dedicated member of the March of Dimes; and was honored to be recognized as a Super Lawyer Rising Star in real estate in 2014. He was a member of the Onondaga County and NYS Bar Associations.

He was an avid hunter and outdoorsman; and car enthusiast. He was just shy of being one of just 173 hunters to have ever earned the title of North American Super Slam.

His family includes his wife Leah Pekarsky, his parents David and Donna, his sister Jocelyn (Ryan) Midgett, niece Addison, nephew Cameron, his grandfather Louis Bacchi, uncles Douglas Smith, Louis (Patti Mullins) Bacchi, and James (Coco Chaing) Bacchi; aunt Debbie Smith, his sister-in-law Alicia Pekarsky (Scott Dawson), brother-in-law Ben (Kelley) Pekarsky; nieces Nyah and Julia; nephews Matthew, Elijah, Cooper, Michael, and Richard; mother-law Linda Pekarsky; Adrianna Rosser whom he raised as his own daughter; and his cousin Kayleigh (Mike) Lewis. His daughter Zoey Rae passed in 2020, leaving a gaping hole in everyone's life.

Contributions in Chris' memory may be made to www.thewolfmountainnaturecenter.org.

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JOSEPH D. WILKINS
October 25, 2026



Joseph D. Wilkins, a life resident of Syracuse, peacefully passed away on October 25, 2026 in the comfort of his home. Joe was born to Marvin and Gertrude Wilkins on 6-22-41. He was a proud graduate of Nottingham High School, class of 1959. Throughout his professional career he was a self-employed entrepreneur.

He was predeceased by his parents, his sister Penny, his wife Mary, and their son Eric. Joe was the devoted husband to Mary of blessed memory, loving father to John, Scott, Eric and Julie (Lenny); devoted grandfather to Alexis, Carson, Tiffany, Angel, Joey, and Nick; a great grandson Jackson; beloved sister Paula Baerson; nephew Seth (Randi) and Neice Dana.

Contributions in his memory may be made to The Golisano Children's Hospital or The Francis House

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May the Chanukah lights spread their warmth and peace throughout the world.



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