

# 'A tree of life'

Beth Hatikvah kids take to the woods as part of a reimagined religious school

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Close your eyes.

Now, touch the tree.

These are not the instructions that students ordinarily hear from their religious school teachers.

But then, the RE-School at Congregation Beth Hatikvah, the Reconstructionist synagogue in Summit, is decidedly not ordinary.

The RE stands for Reconstructionist.

It also stands for “resident expert.”

For the encounter with trees in a wooded area three blocks from the synagogue, the resident expert is Avery Robinson, an environmental educator who is leading the Saturday morning classes of the RE-School for six weeks.



Musician Peri Smilow leads a songwriting session for Beth Hatikvah children.

He was the third resident expert; he followed a muralist and a music instructor in “providing engaging, creative explorations of Judaism,” in the words of Leemore Ellman, the congregation’s educational director.

Ms. Ellman has been with Beth Hatikvah for about a year and a half.

“We have to approach Jewish education in an alternative way right now,” she said. “There’s so much negative feeling that the parents in our school hold on to from their own upbringing in traditional Hebrew schools. Some parents were so, so miserable in Hebrew school that it’s the very last thing they want to give their kids.”

But if Hebrew school classrooms fostered bad memories, “We know from overnight camp that immersive experiences, the communal experience of being Jewish, leads to tremendous identity building,” she said. The secret: “Taking children out of the classroom and giving them the opportunity to engage in fun activities where Judaism is snuck in.”

The year’s first resident expert was Jennifer Levine, an artist as well as the former director of education at Temple Sholom in Scotch Plains. She moved Beth Hatikvah’s education from the classroom to the airier (and better for covid times) public space of a synagogue wall. She worked with the students to design and paint a mural.

She based the mural “on the prayer Hashkivenu, which talks about sheltering us in God’s peace,” Ms. Ellman said. “Through dialogue with the children, Jennifer helped them conceptualize what images might be used and came to an image of a tree of life — the tree of life is of course the Torah — with two figures, one male and one female, representing the community, embracing it.

“It was a five-week project that was really powerful. There’s something moving about taking a paint brush and painting a wall, as opposed to painting a canvas or a piece of paper. There’s something about knowing you actually painted the wall of your synagogue, a wall that will remain painted for a very long time.”



Torah and exploration in the Summit woods.

The second resident expert was Jewish music songwriter and performer Peri Smilow.

“Over four weeks she worked on a methodical process to get students to appreciate different Jewish melodies and different liturgical melodies with the goal of composing their own new prayers,” Ms. Ellman said. “We divided the entire school into three groups and composed three prayers, which are now part of our Friday night and Saturday morning services.

“She has this amazing talent where she can work with them through a process of discovery of different tunes and melodies to understand what they are interested in. She goes home and writes a song and they write the verses.”

Bringing in an outdoor educator made a lot of sense.

“Nobody wants their children to wake up on a Shabbat morning and hop on Zoom,” Ms. Ellman said. “Our students have way too much screen time. Outdoor education solves that problem.

“We know that it’s better for them to be in the sunshine and running around. That’s their birthright, who they’re meant to be: free-spirited children who move their bodies and explore the natural world.”

“We said, let’s be a little countercultural. Yes, it’s freezing cold out” — Mr. Robinson began his six week residency in January — “but if you’re wearing the right gear, you will not be cold.



The wall features the Tree of Life.

“Some students showed up the first day wearing sneakers, not wearing winter boots, not wearing snow pants because they put up a fight with their parents. They were cold. The next week they showed up with snow pants. There’s an old adage, there’s no such thing as poor weather, only poor clothing.”

Mr. Robinson taught stories from the Torah — such as how Abraham and Sarah, as described in the Torah portion of Lech Lecha, left their home in Haran and came to Canaan, where they settled at Elon Moreh — which literally means “the teacher tree,” Ms. Ellman said.

Mr. Robinson provided activities for the children that matched the Torah stories. In one of those activities, he’d blindfold a child, and then help the child approach a tree and touch it — and then, with the blindfold removed, the child would try to recognize it by remembering what its bark felt like.

“How does it work to touch a tree that you can’t see?” Ms. Ellman said. “Are you more attuned to what a tree really feels like? And could this be a metaphor on how to access a closer relationship to God?”

Ms. Ellman believes that “these kinds of emotionally satisfying, joyful experiences are what can help children become more engaged Jewish adults. For education to work, it has to be joyful and it has to bring meaning.”

Mila Rodgers of Maplewood agrees that the RE-School programs have been engaging and worthwhile.

“It’s really fun,” the 10-year-old, who is in fourth grade, said.



Painting a mural under the guidance of Jennifer Levine.

The mural project “was really cool. Every time we would do the mural we would sing the song about the Tree of Life. Then we would close our eyes and picture it.”

For the song-writing with Peri Smilow, “we paired up into partners and then each group would write a verse, based on the actual prayer. And then Peri Smilow would incorporate parts of the verse into the song,” Mila said.

The song Mila’s group worked on was based on the prayer “Oseh shalom bimromav,” praising God who makes peace in the heavens.

She sings a verse of the finished song: “We pray for peace and quiet / May there be no more fighting or war / May all of us feel kinder / And let us say / And let us say Amen.”

Mila’s mother, Allison Zuckerman, is very pleased with the direction of the school, which engaged both her children (Mila has a sister, Norah, who is 7 and in second grade).

“My kids love their lazy weekend mornings,” Ms. Zuckerman said. “But they would be excited to go to synagogue and paint this mural. They’d leave talking about the artist and the part they painted. There’s a lot of pride in the fact they participated and that the mural is a permanent part of what the synagogue is going to showcase in their building.”

She said there was a similar pride when, at the conclusion of Ms. Smilow’s residency, “all of the students stood up in front of a crowd of parents singing proudly. Mila continued to sing the song at home. And that Friday night, we took part in services via Zoom and they sang the song as part of the services.”



Congregation Beth Hatikvah began the year with an outdoor Yom Kippur family program in a park.

The children were so excited by the experience that “they’ve talked about it with their grandparents and other family members.”

Her children were similarly enthusiastic about their outdoors experiences.

“This past week, they were learning about the Tree of Life song while experiencing nature,” Ms. Zuckerman said. “It’s just a different kind of joy in their voices.

“I asked, ‘What did you do in the forest?’ They said, ‘We were talking about the Tree of Life, about how things happened in the Garden of Eden.’

“It felt like a very creative way to make it relevant.”

Ms. Zuckerman said that she grew up in Rockland County, and went to Hebrew school at her Reform congregation through 12th grade. But while she enjoyed the final years — “when it was my choice and what we were learning was not specific to the finish line of a bat mitzvah — I do remember the time when I didn’t enjoy it.

“Now, my kids love going, and that feels special to me.”