

Beth El Gets Centered An Oasis of Spiritual Growth

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By Mathew Klickstein



(David Stuck)

In these harried, complex times, it can be easy to forget the importance of taking a step back from one's busy day, breathe and simply *be*.

Integrating this brand of needful mental, physical and spiritual health into one's connection to Judaism (and vice versa) is exactly what Rabbi Dana Saroken and Rachel Siegal are aspiring toward with Beth El Congregation's new Alvin & Lois Lapidus Center for Healing and Spirituality (aka the Soul Center) open now to the public.

"People want to grow and reach their best selves," said Saroken, who founded the center and acts as its spiritual director.

"They want clarity in a complicated world, they want moral and ethical guidance through complicated moments in life, and I think in some ways, we do have that; Judaism has all that," Saroken continued. "But the question is: How do we offer it in 2016, recognizing that circumstances are different than they were 30 years ago, if not 100 years ago?"

It was two years ago that Saroken began coming up with ways to further engage members of the community — be they congregants of Beth El or not, affiliated with other synagogues or not.

This was in the aftermath of an alarming report by the Pew Research Center in October 2013 that discovered "[t]he percentage of U.S. adults who say they are Jewish when asked about their religion has declined by about half since the late 1950s and currently is a little less than 2 percent."

“I started to wonder how it could be that with everything that Judaism has to offer, we’re not inspiring people,” Saroken said.

The Soul Center — which officially opened on Sunday, Nov. 13 and had a wildly successful first week in which nearly 500 people participated in various mindful events ranging from drum circles to meditation to a mixology tisch — has become an oasis from the hurly-burly modern-day meleé.

It has become a place where Saroken and Siegal feel they are announcing to the community, “We recognize the fullness and busy-ness of your family’s life and can offer you something that will allow you to feel like you were actually transformed in some way, in a certain amount of time, because that short amount of time might be all you really have nowadays,” Saroken said.

Saroken and Siegal (who took on her role as director of the center in June after six years operating as the development director at Pearlstone) are employing a four-tiered approach to the facility’s methodology.

“Our mission is to transform Jewish life in Baltimore through innovative experiences in mindfulness, healing, rejuvenation and growth,” Siegal said. “Your mind is doing something, your body is doing something, your spirit is doing something ... and it’s all localized in your own community.”

To Siegal, what makes the center so powerful is its drawing in people who might otherwise feel they need to leave their local area to take a trip to, say, an ashram or a retreat far away on a long vacation or some other expensive and time-consuming journey away from home.

With the Soul Center, the same kinds of restful and health-conscious experiences can be had close by and with family members, friends and other community members who are perhaps right down the street.

In addition to various group activities offered that will help bolster one’s mind, body and soul, the center is bringing in the likes of Sarah Shapiro, who has been a social worker for the past two decades and has worked closely with other area Jewish organizations for the past 12 years to provide one-on-one short-term counseling sessions.

Owings Mills native and current Remington resident Jordan Goodman, 31, was tapped to lead drum circle and meditation sessions at the center.

“Jordan was not engaged in Jewish life but has an amazing Jewish soul,” Saroken said. “The fact that here’s this Jewish guy who’s out there and not necessarily connecting to his Judaism, that’s exactly why we’re here. We want to give people an opportunity to explore without feeling intimidated or overwhelmed.”

“Without feeling *judged*,” as Siegal put it. “We want people to feel good about coming without worrying about bowing the right way or saying the right thing or being able to read Hebrew. Jordan is a perfect story to show the power of what we’re doing here.”

Goodman, a licensed clinical professional counselor who also happens to be a longtime musician with a special predilection for drumming, agreed that when he was first approached by the center, he was somewhat reticent to join in.

“But when I met Dana, I felt an immediate rapport with her,” he said. “I was very blunt with her and asked, ‘Who is this ‘God’ you keep talking about?’ and brought up the fact that my own feelings were different from hers. She understood and encouraged me to share my beliefs with the people who came.

“Once she said that, it gave me the confidence that I could be 100 percent myself in the work, and that is really what I’m always looking for. I don’t have to hide, I don’t have to quiet parts of myself to show up and do the work, because if I had to do that, I wouldn’t be as effective as I could be.

“I think they’re doing it right there for all the different, right reasons. It’s really something there for the whole community.”

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