

RABBI'S MESSAGE

Spiritual Imagination: Learning to Learn

The Jewish community at large — and Temple Beth Torah specifically — have been experiencing an interesting phenomenon. Adults are re-learning to learn. In many people's minds, religious education is for children. The typical religious school classes of yesterday were all about dropping children off to prepare them for a bar or bat mitzvah. Parents remembered suffering through Hebrew School, Sunday School, or (for our elder members) *Heder* and often told their children, "I had to do it when I was your age, so suck it up 'til you're 13, and then do what you want." I'll never forget the joke I was told by a 12-year-old student, one of my first bat mitzvahs at Temple Beth Torah:

A priest, a rabbi, and a minister were getting together to talk about the problems they had at their houses of worship. Mice had infested all the churches, and they didn't know how to handle it. The rabbi told them he had a guaranteed method. "I put some cheese on the bima. When the mice came up to the bima to get the cheese, I blessed each of them with a bar mitzvah. I haven't seen any of them since!"

This trend is changing. At Temple Beth Torah, many of our teenagers blend seamlessly from student to teacher. Some are tutoring younger students in Hebrew or volunteering as teacher's aides. Others have moved into taking responsibility for teaching their own classes. As one young lady, now a junior in high school, said: "I can't imagine doing anything else on a Sunday morning." These students — now teachers — continue their learning through our confirmation program.

And it's catching on for adults, too. Rabbi Hillel said, "*Don't say 'I will study when I have time,' lest you will never find the time.*" (Pirke Avot, 2:4) Our community is finding the time. The Sunday morning classes with Rabbi Wolbe are beginning a new series on January 12, as each session has attracted new participants. One Wednesday a month, a group takes lunch hour for a group discussion with "Lunch and Learn with Rabbi Dan." Several members of last year's class "For the Newish to Jewish" have become regulars at Friday night Shabbat services and other programs. Some Sunday mornings, one observer said, "are like a three-ring circus," with pre-school-aged children making projects in one area, adults learning in another, teenagers teaching and assisting our younger students, and the age range in the building spanning from infancy to late 80s.

It's an incredibly beautiful experience to bring together both younger and mature learners. This February, TBT will be blessed with a full weekend of learning for adults and youth with the Yom Limmud Scholar's Weekend. Rabbi Sandy Sasso will be presenting at TBT Shabbat services Friday night, February 14, and at special programs on Saturday, February 15. Friday night's presentation is entitled "Spiritual Imagination," and Saturday afternoon will be a workshop for all ages about "Shema in the Mezuzzah." Saturday morning, there will also be an opportunity for informal "Meet the Author" conversations with Rabbi Sasso. On Sunday, February 16, she will present at Congregation Emanuel in Houston to the community's Yom Limmud (Day of Learning) on the topic "God's Echo: Reading the Bible with Question Marks." Rabbi Sasso is the author of several award-winning books for children on spirituality, connections to God, and religious imagination. Ordained from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 1974, Rabbi Sasso has some unique distinctions: she was the second woman rabbi ever ordained in the United States; she was the first woman rabbi to serve a Conservative congregation; and she and her husband Rabbi Dennis Sasso are the first husband-and-wife team to lead a congregation together in world Jewish history. She has been a leader in her community in interfaith work and has received several honorary doctorates from various universities. After serving Congregation Beth-El Zedeck in Indianapolis with her husband since 1977, Rabbi Sasso now devotes her time to writing, lecturing, and teaching religious studies at Butler University, initiating an innovative "Religion, Spirituality and the Arts" seminar for all faiths.

Rabbi Sasso is one of five Barish Shabbat Limmud Scholars in the Houston area that weekend. Through the Bureau of Jewish Education, the Barish family provides grants for local synagogues to bring scholars to enrich our Shabbat experiences. This is the fourth time TBT has been a recipient. Long-time members will remember other past scholars, storyteller/author Cherie Karo Schwartz, Argentinian Rabbi Ernesto Yattah, and "Holy Rascal" Rabbi Rami Shapiro. This weekend opportunity is a chance for all of us to engage in our "spiritual imagination." We have the chance to contemplate our personal connections with God and community, inspiring deeper relationships and enhanced understanding.

It's a new year. Welcome to 2014 – the year of learning.

L'shalom,

Dan Gordon