

THE JEWISH STATE

www.TheJewishState.com

VOL. 11 NO. 20 • MAY 19, 2006 • 21 IYAR 5766

Designer Fashion
Verena Inc.
at
ARENA
71 Woodbridge Ave., Highland Park

Personal change with Torah in Highland Park

Michele Alperin

SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH STATE

Picture a maggid, an itinerant preacher who, hundreds of years ago, would preach morality to the common folk, in the vernacular, basing his sermon on the portion of the week. Look at his intense eyes, expressive hands, black coat, his tzitzis hanging out.

"His mission," according to JewishEncyclopedia.com, "was to ... awaken the dormant spirit of Judaism, and to keep alive the Messianic hope in the hearts of the people."

Scroll ahead to the year 2006 at Congregation Ohav Emeth, Sunday, May 14. Rabbi Jay Yaakov Schwartz, social worker, rabbinical director of the Nachal Novea Tsfat Fund, and former host of an Internet-based radio program called "Labriute," held a crowd of more than 100 spellbound with stories and creative commentary — with the goal of motivating involvement in a program of personal change.

The program was the opening event for the Achieving Change Through Torah (ACTT) organization, whose goal, as stated in a letter to potential participants, is to facilitate "meaningful and lasting character improvement by using a methodology that includes learning Torah, performing actions, making

commitments, and sharing motivational material."

Schwartz was standing in at the last minute for Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, executive vice president of the Orthodox Union, whose mother was ill. Schwartz used a maggid's bag of tricks, along with his own psychological acuity, to make the point that although personal change is difficult, it is possible in small increments.

Rachel Wolf, a computer programmer, liked the fact that the ACTT program kicked off with an inspirational speaker and she enjoyed what he said and how he said it.

"I liked the stories he told, and I liked the fact that he emphasized that you had to make changes a step at a time," she said.

The program was a truly grassroots effort, quickly growing from an idea hatched when a congregant consulted his rabbi about a problem to a community-wide effort, involving synagogues in Highland Park, Edison, and East Brunswick.

The rabbi who was part of the initial conversation was familiar with a two to three month program run by the Chofetz Chaim Heritage Foundation to help people be more careful about their speech. People were asked to set a specific hour during the day in which they would be extra careful not to speak ill about another person. The problem with the program was that it did not



Photo by Michele Alperin

Rabbi Jay Yaakov Schwartz told a Highland Park crowd how it could accomplish the goals of a new group — Achieving Change Through Torah (ACTT).

support sustained change and a continually renewed commitment to self-improvement.

From the rabbi's experience with the Chofetz Chaim foundation and the congregant's realization that the solution to his problem was to change his attitude and mindset came the germ of the idea.

The two talked more, decided to include additional areas of self-improvement, and developed a proposal to present to the Vaad Harabanim of the Raritan Valley,

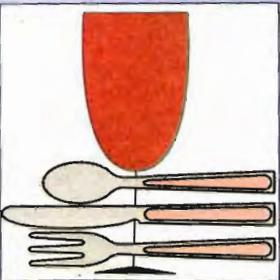
the Orthodox rabbis' group. The rabbis were all supportive, and to ensure that the program was community wide, they included a representative from each synagogue on the leadership committee. During 12-14 meetings, the committee came up with the areas for character improvement and created materials and a website.

They decided to develop the materials in a professional way to

See TORAH, Page 12

Play
Sudoku
Page 5

Dining Guide
Profiles of local eateries



15

At Work
BG Products LLC



14

Personal change with Torah in Highland Park (continued from page 1)

ensure that people would understand the seriousness of their intentions. Their website, www.actt613.org, is currently rudimentary but will soon be more robust; all of the materials developed for the program, however, are available there.

Phil Rosen, a member of the ACCT Leadership Committee, felt the planning process was not only successful but personally meaningful. "This has been probably the most rewarding experience I've had in my life," he said.

Schwartz opened the ACCT event by quoting Rabbi Yisrael Salanter on the difficulty of personal change: "It was easier to learn the whole of Shas (all of Mishnah and Talmud) than to change one personal character trait."

Then Schwartz started to build up a case for his main point--that change can happen, with will, perseverance, and small steps.

Schwartz opened with a reinterpretation of a verse from Ashre, a prayer that Jews say every day: "You open your hands, and satisfy every living thing with favor (ratzon)." He suggested a different reading: "Open up your hand, God; you are holding the keys to our success; fill us with the desire (ratzon) to make change."

The next brick in Schwartz's argument for change was a story about Reb Nahman of Bratslav, an early Hasidic rabbi and the grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism. Reb Nahman, whose mastery of Judaic texts was profound, at one point in his life decided that his teaching of these texts was not helping people to change their lives. So he started telling original stories whose goal was to effect change.

The story "The Fixer" was about a wealthy king who believed he was the happiest man in the world and decided to prove this to himself. He wandered about his kingdom, listening in at windows, where he heard about problems with illness, kids, employment, and even the law. Then he got to a shabby little cottage where a man sat at his broken-down table, drinking the best wine, eating a bit of meat, and happily fiddling the evening away.

The king asked the man how he managed to live a life of such content, and he responded: "I'm a fixer. I can fix anything, but I can't create a thing." He said that each day he earned the 6 gulden necessary to buy wine and a bit of meat, and no more, and these small things made him the happiest man in the world.

Furious to have found someone happier than he, the king banned repair from his kingdom. As the fixer then tried different jobs to earn his 6 gulden, woodcutting, latrine cleaning, the king banned each in turn. Finally, the fixer outsmarts the king, and the king surrenders his quest to dampen the fixer's spirits and joins the fixer for a drink.

"The fixer represents the power to embrace change," explained Schwartz, "and the king represents resistance to change." Eventually the fixer's ability to seek different means to achieve his happiness broke through the king's resistance.

But it takes more than desire to make a change--it takes a technique. Schwartz, who said he has a hard time remembering his own cell phone number, decided to memorize the 48 ways to acquire Torah listed in Pirke Avot (the Ethics of the Fathers). Faced with a list of 48 he was overwhelmed, but then he came to see that the steps are cumulative and represent four stages of learning. Four stages with 12 ways per stage was doable.

From tools Schwartz moved to motivating his audience to take steps now. Quoting a verse from the prayerbook, "God renews every day the acts of Creation," he said, "There is no history. A person can wake up a different person." People can renew themselves at any moment.

Schwartz closed with a down-to-earth story of how a nonreligious troublemaker in a Talmud Torah embarrassed his teacher on Purim and then, when he found her in tears, collected money to buy her a box of Barton's chocolates. She then invited him to her house for shalach manot, Purim treats, which began his journey back to Judaism. Citing this story of a bunch of kids willing to buy a box of Barton's to do teshuvah (repentance), Schwartz concludes by urging people to get started on making changes in the first character trait targeted by the ACTT program, "Don't underestimate the value of one act of Ahavas Chesed (lovingkindness)."

Attendees reacted positively to Schwartz's rousing lecture and lined up at the tables in the corridor to sign up for the program and purchase reference materials.

Jeff Zelka saw benefits in the communal aspect of the ACTT program: "I love the idea. We try to do good anyway, but to document it and build it up together--there is power in numbers."

Retiree Bill Steinmetz liked the incremental approach, "the idea of doing the mitzvas one at a time." Taking small steps makes so much sense, he said, that "we should already have known that." But he added: "We intend to do it."

Technical writer Abby Hochhauser was impressed that her friends and neighbors had come up with such an interesting and novel concept. She was also hopeful that small changes on an individual level could help to heal a world in great need of mending. "There are so many things going on in the world. I hope we can stick with it and make something better."