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Greater Middlesex County Feature

Synagogues' effort hopes to harness the power of positive thinking, doing

by Debra Rubin
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Six Raritan Valley Orthodox synagogues are embarking on a project to promote character development through a combination of Torah study and good deeds.

More than 40 people have already signed on to the Achieving Change Through Torah, or ACTT, program, which began May 14 with a kickoff event at Congregation Ohav Emeth in Highland Park (see [sidebar](#)).

The program will include public study and discussion groups, as well as resources encouraging participants to study on their own on a daily basis. Each “module” will focus on a specific character trait, including loving-kindness, gratitude, anger management, and kavana or concentration during prayers.

“Our philosophy is to take baby steps that will lead to gradual change that will be lasting,” said coordinator Phil Rosen. “The goal is to build a solid foundation, and this does so through a multi-faceted approach where we select different character improvements for personal character development. The concept is that a person will commit to reading a short amount of Torah-oriented reading — maybe only five minutes of learning a day. Then they do one act of kindness per day.”

The program will also encourage support groups to share lessons and discuss what has and hasn't worked. “They will be able to share ideas,” said Rosen. “We also have on-line discussion groups to share ideas and disseminate inspirational materials.”

The program grew out of a community-wide push by the area's Orthodox synagogues and rabbis to bring about positive change. Rabbi Steven Miodownik of Congregation Ahavas Achim said the program was the brainchild of people who wanted to help others deal with tough times.

“They saw some tragedy in the community, some deaths, and wanted to involve people in self-improvement,” he explained. “When faced with tragedy, we don't look to blame others. We turn inward and handle it with prayer and study.”

A committee was formed with representation from each participating synagogue, each of which publicized the program in bulletins and through pulpit announcements.

A letter went out to the community signed by the rabbis of the six synagogues, including Miodownik, David Bassous of Congregation Etz Ahaim, and Eliyahu Kaufman of Ohav Emeth, all in Highland Park; Yaakov Luban of Congregation Ohr Torah in Edison; Abraham Mykoff of Congregation Poile Zedek in New Brunswick; and Yaakov Wasser of Young Israel of East Brunswick. A representative lay committee member from each synagogue also signed the letter.

The group's mission statement says that its goal is "to provide a Torah-based approach and support system that nurtures spiritual growth and sustains enduring positive change."

In addition to study, it will encourage participants to undertake specific acts, including running an errand for a friend, greeting someone cheerfully, remembering someone's birthday, or calling a person going through a difficult time.

Organizers acknowledged such actions should develop naturally among people committed to an Orthodox lifestyle, but that efforts are sometimes needed to overcome "inertia."

"We need to make changes in the physical to face a change in inertia as human beings," said Luban. "That is what ACTT is about, utilizing the power of Torah to channel that power and overcome inertia in our behavior. If a person makes a small commitment every day, it may not change the world, but [he or she] will be learning something powerful."

The program also has implications between the local communities.

"This is an idea to provide a system where we connect ourselves to Torah, to Hashem," said Kaufman. "We are taking positive action as a zechus," or merit that contributes to the welfare of others.

This merit will benefit those who are sick or are experiencing other hardships in their families and communities and klal Yisrael, or the Jewish people, in the face of worldwide anti-Semitism, Kaufman explained.

In fact, Rosen said, a national organization, which he declined to name, was keeping its eye on the Raritan Valley program. If ACTT works as well as its organizers hope, it will be used as a model by the organization to implement a similar program nationally.

Aviva Siegel, Ohr Torah's lay committee member, said she became part of the program because she thought it was "fascinating and wonderful."

"I just thought it was the best way for people to improve and would be a wonderful thing to be a part of," she said. "My husband [Barry] will be signing on as well, and I hope our kids will join us."

Siegel said she has six children ages eight-20, and although her youngest may be too small to join in, she hoped the others would make the program a family project.

She has her own reasons for participating. "Probably it was to change as a person," Siegel said. "I think that is a goal for all of us. People will not only be helping others, but they will be doing it with a better attitude, even in my own family. Instead of making my kids lunch and doing it begrudgingly, I'm doing it anyway — so why not make it in a nicer family atmosphere that will allow us to keep growing.... I was thrilled to be asked to be a part of this."

Rosen said the program was open to anyone interested in increasing his or her level of observance, and because much of the work will be done individually and on-line, those outside the Raritan Valley can also make the commitment.

"Our rabbis tell us that what we do on Earth can influence what goes on in the heavens," said Rosen. "There are so many people not well in the Jewish community and families living with hardship, such as unemployment and poverty. Through this program we can not only improve ourselves but help our fellow Jews."

To register or for more information, [contact](#) 732-993-5376 or visit their [Web site](#).

[Personal growth,step by step](#)



AN EFFORT AMONG six Raritan Valley synagogues to promote character development was launched May 14 with a speech by a rabbi versed in the integration of Jewish law, healing, psychology, and spirituality.

Rabbi Jay Yaacov Schwartz, rabbinical director of the Nachal Novea Tsfat Fund — a New York-based group that supports the work of the Breslav hasidic community in Tzfat — spoke to a crowd of about 150 at Congregation Ohav Emeth in Highland Park at the kick-off event for the ACTT (Achieving Change

Through Torah) program.

Schwartz praised the Raritan Valley Jewish community for its support and dedication to the program, which he termed "remarkable."

Although a last-minute fill-in for the scheduled speaker, Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, executive vice president of the Orthodox Union — who cancelled because of an illness in his family — Schwartz captured the crowd's attention by citing examples from Jewish text and holding up as examples renowned figures in Jewish history who developed self-improvement plans through meaningful study.

Schwartz, who maintains a private social work practice in Lawrence, NY, specializing in marital and family therapy, told those gathered that "success and all the good things we want for our family, friends, and us" are predicated on *ratzon*, or the will to move forward.

"We have to embrace the ability to make change," said Schwartz.

Schwartz said the Mishna, the foundational document of talmudic law and lore, provides 48 steps, divided into four stages, that guide learners toward self-improvement. By the time the last half of the steps is reached, a student of Torah will note a change in himself, according to Schwartz.

"It is starting to impact a person's personality," he said. "As the person goes higher, his personality is going to become more sophisticated. He has reached the level where he has become beloved by others. He has become involved with charity. By the last 12, he has become concerned with the plight of others. He has reached the level where he seeks truth... he seeks out the good things in life."

However, at the end of this path, people must still repeat the cycle of Torah study to continue to learn and grow and progress still further in their character development.

People must have an ongoing commitment to the process to make it worthwhile, said Schwartz.

The kick-off speech and the concept of the ACTT program were warmly received by those in attendance.

Marion Pianko of Edison said she found the program "very inspiring and spiritually uplifting."

"It's something a person can do step by step, and it's not overwhelming," she explained. "People who do it can grow spiritually."

Keren Avery of Highland Park said the size of the crowd and the reaction to Schwartz's speech demonstrated the community's unity.

"I felt the excitement from a group of people in the community coming to work together," she said. "My husband and I both signed up [for ACTT]. It just sounded like such a good moral venture and spiritual effort. I think it will foster a sense of community that in this day is very unique and important."

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