

Local 'achieving change' initiative goes national

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Two years after a consortium of local synagogues launched a program for improving the moral character of the Raritan Valley Orthodox community, the program is going national.

The Orthodox Union has designated Sept. 20 the National Day of Lashon Hara Awareness, one of the components of the Achieving Change through Torah program.

The program is centered on members committing daily to as few as five minutes of Torah-oriented reading and performing one act relating to the *midah* — or character trait — being studied. Each component runs two to three months.

The synagogues involved are: Congregation Ahavas Achim, Congregation Etz Ahaim, and Congregation Ohav Emeth, all in Highland Park; Congregation Ohr Torah in Edison; Congregation Poile Zedek in New Brunswick; and Young Israel of East Brunswick.

"We hope our actions and efforts individually and collectively will really help the Jewish people be more successful in our lives and solve issues we have," said Phil Rosen, an Ohr Torah member who has served as the local ACTT coordinator.

Rosen said the initial impetus for the program, which came from Rabbi Yaakov Luban of Ohr Torah, was to give people "a sense of belonging and community." Luban is also executive rabbinic coordinator for the kashrut division of the OU. He was inspired by the Chofetz Chaim Heritage Foundation and its focus on *shmirat lashon*, the mitzva of guarding one's speech.

The local program was launched in an effort to help community members facing tragedies to handle the difficulties through prayer and study leading to gradual moral development.

The program features speakers from the local community and outside to kick off each module. Its latest segment, *kavana* during davening (concentration during prayer), was launched Sept. 7 with a program at Etz Ahaim featuring noted educator and orator Rabbi Ron Yitzchok Eisenman of Congregation Ahavas Israel in Passaic.

Other modules include anger management and loving-kindness and avoiding *lashon hara*, evil speech or gossip.

The program, which posts study modules on-line, has attracted more than 140 participants from as far away as South Africa.

"We set up the website so it would be available to anyone in the world," said Rosen. "The unique beauty of the community is that when there's an initiative from one shul — like the *bikur holim* [visiting the sick] program — it becomes a community-wide effort with community-wide support, a reflection of the rabbis' closeness to each other and to the community."

"The success of ACTT in Edison/Highland Park is a tribute to the rabbis."

The local committee, which includes a representative from each synagogue, has been working with the OU on taking the program national for about a year and a half. Rosen said he approached several different organizations in an attempt to broaden the program's outreach.

The OU program is sponsored by its Pepa and Rabbi Joseph Karasick Department of Synagogue Services. It will offer a module four times annually and make packets of material available to synagogues for each of the *midot*.

"Sept. 20 is an especially appropriate date for the National Day of Lashon Hara Awareness as that night we start saying *Selichot*, special prayers for forgiveness," said Rabbi Jack Abramowitz, OU associate director of synagogue services and coordinator of the program. "People typically work on refining certain character traits during this time as we approach Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. It is our hope that the ACTT modules provide people with material to utilize so they can become more aware of their negative traits and to help develop their positive traits."

For more information, contact Abramowitz at synsvcs@ou.org or 212-613-8366. ACTT materials and "lift of the day" can be viewed at www.actt613.org. Call 732-993-5376 for more information.

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