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Values program marks its one-year anniversary



Rabbi Jonathan Rietti, a lecturer with Gateways Seminars, who spoke at the Achieving Change Through Torah Program's study module on gratitude in April. A new module on anger management will begin July 1.

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Orthodox synagogues in the Raritan Valley marked the one-year anniversary of a program in communal character-building, with participants saying it had changed their lives for the better.

Since its formation last year, some 130 people are regularly taking part in classes and lessons through Achieving Change Through Torah (www.actt613.org), or ACTT.

Intended to promote "character improvement" within the Orthodox community, the program's "modules" have focused on such Jewish values as gratitude, anger management, and judging others favorably.

"I've really gotten a lot of inspiration from people who came and spoke," said Abby Hochhauser of Edison. "I think the idea when we started this program was that things are happening in this community and world and what can we do to try and make ourselves better and help other people more. I certainly thought I could improve myself more."

The program's followers are mostly local, but some who take part are from as far away as South Africa, according to coordinator Phil Rosen. Out-of-towners can participate on-line.

"I live out of the area so I haven't actually attended any of the group sessions," said Shlomo Abrahams of Passaic, who also listens to the speakers on-line. "A lot of things they recommend are very obvious, simple; a lot of things people miss. But you can really take the Torah lessons studied, and apply them to everyday life. It really has a tremendous effect."

From the program's exploration of anger management Abrahams learned to treat people with more kindness.

"It's very easy to go with the flow," he said. "When you see people who want to make a difference and start a program like this as a way of improving the world instead of sitting around a coffee table talking, it's beautiful. It's a beautiful program, but it was a lot of work on the part of the organizers, and it showed."

The program asks participants to commit as little as five minutes of Torah-oriented reading a day and to perform a daily act relating to the studied theme. The "modules" have been introduced by guest speakers, most recently Rabbi Jonathan Rietti, who kicked off the "gratitude" module in April with a talk drawn from his experience as a former education consultant to parents of gifted children and those with attention deficit disorder.

On July 1, the anger management module will be offered at 8 p.m. at Congregation Ohr Torah in Edison. Rabbi Ben Tzion Shafier, the director of Tiferes Bnei Torah in Monsey, NY, will speak on "How To Stay Cool, Calm, and Collected."

Rosen said the organization does not charge for events but relies on donations to keep its programming going.

The Judaica Gallery in Highland Park provides source books to ACTT on consignment and typically deducts about 20 percent from the list price.

"One of the biggest impacts that the ACTT program has had on people's lives is that it has created an awareness and sensitivity for how to handle certain challenging situations that arise on a daily basis," Rosen said. "It has helped people improve their love for doing acts of kindness, ability to judge people in a favorable way, effectiveness and experience while praying, ability to control their anger, including frustrations, and their method of talking to other people in a respectful and positive manner."

Hochhauser, who participates with her husband, Albie, said the program has helped her to treat those asking for money with dignity.

"This is a great program," she said, "and I encourage everyone to get involved."

The synagogues involved in ACTT 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.