

Jewish Standard



A joyful noise

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a drumming circle

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Different drummers

Drumming circle at B'nai Israel fosters emotional as well as intellectual connections to Judaism



Phyllis Schleifer, Emma Fodor, Rabbi Debra Orenstein, Emmett Weisz, Seth Weinstein, Phylcia Fodor, Corey Dubin, Max Dubin, and Harvey Meer at a drum circle rehearsal. PHOTOS BY NAOMI WEINBERG

BRUCE GOLDMAN

When Amy and Jonathan Shein heard that Cong. B'nai Israel in Emerson was holding an intergenerational drumming circle before Shabbat services one recent Friday evening, they figured it would be a child-friendly activity that would excite their 6-year-old daughter, Erica, and 8-year-old son, Evan.

"What kid doesn't like to bang on a drum?" Amy Shein said a few days after the event.

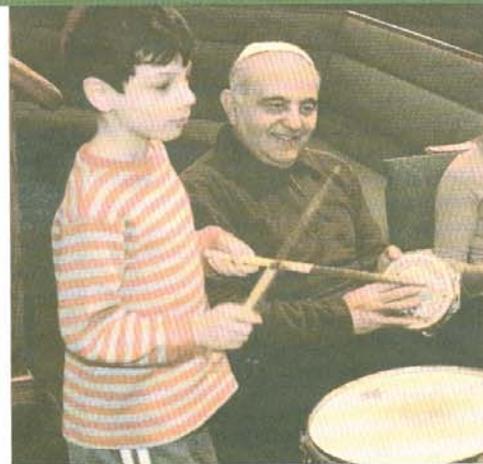
So the Sheins joined more than a dozen other B'nai Israel members and guests for a 45-minute introduction on Feb. 4 to the spiritual aspects of drumming, one of the most ancient forms of Jewish worship. The inaugural session — monthly sessions are planned — was led by Rabbi Debra Orenstein, who studied drumming as a healing art as the religious leader of Makom Ohr Shalom in Los Angeles before assuming the pulpit of CBI last year.

"[One] reason I like drumming is because for many of us, Judaism has become hyper-intellectualized — what I call Judaism from the neck up," said Orenstein. "Judaism

obviously has a strong intellectual tradition. But it also has other aspects. It's a feeling tradition; it's an embodied tradition."

Orenstein organized the drumming circle as a way to provide congregants with that deeper emotional as well as intellectual connection to Judaism — and also to draw more parents and children to the synagogue on Friday nights. The rabbi provided drums and other percussion instruments to three generations of participants, who experimented with different sounds, rhythms, and volumes to reflect their interpretation of the week's Torah portion, Parshat Terumah, which includes the account of the construction of the mishkan (portable temple) with its interior courtyard and inner sanctuary, the Holy of Holies.

"We had been looking for ways to make all our programming exciting and relevant for young families," said Orenstein. "The drumming circle was part of this. To me, it was also important to create opportunities for intergenerational events that will be engaging for everybody. [The drumming circle also helps] create a



welcoming, supportive atmosphere so people of any background and any age can feel part of the community."

Orenstein explained that there is a long tradition in Judaism of using drums and percussion instruments.

"Drumming is an early form of expression in the history of humanity, the history of Jewish worship, and

Orenstein: 'I saw myself as part of a legacy and tradition'

BRUCE GOLDMAN

Spirituality has always played an integral role in Debra Orenstein's approach to the rabbinate.

"It's been part of both the calling and the timing of my rabbinate that I chose a spiritual orientation and, equally true, that it chose me," said Orenstein, the rabbi at Cong. B'nai Israel in Emerson.

"I entered rabbinical school at a time of change not just for women, but for the culture of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Rabbi Neil Gillman was beginning to teach theology in a much more personal way. Some other professors and classmates were also focusing on spiritual autobiography, chasidic stories and niggunim [wordless melodies used in prayer]; Jewish meditation, and creative liturgy."

Orenstein traces her interest in a spiritual approach to prayer to her early childhood. At the age of 4, she learned blessings to present as a "gift" to her great-grandfather, which she says gave her a deep sense of connection. Four years later, she already knew she wanted to be a rabbi.

A graduate of the Solomon Schechter day schools and a member of the first class that included female rabbinic students at JTS in the mid-1980s, she received a traditional education in a Conservative setting. She supplemented her rabbinical training by exploring different modalities of prayer and Torah learning, including meditation, chasidic stories, and the use of ancient texts to create new rituals.

Her interest in going beyond the classroom led Orenstein and another rabbinical student to begin doing social service work and to sponsor learning that wasn't in the curriculum, including organizing a lecture on spirituality that drew 70 people, nearly five times the audience that other lectures at the seminary attracted.

One memorable experience that Orenstein went on to have, during her rabbinate, was a five-day silent meditation retreat for rabbis from around the country and across all the different movements. She still vividly remembers her mother laughing about it. "As the daughter, granddaughter, wife, and mother of rabbis, she could hardly believe that rabbis would get together



Rabbi Debra Orenstein

for five days to *not* talk," said Orenstein. "I took her point, but there was a lot of deep learning and connection in that prolonged silence."

B'nai Israel's openness to different approaches to prayer was an important factor in Orenstein's decision to accept the position there last year after a 10-year tenure as the rabbi at Makom Ohr Shalom in Los Angeles. She said she was fortunate to be able to co-officiate High Holiday services in L.A. with Rabbi Zalman Schacter Shalomi, the father of the Jewish Renewal movement who

brought tens of thousands of unaffiliated Jews back to Judaism.

"One of the things I like and admire about CBI is it's a synagogue with an adventurous spirit," said Orenstein, who grew up in South Orange. "They're willing to try new things, take a creative approach, and use new structures in support of traditional values, texts, and rituals."

Orenstein mixes traditional methods to prayer with innovative approaches. Last year she led a healing service during the break on Yom Kippur, interspersing silence, meditation, chanting, and even a laying on of hands. In early February, she organized a drumming circle for Shabbat, an activity she plans to hold regularly. In another break with modern practice, when she chants a Torah portion, she occasionally chants the English translation along with the Hebrew, as well as offering commentary, in the traditional trope, as a way of imparting a deeper sense of the meaning of the passage to her congregants.

"Though it feels new to most people, the way I read Torah is actually based on the way that Ezra and the Levites read Torah publicly, as described in the Book of Nehemiah," said Orenstein, who has a love and passion for Jewish history. "The goal was to 'cause the people to understand,' and the result was that the people became emotionally bonded to the text."

She also encourages laity participation during services.

"Sometimes if I do a Torah teaching on a Friday night, I will invite people to discuss what I've said with the

people sitting around them," said Orenstein. "Usually, I will raise a specific question. The idea of incorporating spiritual conversation into the synagogue service in this way was something new to people. There's a standing tradition of having a communal Torah discussion on Shabbat morning with an interchange of ideas. But taking a sermon and figuring out how it might apply in your life [is another way of] engaging in spiritual conversation."

Orenstein was virtually destined to become a rabbi, having hailed from six generations of Jewish religious leaders and with a solid grounding in Jewish texts. But though she was reading Torah in junior congregation and teaching Bible class as a fourth-grader, her gender precluded her from pursuing the rabbinical path within the Conservative movement until the Jewish Theological Seminary opened its doors to women in 1984.

"My entering the rabbinate was the perfect fulfillment of all my family's values, and at the same time it was perceived as a rebellion," said Orenstein. "My family was very traditional. There was no support for women taking an equal role in the service, let alone taking a role in religious leadership.... When, at age 8, I told my mother I was going to be a rabbi, her answer was, 'That's impossible.' She went on to say that girls didn't become rabbis. But it was already too late to deter me. I saw myself as part of a legacy and tradition. I joke that it was almost like the family business."

Orenstein entered the doctoral program at JTS with the hope that women would soon be permitted to enroll in its rabbinical school. After she was ordained, she taught full-time for several years at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles, continuing on a part-time basis until 2010.

During her time at JTS, Orenstein acted with a theater troupe that performed at homeless shelters. She later appeared in a cameo role in "Her Best Move," a film made by her husband, Craig Weisz, and performed in a play in Los Angeles shortly before relocating to New Jersey. Her varied career has also included stints in counseling and political advocacy, and she is the author or editor of five books, including the acclaimed "Lifecycles" series (Jewish Lights Publishing) that explores aspects of Jewish women's lives.

even in a baby's development," she said. "Drumming and percussion are mentioned in one of the earliest poems of the Bible — the 'Song of the Sea.' Miriam took the tambourine and the women danced after her.

"Drums and cymbals are mentioned as instruments for worshipping God in the psalms, and percussion was used in the ancient temple. Of all instruments, drums are among the least controversial to use on Shabbat today, partly because there is no issue of breaking a string or needing to make a repair. Just as I tap on a table or clap my hands, one can use a drum."

The rabbi cited Psalm 150 as an example in which the use of drums in Jewish prayer was prescribed. The psalm includes the phrase "Praise God with drums and dance ... praise God with clashing cymbals."

Orenstein noted that a drumming circle that gathers in honor of Shabbat can "use the instruments to celebrate the joy and peace of Shabbat and the meaning of the Torah portion." To help explore Parshat Terumah, "we used our drums to

"It was very beautiful to see many people use their instruments in unexpected ways."

— Rabbi Debra Orenstein

convey the spirit and atmosphere of the holy courtyard in the temple and of the inner sanctum of the Holy of the Holies. We also used the sound of the drums and other percussion to imagine the experience and sound



of the parochet [curtain] separating different areas in the temple. For future gatherings we'll [continue to] use our drums to explore and personalize the meaning of that week's Torah portion."

At one point, the rabbi asked participants to express the sound of God's voice on their drums.

"It was very beautiful to see many people use their instruments in unexpected ways — gently moving fingernails over the front of a tambourine to make a soft, inviting sound or circling the outer rim of a drum using a drumstick," said Orenstein. "My favorite part was when we made the different holy sounds together. It was not a cacophony but a chorus that created a new type of harmony."

Bill Davis, 80, who came to the event with his 14-year-

old granddaughter, Peri Ganberg, also noted the differing ways in which attendees illustrated the voice of God.

"Some people had loud voices, some people had soft voices, and sometimes it was silent," said Davis. "I think it's quite significant what they think God is like. If you go back to the Bible, ... you think God [has] a booming voice, but not everybody thinks that way.

"I thought [the drumming circle] was instructive, inclusive, and very interesting, especially for young people."

"The rabbi related to the kids on their level, and they all seemed to be able to relate to her," said Bob Greenblatt, 66, who accompanied his daughter, Stephanie Brenner, and 6-year-old grogger-shaking granddaughter Jessica to the drumming program.

For Emma Fodor, a fifth-grader in the CBI Hebrew School who played the drums last year at Brookside Elementary School in Westwood before taking up the clarinet, the drumming circle helped her to feel a stronger spiritual connection to Judaism.

"I loved it," the 10-year-old said. "I liked that we were learning something new and having fun doing it. I liked that it kind of expressed my feelings a little bit and I liked the music and how everybody was playing."

Echoing Emma's observations about the drumming circle, Amy Shein said, "It was a lot of fun. It really had the kids thinking about lots of sounds and the beat and how to express the story [the rabbi] was telling. I liked how it was so creative."

The next Shabbat drumming circle at Cong. B'nai Israel is scheduled for March 25 at 7 p.m.