

'Knockin' on Heaven's Door'

Then learnin' about what comes next — rituals for death and mourning

ABIGAIL KLEIN LEICHMAN

EMERSON — Cong. B'nai Israel's "Knockin' on Heaven's Door" workshop series begins on Sunday, February 10, with a discussion of Jewish customs and traditions about death, funerals, shiva, and unveiling.

Three subsequent Sunday morning sessions will cover funeral arrangements, estate planning, Jewish views of the afterlife, and how to run a shiva minyan. All are open to the public free of charge.

Rabbi Debra Orenstein explains that the idea for the synagogue's latest adult-ed series came from congregants who recently have suffered the deaths of family members, as well as the untimely death of a beloved congregant a year and a half ago. She will lead the sessions, along with the shul's Cantor Lenny Mandel and guest speakers.

"People were getting a lot of exposure to Jewish mourning customs but did not feel as informed as they wished to be," she said. "A time of tragedy, when you are absorbed with your own grief, is not when you have the power or energy or inclination to attend a class about these rituals.

"We felt that preparing for death and mourning is



Rabbi Deborah Orenstein

something Jews want and need to know about more deeply. When the time inevitably comes for you to draw on that preparation, the resources and the rituals will be more meaningful for you," she continued. "Most of us have at least a superficial acquaintance with shiva and mourning, and we tend to feel its usefulness, compassion, kindness, and healing, but there is a sense that we haven't gotten deeply into it."

Orenstein, a Conservative rabbi who was editor of Jewish Lights' "Lifecycles," a book series that began in 1994, also sat on the Rabbinical Assembly committee that designed rituals and prayers for childbirth, pregnancy, and miscarriage. "I have a career-long interest in how lifecycle events help us connect to God, Torah, and community," she said.

An article she wrote about the Jewish mourning process for a Catholic publication on interfaith rites of death will be among the texts upon which she will draw for the series, along with biblical, talmudic, and other contemporary sources.

In the opening session, Orenstein will present a timeline detailing what happens in traditional Jewish

observance after a death, why it happens, and how those observances play out in different people's lives. "Sometimes you have expectations and then in the moment things might be a little different," she said. "We'll be peppering these discussions with individual stories."

The workshop will address people's concerns about what to do immediately after hearing of a close family member's death. "People have said, 'I have been to shiva minyans, but when my parent died I didn't know what to do first. Cover the mirrors? Call the doctor?' This is an attempt to give step-by-step, practical tools — but at the same time, the spiritual meaning behind everything."

The second workshop, to be held March 3, is called "With a Little Help From my Friends." It will feature a panel discussion about buying plots, selecting a funeral home, preparing for funerals, prepaying for funerals, and bringing a body back from out of state. Barry Wien, co-owner of Eden Memorial, will lead that session. Louise Reich, an estate planning and administration attorney and congregation member, will focus on living wills, health proxies, and preparing an estate. Orenstein and Mandel will discuss organ donation, bequests, and charitable donations.

The third session, on April 14, will delve into Jewish

See **KNOCKIN'** page 32

Knockin' FROM PAGE 12

beliefs about the afterlife. "It's surprising to me how often people say, 'I didn't know Jews believed in the afterlife,' so it's important to communicate the history and philosophy of those ideas and open it up for conversation and questions," Orenstein said.

In the final session, "Leader of the Pack," set for April 12, Mandel will train anyone 13 or older how to lead a shiva minyan.

"We're a very musical synagogue, so the committee named each session after songs," Orenstein explained. "It's a tough topic, and they wanted to make it accessible and friendly. We also want to communicate that you can think of these ideas in a way that will enhance your life."

In the spring, the synagogue will host its next adult-ed series on lifecycle events, "All You Need is Love." The sessions will be: "One and One Make Two," about brit milah, baby-naming, and conversion of non-Jewish babies; "Do You Want to Know a Secret," looking at "invisible life passages" such as coming out (or learning that your child is gay), having a miscarriage, sending your last child out of the nest, and achieving remission of a disease; and "Got to Get You into My Life," dealing with Jewish wedding rituals and traditions, and the issue of interfaith marriages.

Each 10 to 11:30 a.m. session is self-contained. People planning to attend are asked to RSVP to office@bisrael.com or (201) 265-2272, and to bring a nonperishable food item to contribute to the congregation's interfaith food drive. Collection bins are in the lobby of the synagogue at 53 Palisade Ave., Emerson.

For more information, call (201) 265-2272 or go to www.bisrael.com. 5603345