

Fall 2007

From Russia with a Jewish Heritage

By Peter Freeman

Three short months ago Valeria Nechaveya became a Bat Mitzvah at the Bemah of Sof Ma'arav. Her Journey toward that wonderful moment began for her and our congregation in August of 2006.

Valerie arrived in Hawaii very much a stranger to the United States, to Hawaii, to American culture and to what she would later describe as a balance of her Judaism and secular life. She came as a part of the US State Department's Center for Culture Exchange.

In Russia, the little exposure she had to Judaism came from Chabad Summer Camp in the Ukraine. Her entire formal experience amounted to four weeks. While there, she found that she was not enamored with her role as a Jewish woman. We remember from her Bat Mitzvah Drash, that based on her experience with Chabad

To Grow as a Jew

By Ilisa Peralta

The decision to convert - February, 2006

My son was in basic training at Lackland Air Force Base on 9/11. In an attempt to understand the big picture, I turned to online news sources from all over the world, including Israeli newspapers. As I read, my longstanding interest in Jewish issues revived and ultimately, my search led me to Jewish websites, one of which was Sof Ma'arav. By the time I stepped through the door on Shabbat Shuvah two years ago the thing I wanted most was to connect with Jewish

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she believes their attitude towards women is restrictive. Therefore, it is easy to understand how Sof's egalitarian practices drew Valerie to her Jewish roots.

Bersherth comes to mind when considering how Valerie ended up at our Congregation. Part of her family on her mother's side survived the holocaust slaughter in the Ukraine. As a result of the persecution, her grandmother now in her 70's went into a deep religious underground and stayed there as the Soviets dissuaded religious practices in their union. As a result, Valerie's mother Svetlana Continued on page 7 *From Russia*

women. The members of Sof have tutored and supported me every step of the way to conversion. I found in them and in Judaism a true intellectual and spiritual compatibility. It's been wonderful.

Judaism makes sense to me, and I find myself nodding in agreement as I read. The concept of living spiritually and carefully in a physical world is consonant with my long-held belief in personal change through action. I relish the freedom to question and explore. I need structure and discipline and welcome the daily

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The Torah is Kosher

By Mat Sgan

Hagbahs will be delighted to know that Sof Ma'arav's newest and most physically manageable Torah is ready to be put back into service. It had been determined not to be kosher when a letter error was found during one of our weekly readings. Dina Yoshimi was leyning and Robert Littman was Gabbai. Each being diligent, the error was discovered. The Torah had to be declared "unkosher."

In July, Mat Sgan took that Torah to Chabad of Hawaii where assistant Rabbi Levi Potash and Chabad Shamas Barry Orenstein first sewed and then pasted in the repaired leaf. Many thanks to Robert for arranging with Rabbi Itchel Krasnjansky

of Chabad to remove the leaf, send it to a reputable Sofer in New York to have the correction made (a letter had to be added), and return the leaf to its proper place. Boos to Mat for not bringing a camera to provide photos of the procedure to insert the leaf.

An ordinary needle was used in the sewing, although Robert later wrote from London that he has a special curved upholstery needle that could be used for this purpose. Never underestimate what Robert may possess to keep Sof Ma'arav afloat and honest. He also commented that "life is a photo opportunity" and that Mat should remember to bring a camera on his next assignment.

Clarity

By Sandy Armstrong

Struggling for Clarity

I strolled down the beach today, so self-absorbed that I did not notice the change from soft sand to rocks. I delicately stepped in and out of the silky sand around the rocks, hoping not to stub my toe, until I grew tired of the maneuvering. I realized this was the pattern of my life. I spent much of my time weaving in and out, avoiding sharp, hurtful moments. I wanted my life to be smooth like a walk in the comfort of placid sand. I worked hard to stay on the sand, fighting the jagged edges. I began to cry, remembering times when it was hard to step around all my problems.

Suddenly, I reached a plateau of unblemished shoreline. I stood transfixed and gazed over the ocean while I soaked my feet in a calm tidal pool. I was sure that I had reached heaven. The world became a refreshing breeze, as simple as a spray of salt water dancing on my face. I thanked God for my life and prayed for its continuation. I wanted others to share this feeling of infinite beauty and joy. Despite all the rockiness in my life, I yearned to move on. I understood that obstacles made me appreciate

the calm, sandy shore.

Clarity

I turned around to walk back and managed to stub my toes over and over again. There was no visible way, no well-defined path, around the rocks back to the beach. Pain and mental confusion followed. No clear-cut route caught my eye. It was that soft spot that I longed for, the key to unlocking the fear and frustration. I passed a couple on the way back from my tedious journey, and warned them to be careful of the rocky path ahead. They asked me if there was a clear passage over to Lanakai beach. I cautioned them by saying, "No, the rocks will take over at a certain point". They gratefully answered, "Thanks, we will take the safer route around".

I watched them stroll away, hand in hand, envious that they had taken a simpler route than I did. God wants us to seek Him, to take the easier path. Then we will walk peacefully on an unencumbered shore.

JEWISH COMMUNITY SERVICES AND GIVE ALOHA



By Judy Goldman

Jewish Community Services (JCS) is an essential organization in our Jewish community. It's not known by everyone but is much appreciated by those who have benefited from its mission: to support and enhance the quality of life for those in need of help in the Hawaii Jewish community by providing appropriate social services. As a not-for-profit, JCS is supported by donations from the local Jewish Community. JCS needs your generous contributions at any time.

To make a tax-deductible donation under \$249 go farther, in September you may participate in Foodland's Matching Gift Program:

For assistance from JCS call 258-7121

- Between September 1-30,2007 donate up to \$249 maximum per person per organization at any Foodland or Sack N Save checkout using a free Maika'i card.
- Foodland and Western Union will match a percentage of all donations to all organizations up to \$285,000
- Jewish Community Services Code is : #77215
- Foodland does not send JCS the names of donors. JCS would like to acknowledge your gift: please send a copy of your receipt, or regular donations, including name and address to:
JEWISH COMMUNITY SERVICES
2550 Pali Hwy
Honolulu HI 96817

Yiskor Memorial List and Book of Memory

To add a name to the list of people to be remembered during the Yiskor memorial service on Yom Kippur: Please submit names not in the Sof Ma'arav Book of Memory or on last year's list by **Sunday, September 16, 2007.**

The Book of Memory provides a permanent record of immediate family members (parent, sibling, child, spouse) who have died. Included names are read at services on the Shabbat preceding the yahrzeit and during the Yom Kippur Yiskor service; A name may be added any time. To have a name entered before the High Holy Days, submit information by **Sunday, September 2, 2007.**

It is customary to give tzedakah in memory of a loved one. Checks payable to Congregation Sof Ma'arav are appreciated and may be sent c/o Robert Littman to @ P. O. Box 10850, Honolulu, HI 96816. Please indicate whether it is for the Book of Memory or the Yiskor list.

Please send the following information to Judy Goldman: P.O. Box 10755, Honolulu HI 96816 OR email: jagoldman@hawaii.rr.com OR fax:735-5877

[] Yiskor Memorial List [] Book of Memory: Date of Death _____

Name to be recalled (please print)_____Relationship_____

Your name_____Contact #_____

JCS Annual Volunteer Dinner

On Sunday, October 7, 2007, the Jewish Community Services (JCS) will be having its annual Volunteer Dinner at the Hale Koa Hotel at 5:30 pm. JCS is an organization which, as its mission statement suggests, is "to support & enhance the quality of life for those in need of help in the Hawaii Jewish community by providing appropriate social services."

The honoree for 2007 is Lyn Zukerkorn for her never ending past & present commitment & service to a multitude of community organizations including: Temple Emanu-El, Samaritan Counseling Center of Hawaii, Hawaii Jewish Federation, the Jewish Community Services of Hawaii, the Honolulu symphony, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Girl Scouts of America, Hawaii Theater for Youth, Punahou Carnival, etc.

The featured speaker is TBD. Tickets are \$50 per person of which \$20 is tax deductible. For more information, please contact Lisa Axelrod at 595-7521 X-206 or call 808-595-7521 for more information.

Sof Book Club

By Carolann Biederman

The Sof Book Group invites you to read and discuss thought-provoking books with a Jewish theme. Join us for informal and friendly group discussions. Our meetings rotate among members' homes (location/directions will be confirmed when you RSVP). Please contact Carolann Biederman at cabcb@lava.net or 254-8812 for more information and to RSVP.

Sunday, September 30, 2007 from 1:00 – 3:00 p.m.

Rebecca Goldstein: *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity*

In 1656, Amsterdam's Jewish community excommunicated Baruch Spinoza, and, at the age of 23, he became the most famous heretic in Judaism. He denied the immortality of the soul and challenged the accepted belief that the Torah was literally given by God. He was already germinating a secularist challenge to religion that would be as radical as it was original. He went on to produce one of the most ambitious systems in the history of Western philosophy.

In *Betraying Spinoza*, Rebecca Goldstein sets out to rediscover the flesh-and-blood man often hidden beneath the veneer of rigorous rationality, and to crack the mystery of the breach between the philosopher and his Jewish past. Goldstein argues that the trauma of the Inquisition's persecution of its forced Jewish converts plays itself out in Spinoza's philosophy. The excommunicated Spinoza, no less than his excommunicators, was responding to Europe's first experiment with racial anti-Semitism.

Sunday, November 18, 2007 from 11:30 a.m. – 1:30 p.m.

Richard Zimier: *The Last Kabbalist of Lisbon*

THE BEST STORIES IN THE WORLD

...are in Genesis and Exodus. These are the narrative chapters in Torah. Take a personal look -- and then sign up for a drosh. Contact Fran at fayge@hawaii.rr.com or 373 2561.

Sally's Book Corner

By Sally Morgan

The High Holidays are once again looming ever closer, and with this in mind, I chose to review three books:

Hammer, Reuven. Entering The High Holy Days; A Complete Guide to the History, Prayers, and Themes. JPS, 2005.

Hammer writes that "the purpose of this book is to provide a detailed map and a trustworthy compass to all those who seek to find greater meaning and personal fulfillment in their observance of the Days of Awe." And so, Hammer provides the historical background and an interpretation of the ideas, practices, and liturgy and so leaves the reader to a better understanding of the days of awe. As Hammer states, "This book can be the beginning of a profound experience of the Days of Awe, but it is only a beginning. What makes the difference is active participation."

Agnon, S. Y., ed. Days of Awe. Schocken Books, 1995.

S. Y. Agnon, one of the greatest Hebrew writers of the 20th century and winner of the 1966 Nobel Prize in Literature, has compiled readings and meditations from the Torah, the Talmud, the Midrash, and the Zohar to deepen the spiritual experience of the High Holy Days. As Arthur Green writes in the new foreword to Days of Awe, "Agnon as an old Jew from a world now vanished...leans over you and...begins to tell you tales, an old preacher's parable, or a custom of onetime pious Jews that will open your heart to the splendor and richness, alongside the terror and awe with which Jews have crowned Yamim Noraim, the High Holy Days."

Salamon, Julie. Rambam's Ladder: A Meditation of Generosity and Why It is Necessary to Give. Workman Publishing, 2003.

During the Yiskor service, we say, "In loving testimony of our loved ones lives, we pledge charity to help perpetuate ideals important to them." For Rambam, perhaps no single idea was more important, as a means of pursuing righteousness, than giving with compassion and common sense. To that purpose, Rambam wrote his ladder of charity or the eight ways of giving. In the book, Rambam's Ladder, Julie Salamon examines her own feeling on 11/11/01 when she felt no urge to help the victims of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, but only wanted to shield her own family from that day's horror. That made her feel selfish. In an effort to understand her own conflicting emotions, Salamon wrote this book...a book that examines how and why people give of their time and money presenting it as a "meditation on Rambam's Ladder."

Bissl Und Bissl

By Sally Morgan... A gut Yontev to you all! L'shanah Tovah Tik Hatevu.

From the New York Times: President Lech Kaczynski of Poland joined with Jewish leaders on June 25, 2007 to break ground for the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. The museum will rise in Warsaw on a site next to the city's monument to Jews who resisted the Nazis during the ghetto uprising in 1943. And in Krakow, "Jewish style" restaurants are serving up platters of progis, klezmer bands are playing, and derelict synagogues are gradually being restored. Every June, a festival of Jewish culture draws thousands of people to sing Jewish songs and dance Jewish dances. The only thing missing, really, are Jews. Jewish communities are gradually reawakening across Eastern Europe as Jewish schools introduce a new generation to rituals and beliefs suppressed by the Nazis and then by Communism.

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routines and yearly cycles of Jewish life. As I investigate the significance of the actions I am learning to perform, I am gaining a deeper appreciation for the wisdom of aligning behavior and belief in the search for intrapersonal harmony and interpersonal synchrony.

The conversion experience—February, 2007

On the night of February 13th, after almost 2 years of study and consultation, Dina Yoshimi and I flew to San Francisco to meet with the beit din convened by Rabbi David Booth of Congregation Kol Emeth. I have special memories of davening shachrit with Dina behind a pillar in the San Francisco airport as the sun rose on my conversion day. I remember a fairly pleasant conversation with the three rabbis of the beit din: Rabbi David Booth, Rabbi Sarah Graf, and Rabbi Alan Lew. I vaguely remember thinking that I shouldn't be arguing with a rabbi on this occasion, especially on three hours sleep, but I was laughingly told that was very Jewish.

When Betsy Eckstein, the mikveh attendant for Mikveh Israel B'nei David, conducted the tour of the facilities, she told me to think of the mikvah as the "womb of the Jewish people". I can still close my eyes and feel the warmth of the water, the mixing of the waters as cool currents flowed in from the tank of rain water, the air vibrant with expectation, and the presence across the room of the women I had invited to attend: Dina, Michelle Booth, Rabbi Graf, and Betsy. Time, at that point, did not seem to exist. It was an intensely personal moment in my life when I connected with my soulmates at Sinai. I am now Hannah Ayalah and I will let Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel (*Man's Quest for God*, 1996) explain for me:

Judaism is not only the adherence to particular doctrines and observances, but primarily living in the spiritual order of the Jewish

people, the living in the Jews of the past, and with the Jews of the present. Judaism is not only a certain quality in the souls of individuals, but primarily the existence of the community of Israel. It is not a doctrine, an idea, a faith, but the covenant between God and the people.

My Jewish Dream

A few months before my conversion, I had a dream. I was standing with a friend from Sof beside a river of the clearest water which was tumbling over the whitest, most glistening rocks. There were children laughing and playing in the water at the edge of a forest. To my left, there was a round-topped mountain, deeply forested and very green. I knew we were going up the mountain and was eager to go, but I wasn't dressed for the trip. My friend had a small open Jeep in which there was a heap of children's clothes. I started hurriedly sorting through the clothes and somehow managed to bundle up in preparation. My friend, driver, and guide then pointed to a slash that cut straight across the mountaintop and ended, I somehow knew, in a scenic lookout around the bend. She said, "That's the Jewish Trail. We'll have to be careful, because the drop-off is steep". There was no visible way to access the trail, but off we went over boulder and bush through countryside of the most vivid color.

So, here I am, on the Jewish Trail. In my conversion essays, I blithely stated that I expected to continue to learn and to grow as a Jew. Learning is easy, but what is growth, and what's the difference? Learn more Hebrew? Study more Torah? Delve more deeply? Be more committed to halachah? Grow in understanding and tolerance? What about developing the wisdom, strength, and insight needed to be both observant and loving? Perhaps, if I keep working on it, the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart will one day be consistently kind and compassionate, and all my choices in line with Torah. Clearly, there's plenty of work to do for this woman of the covenant.

From Russia from page 1

had no exposure to her own Jewish heritage.

But in the 1990's as the USSR's choke hold grip on Russia and their satellites was reduced to a sweaty palm, religious practices resurfaced in these countries. At that time, without any direct Jewish influence there, Chabad's window of opportunity presented itself and they took a presence and grandma sent Valerie to camp for two weeks over two summers.

Valerie was born in 1991 in St. Petersburg, just in time to see her country struggling back from a political state to a country allowing religious identity. She points out that this is not an "on or off" condition. In fact, she and her family are not quick to openly identify themselves based on their religious background. While religious freedom is evolving, the practice of Judaism is done with a sense of caution.

Interestingly, her government classifies their citizens based on their ethnicity which in Russia includes Jewish. That is, citizens are not merely Russians; in Valerie's case she is officially classified as a Jewish Russian. However, Christians (generally Russian Orthodox) are not classified in this manner. This then brings up the discussion of: is Judaism a religion or an ethnicity; again.

We know the reality of citizenship in this country to be that we are all Americans / citizens of the United States no matter what our heritage, race, country of origin, color or religion. Apparently, this is not the case in Russia.

Identity classifications are used for census information, university enrollment, women in business loans, veteran benefits, etc. The act of identity specificity is mostly a self preferential subcategorizing and at it worst it is used for minority group status seeking.

So Valerie, a Jewish Russian, was chosen for the program that brought her to us though a very difficult testing and screening process. According

to the local program director, 59,000 finalists from all the countries of the former Soviet Union were narrowed to 1,100 selectees. These young men and women, between 15 and 17 were placed in homes throughout all fifty states.

The purpose of this program is to expose these young people to the culture of the United States which in the end promotes a better understanding of international issues through experience and observing our strengths and weaknesses. It appears that Valerie's Jewish kismet was at full power since she ended up in Hawaii, and at a Jewish home, with membership at Sof Ma'arav. This was certainly a great fit for her and was very clear that: "not only did women participate in the service, they even led it."

More so, Valerie was able to celebrate Shabbat and holidays in the way that was done before the pogrom in Russia. For example, she went from having a glass of grape juice and a piece of matzo one time with just her grandmother, to a full Seder in Hawaii with 35 people all participating, reading the Hagadah and singing all the songs.

Valerie's metamorphosis happened on many levels and by her own admission is compared with her life in her own country. Educationally, she experienced a wonderful Junior year at La Pietra; her exposure to the ease at which we do things in the United States; the pleasant demeanor of most of the people in this country; the lack of corruption in business, politics, education, etc; our retail shopping; cultural diversity; and certainly the completeness of her Jewish practice, all contributed to an interesting result. Valerie is hoping to go to an American University after she finishes high school in 2008.

Perhaps we will see her at Sof again someday. Until that time, we can remember what a remarkable young lady she is and take great joy in knowing how our congregation so deeply and importantly influenced her life.

Congregation Sof Ma'arav

2500 Pali Hwy

Honolulu, HI 96817

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Ritual Advisor: Ken Aronowitz
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Havdalah: Trudy Wong
Webmistress: Louise Good
Welcome: Sandy Armstrong
Adult Ed. Dina Yoshimi

We're on the Web!

Visit us at:

www.sofmaarav.org

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Holiday Service Schedule

Erev Rosh Hashanah:

Wednesday September 12th 8:00PM
followed by a pot-luck dessert

Rosh Hashanah:

Thursday September 13th 9:00AM-1:00PM

Friday September 14th 9:00AM-1:00PM

Yom Kippur - Kol Nidre:

Friday September 21st 6:15PM

Yom Kippur Day:

Saturday September 22nd 10:00AM-2:00PM
5:00PM - 7:00PM

Sukkot

To Be Determined

Simchat Torah:

Thursday October 4th 6:30 PM

Congregation Sof Ma'arav

2500 Pali Hwy

Honolulu, HI 96817

