HAPPY *SHAVUOT!*

# Jewish Observer of Central New York

A publication of the Jewish Federation of Central New York

PERIODICALS POSTAGE PAID, SYRACUSE, NY & ADDITIONAL OFFICES

GREATER SYRACUSE, ISRAEL & THE JEWISH WORLD | WWW.JEWISHFEDERATIONCNY.ORG MAY 2026 | IYAR-SIVAN 5786


**LOOK:**
***SHAVUOT* AND CHEESECAKE**
**( 6 )**

**INSIDE:**
***SHAVUOT* AND BLINTZES**
**( 7 )**

**DON'T MISS:**
**JEWS AND LACTOSE INTOLERANCE**
**( 5 )**

# May 2026

## From the Editor

Barbara Davis

**The theme of this month's issue of the *JO* is Shavuot. It has been said that Shavuot is the most important Jewish holiday most people have never heard of.**

Shavuot started as a purely agricultural festival—one of three pilgrimage holidays when Israelites brought their first fruits to the Temple, marking the wheat harvest seven weeks after Passover. When the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, the rabbis needed to give the holiday meaning that could survive without Temple rituals or farm-based observance. They seized on a key detail: Exodus places the Israelites' arrival at Mount Sinai in the third month after leaving Egypt—the same timing as Shavuot. By reframing the holiday as the anniversary of receiving the Torah, they transformed it from a harvest celebration into the spiritual completion of the Exodus story. The *Book of Ruth* was added because of its harvest setting and its story of an outsider choosing Jewish law. The result is a holiday with multiple layers: agricultural memory, theological significance, and a story about loyalty and conversion.

In 2026, Shavuot offers other lessons that resonate with our lives. There's the active choice the Israelites made at Sinai—not simply receiving the Torah but accepting it. The tradition of all-night study reflects learning as something continuous, without a clear endpoint. Ruth's story provides another dimension: an outsider who chose to belong and became central to the lineage of King David. And even though most of us don't farm anymore, the harvest metaphor still holds: you reap what you sow, good things take time, and there aren't really shortcuts to what matters.

And of course, there's what we eat on this holiday. When it comes to Shavuot, cheese is the go-to food, usually in the form of cheesecake, blintzes, or bourekas if you're Sephardic. But aside from the explanation on our cover page, the question remains: why is this a custom? Some point to linguistic clues: the first letters of four Hebrew words in Numbers 28:26, which describe the sacrificial meal offering on Shavuot, spell out *mei halav* (from milk), hinting that dairy is the right choice for the festival. Then there's Mount Sinai itself, called the *Mount of Gavnunim* in Psalms 68:15, meaning "many peaks." The word *gavnunim* connects to *gevinah*, Hebrew for cheese. Scholars who trace Jewish customs to ethnic practices note that spring harvest festivals typically featured dairy dishes, likely because that's when cheese was made. There is also a spiritual symbolism: after receiving the Torah at Sinai, the Israelites were considered as pure as newborns, whose food is milk. So whether you prefer cheesecake or blintzes, there's plenty of culinary tradition behind the holiday.

And while it was a lot of fun to write about Jews, dairy and lactose intolerance, there is a serious side to the holiday that is particularly relevant today. The rabbis ask: why was the Torah given in the desert, *bamidbar,* in a wilderness belonging to no single tribe, no single people? They answered: because Torah must be *hefker*, ownerless, available to all. Only what belongs to no one can truly belong to everyone. We live, at this moment, in a world that is the opposite of *hefker*. Everything is being claimed, weaponized, fenced. Truth itself has become tribal property. In the two years since October 7th reshaped the emotional geography of Jewish life, many have felt the ground shift beneath old certainties—about who our allies are, what our children are learning in the institutions we built, about the relationship between Jewish peoplehood and the broader humanist values we long believed in. We have argued. Communities have fractured. Friendships have ended.

Into all of this, Shavuot arrives, commemorating the giving of the Torah at Sinai. We receive it anew each year precisely because no generation's reception is final or complete. What our ancestors heard at Sinai, what our grandparents and parents heard, what we heard are not identical. Scholars call the present situation an "epistemic crisis." The Talmud says that the Torah has *shivim panim*, seventy faces. In a year when so many in our community feel exhausted, depressed and lost, it is vital to remember that we are still one people, even when we disagree.

Shavuot is one of only two major Jewish holidays without a ritual accessory: no *shofar,* no *lulav,* no *chanukiya,* no grogger, no seder plate. What one brings to Sinai are questions, doubts, learning, yearning. Shavuot is a reminder that, in spite of everything, we are still one people, standing together at the foot of something bigger than ourselves.

*Chag Sameach* to all our readers and may the revelation at Sinai—that there is meaning, that there is moral order, that we are not alone in the universe—bring you comfort.

## Letter from the Editor

It is easy to criticize. And when it is done anonymously, it is even easier because there is no accountability. But if one wants to see change, one needs to do more than point out what isn't working. One needs to step up and DO SOMETHING. Nowhere is this truer than in a community organization such as the Federation.

Recently a letter was sent to the Federation by an anonymous "member" who had some negative thoughts about the *JO*. Some of those thoughts were uninformed, but some were reasonable and worth considering. But the writer wanted others to act—nowhere did they offer to help, or to get others to help.

And that is the crux of the problem. Community organizations do not run on good intentions or critiques. They run on people—people who show up, roll up their sleeves, and do the hard, often thankless work of making things happen. They run on volunteers who give their time when time is precious, on donors who give when resources are limited, on leaders who step forward when stepping forward is uncomfortable.

Criticism absolutely has a place. Our community is stronger when we ask hard questions and refuse to settle for "good enough." But there is a real difference between a member who raises concerns and stays in the room to help address them, and one who lobs criticism from a safe distance and then disappears.

So here is a challenge—not to the anonymous letter-writer specifically, but to all of us: If you see something that isn't working, say so—and put your name to it. If you have an idea, share it—and offer to help carry it out. If you care about the Federation, about the JO, about our community, show that you care. Attend a meeting. Join a committee. Make a phone call. Write a check. Send us your good news for Hadashot Tovot. Tell us about something interesting you are doing. Volunteer. Be present.

The *JO* and the Federation belong to all of us. But belonging comes with responsibility. The issue is never simply "What should be done." It is "How can we do it together?"


**Jewish Observer**
of Central New York

Published by
**Jewish Federation of Central New York**
**5655 Thompson Road**
**DeWitt, NY 13214**

**phone: 315-445-0161**
**fax: 315-445-1599**
**jewishfederationcny.org**

Jewish Federation OF CENTRAL NEW YORK

Board Chair.....**Todd J. Pinsky**
President/CEO.....**Mark Segel**
Editor.....**Barbara Davis**

Jewish Federations of North America

The Jewish Federation of Central New York is a proud member of the Jewish Federations of North America.

Produced by
Buffalo Spree CUSTOM PUBLISHING & DESIGN

**BUFFALO SPREE PUBLISHING, INC.**
President.....**Sharon C. Levite**
Vice President/Chief Revenue Officer/
Publisher.....**Barbara E. Macks**

**ART, EDITORIAL & PRODUCTION**
Lead Designer.....**Kimberly Miers**
Graphic Designer.....**Rachel Kaznica**

**ADVERTISING & SALES**
Director of Advertising.....**Barbara E. Macks**
Account Executives..**Keren Green, Rachel Wasserman**

**FINANCE**
Finance Manager.....**Brittany Baer**

**Submissions:**
Submit stories and photos no later than the 1st of the preceding month prior to publication to jo@jewishfederationcny.org.

**To Advertise:**
Ad space & materials are due by the 16th of each month prior to publication. For a rate card and any additional information, please email Barbara Macks at bmacks@buffalospree.com.

**To Subscribe:**
To subscribe, email bdavis@jewishfederationcny.org. Free for Central New York area residents and donors to the Federation's annual campaign. Non-resident subscription is $36 for 12 issues, payable to the *Jewish Observer*.

THE JEWISH OBSERVER OF CENTRAL NEW YORK (USPS 000939) (ISSN 1079-9842) Publications Periodical postage paid at Syracuse, NY and other offices. Published 12 times per year by the Jewish Federation of Central New York Inc., a non-profit corporation, 5655 Thompson Road, DeWitt, NY 13214. Subscriptions $36/year; student $10/year. POSTMASTER: Send address change to JEWISH OBSERVER OF CENTRAL NEW YORK, 5655 Thompson Road, DeWitt, NY 13214.

## MESSAGE FROM MARK SEGEL
*Federation President & CEO*

**There are moments when the weight of the world settles squarely on a community's shoulders, and this is one of them. For Jewish Americans in Syracuse and across the country, the past months have brought an almost relentless convergence of anxiety, grief, moral complexity, and fear. Israel is never far from our thoughts. Antisemitism has moved from the margins to the mainstream of public discourse. And we find ourselves navigating a landscape that is, simultaneously, deeply personal and almost impossibly complicated.**

The conflict in the Middle East has fractured friendships, strained family relationships, and divided institutions that once prided themselves on their cohesion. Within the Jewish community itself, there is no single voice, no unanimous position—nor should we expect one. What there is, instead, is a shared sense of stakes: an understanding that what happens in Israel matters not merely geopolitically but existentially, in the oldest and most literal sense of that word. The safety and survival of a Jewish homeland and the welfare of its citizens are not abstract concerns. They are felt in the gut.

At the same time, antisemitism in this country has reached levels not seen in decades. The statistics are stark. The incidents—on college campuses, in social media threads, in the streets of American cities—are no longer surprising, which is itself a disturbing measure of how far we have traveled. Locally, we have not been immune. Members of our own community have experienced slurs, vandalism, and the low-grade but persistent unease of wondering whether a mezuzah on a doorpost or a Star of David around one's neck might invite hostility. That this is the reality in 2026—in Syracuse, in America—would have seemed unthinkable a generation ago.

What makes all this harder, not easier, is that the issues resist simple framing. Reasonable, decent, deeply committed Jews disagree—sometimes passionately—about Israeli policy, about the conduct of the war, about what peace might look like and whether it is achievable. They disagree about how to respond to antisemitism when it comes wrapped in the language of human rights. They disagree about what loyalty to Israel requires and what criticism of Israel permits. These are not comfortable conversations. They are, however, necessary ones.

It is against this backdrop that we observe Shavuot, the festival that commemorates the giving of the Torah at Sinai, the moment when a people received not merely a set of rules but a framework for living in relationship with one another and with the divine. The Ten Commandments, at their core, are about the obligations we owe: to God, to parents, to neighbors, to strangers, to truth. They ask us to bear witness honestly, to honor what is sacred, to refrain from the acquisitive and destructive impulses that unravel communities from the inside.

In a season of noise and division, Shavuot invites us to pause and listen. Not to agree—agreement is too much to ask, and probably too much to want. But to listen. To extend to those with whom we disagree the presumption that they, too, are acting from conscience and from love of something larger than themselves. To resist the pull toward caricature and contempt.

Our values are ancient, but they are not naive. They were forged in the wilderness, tested in exile, and carried across centuries of adversity. They have not led us to consensus. They have led us to survival—and to each other.

That, for now, may be enough.

# On The Safe Side

*By Bill Bronner, Director of Community Security*

## Elder Scams: A Growing Threat

**Elder scams have become one of the fastest-growing financial crimes in the world, targeting older adults who may be more trusting, isolated, or unfamiliar with rapidly evolving technology. Over the last few years, during my attendance at local Law Enforcement meetings, I was alarmed at the significant number of these cases being investigated by police departments.**

One of the most common types of elder scams is the **imposter scam**. These criminals pose as government officials, bank representatives, or even family members in distress. A typical example is the "grandparent scam," in which someone calls pretending to be a grandchild who needs immediate financial help. The scammer uses urgency and fear to push the victim into acting before thinking. Similarly, scammers often impersonate the IRS, Medicare, or Social Security, threatening legal consequences or loss of benefits if immediate payments aren't made.

Another widespread tactic is the **tech support scam**, where a scammer contacts an older adult claiming that their computer has a virus or security problem. They may ask for remote access to the device, enabling them to steal personal information or install malicious software.

**Romance scams** have also surged among older adults, especially those who are widowed or living alone. Scammers create fake profiles on dating or social platforms, slowly gaining the trust of their victims before inventing crises that require money. The emotional manipulation involved can be devastating, often resulting in significant financial loss and deep psychological harm.

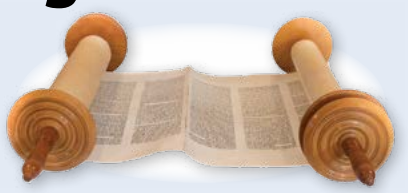
Additionally, **prize, lottery, and sweepstakes scams** frequently target seniors by informing them that they've won a large sum of money. To claim the prize, the victim is told they must first pay taxes or processing fees. Once the money is sent, the scammer disappears, and the "prize" never materializes.

Protecting older adults from these schemes requires vigilance and communication. Families should encourage open discussion about unexpected calls, emails, or online interactions. Seniors should be reminded that legitimate agencies—like the IRS, Medicare, and banks—**never** demand immediate payment over the phone or request personal information through unsolicited contact. It's also wise to establish simple rules, such as never sending money or gift cards to someone you haven't met in person, never giving remote access to a computer, and verifying identities through trusted phone numbers before acting.

Elder scams are a serious and escalating issue, but with awareness, support, and proper safeguards, older adults can stay informed, empowered, and protected.

# Simon and the Words of Thanksgiving

***By Rabbi Daniel Jezer,***
*Rabbi Emeritus of*
*Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra Shas*



**The preparation for the trip was almost complete. Simon looked over his field with a sense of satisfaction and anticipation. The year had been good to him. King Hezekiah, the king of Judea had not raised taxes that year. As Simon viewed his crops he was thankful that the rains had come in their season, sufficient for his crops to grow in abundance. There was no drought that year. At Passover time he had harvested a good barley crop and now, just before Shavuot he had cut his winter wheat. The grapes were fleshing out; there would be good wine, and the olive trees were foretelling a successful year for olive oil.**

With a heart filled with gratitude to God for the bountifulness of his harvest he anticipated his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, as was the custom of the time. He imagined giving his basket of the first fruits to the priest and with great pride and happiness give thanks to his God who had provided him with all.

Simon placed the basket of fruits that he was going to dedicate as a thanksgiving to God on his donkey and began his trek to Jerusalem for the festival of Shavuot. As he approached the city he was joined by throngs of other farmers, each with his thanksgiving to God basket of fruits and wheat from the new crop. The mood was jubilant, and the wine flowed.

Upon arriving at the city, Simon was welcome by a priest who was to guide Simon through the ritual of the thanksgiving. Simon was overjoyed for now he would thank God for his good fortune.

The priest took the basket from Simon laid it in front of the alter and instructed Simon to recite the words prescribed in the Torah: "My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers…. and became a great and populous nation…. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us…. We cried to the Lord our God…. The Lord freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand… He brought us to this place, and gave us a land flowing with milk and honey." *(Deuteronomy 26)*

Simon repeated the narrative as he had been instructed. Finishing the words, he stood silent, crestfallen, dejected. Recomposing himself, he bitterly rebuked the priest. "I left my family, and fields to come on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to praise and give words of thanksgiving to God for my crops and you have me recite a history lesson!"

The priest, who was wise beyond his sacerdotal position attempted to placate Simon, "What are you?" he asked Without hesitation, Simon answered, "a farmer."

"Yes," said the priest, "You farm the land and tend to your crops, but you are not just a farmer. You plant, and you harvest and that is how you earn your living. You are a person, created in god's image with the ability to be a successful farmer. You are a person created in God's image who has the ability to fulfill the Torah's goal for you, to raise yourself up above the here and now life of an animal. An animal knows about its daily life as you know about the daily life of your fields. The Torah desires that you rise above that, yes, to farm, and also to use your abilities to think, to know your values, to be unique. At this time of joy and happiness, of thanksgiving for your crops you need remember who you are. You are Simon the son of Eliezer of the tribe of Judea whom the Lord God saved from the tyranny of Egypt and brought us to this land of milk and honey. You must know who you are and that is the importance of reciting the story of our people."

Simon listened to the words of the priest and then quietly mumbled his own words of Thanksgiving and returned home.

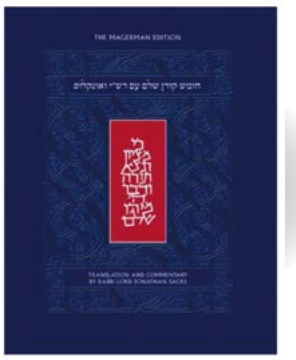


# Torah Is For Our Time: The *Koren Shalem Humash*

## Translation and Commentary by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

***Reviewed by Rabbi Irvin S. Beigel***

**A colleague once said that the most important goal of Jewish education is to show that Judaism has meaning and significance. The men and women we read about in the Torah dressed differently than we do. In many ways, their world was different from ours. Yet their problems were the same as ours and their search for meaning and purpose is also our search. What we want from a Torah commentary are coping strategies for our times. We want to know how the Torah teaches us to live. In dismissing the supposed conflict between science and Torah, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks writes: "We need to understand the universe, and we need religion to guide our way within it." Every Torah commentary tries to help us on our journey.**



In his review of the *Sacks Humash*, Rabbi Yosef Lindell observes that every commentary has an intended audience and purpose. The *Hertz Humash* defends the divine authorship of the Torah. The ***Artscroll Humash*** anthologizes classical Jewish commentaries. For Artscroll, rabbinic interpretation is the literal meaning of text. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, succeeds in educating and inspiring Jews, including those who do not share his orthodoxy. Rabbi Lindell notes that Rabbi Sacks disliked the term "modern Orthodox." I believe that all such labels stand in the way of critical and thoughtful discussion.

When Rabbi Sacks died in 2020, he had just begun work on this project. The commentary was completed by others, speaking in his voice through his writings and lectures. The layout of the book is noteworthy. The English translation, which was the work of Rabbi Sacks, appears on the right-hand page with the Hebrew text on the facing left page. Rashi's commentary appears in a new Hebrew script created by Koren. The Aramaic translation of *Onkelos* also is on the page. Rabbi Sacks' commentary is across the bottom of both pages. Some readers may need to adapt to this layout.

What is most valuable about this commentary is Rabbi Sacks' eloquence and his ability to identify the issues which are important to Jews today. Using literary analysis, Rabbi Sacks notes that the number 7 pervades the story of creation. The word "good" occurs 7 times. "God" appears 7 times. "Heavens" and "earth" appear 21 times. He infers that "The Sabbath [the seventh day!] then, is woven into the pattern of creation."

Rabbi Sacks asks why Joseph never contacted his father, Jacob, all the years that he was in Egypt. The anguished Jacob believed that his beloved son was dead. Rabbi Sacks notices that just before Joseph was sold into slavery, he told his father that, in a dream, Jacob bowed down to him. Joseph believed that his father was angry and became complicit in Joseph's enslavement. Jumping to conclusions caused the estrangement.

Rabbi Sacks had a breadth of knowledge that allowed him to turn to both rabbis and Egyptian myth to explain the problematic hardening of Pharoah's heart. Egyptians believed that when a person dies, their heart, where the soul is, is weighed. If unjust and immoral behavior have made the heart heavier than a feather, the person is denied the pleasures of the afterlife.

In the Torah, Rabbi Sacks finds a blueprint for creating an ideal world. Commenting on the Ten Plagues, he writes: "The plagues are a lesson, to Pharaoh and to the world, that there is something higher than power. There is justice, liberty, human dignity, the sanctity of life."

The *Koren Sacks Humash* is for the Torah observant Jew, and it is for the searching Jew. It is for all who journey through this world.

*Rabbi Irvin S. Beigel is a retired healthcare chaplain.*

# *Hinenu: Israel at 10 Million* by David Schlachter

*Reviewed by Marc Safran*

**Before starting medical school in 1981, I took a gap year to backpack abroad—a journey that began in Europe, continued through India, and ultimately brought me to Israel. At the time, Israel was a young nation of just under four million people, often seen as an underdog in a difficult region. What struck me most, however, was not its geopolitics but its people. I was immediately drawn to the remarkable diversity of Israeli society—individuals whose stories spanned continents, generations, and vastly different life experiences. In my own case, my Israeli family traces its roots to Argentina—just one thread in the broader tapestry that makes up the country's identity.**

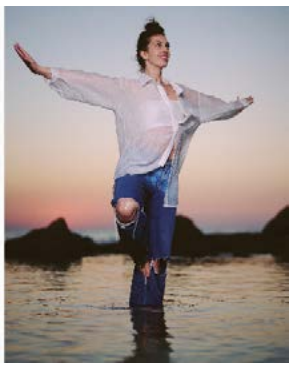
In his newly released book, *Hinenu* ("Here We Are"), David Schlachter steps away from the political and analytical frameworks that so often dominate discussions of Israel. Instead, he offers something more intimate: a collection of photographic portraits and personal narratives from one hundred Israelis, selected to represent the country as it approaches the milestone of ten million citizens.

As Schlachter notes, Israel conducts a formal census approximately every fifteen years, with the most recent completed in 2023. His introductory discussion of demographics underscores the remarkable dynamism of the country: Israel is strikingly young, with nearly 40 percent of its population under the age of thirty, and it continues to experience one of the fastest growth rates among developed nations. Approximately 15 percent of the Jewish population is foreign-born—primarily from the former Soviet Union, Europe, and the Middle East—while about 17 percent of the country's citizens are Muslim. These statistics serve as a framework, but the heart of the book lies in the individuals who embody them.

A Harvard graduate with a background in international development, Schlachter recounts relocating with his young family from California to Tel Aviv, drawn by its vibrant beach culture and café-lined streets. Their arrival coincided with one of the most difficult chapters in Israel's recent history—the events of October 7 and the ensuing Gaza war. Yet even amid this upheaval, Schlachter found that the essential spirit of the Israeli people remained intact.

As a photographer, he set out to capture that spirit. The result is a project that spans generations and backgrounds: from the reflections of a 91-year-old Holocaust survivor to the story of a newborn in Caesarea. Each chapter presents a personal narrative paired with a striking on-location portrait, grounding the reader in the lived reality of the subject. The photographs do more than illustrate—they deepen the emotional resonance of each story, creating a powerful connection between image and text.

These stories challenge the stereotyped images Israel often evokes. As reflected in the portraits accompanying this review, we encounter an Ethiopian gang member who, after serving in the IDF, finds a path toward purpose; a Haredi Ashkenazi woman who leaves an oppressive ultra-Orthodox marriage to pursue a university education; and a dreadlocked Tel Aviv surfer who dreams of redesigning sailboats. We meet a



Bedouin Arab who, after suffering heart failure at age fifteen, receives a life-saving transplant and searches for her donor's family to express her gratitude; a three-year-old child of formerly secular Americans who have become deeply religious and Zionist; and a Sephardic teenager from a large, fractured family navigating her own path of self-discovery. These are just a few of the evocative and deeply human stories that give the book its emotional power.

As a studio photographer, I found myself especially drawn to Schlachter's approach. A photograph can never fully tell a subject's story; it is, at best, a constructed moment—a collaboration between photographer and subject, shaped by perspective and intention. Schlachter understands this limitation and works beyond it. Hinenu is not a coffee-table collection of Israeli subjects. Its power lies in the pairing of image with narrative, where the written trajectories of his subjects bring depth, context, and soul to what might otherwise remain only a surface impression. The result is a work that captures something essential about Israel—not as a fixed idea, but as a living, evolving mosaic of human experience.

# Milk in Judaism

**Milk may seem like a simple, everyday food, but in Jewish tradition it carries a surprising amount of meaning. Milk is a potent symbol of life, nourishment, and divine blessing that extends far beyond dietary restrictions From the Bible through rabbinic teachings, milk is used to talk about freedom, learning, and spiritual growth. It reflects the realities of ancient life while also pointing to bigger ideas about faith and God's care for the world. The points below explore how milk shows up in Judaism not just on the table, but as a way of understanding nourishment, abundance, and the sweetness of learning.**

The most famous reference appears in Exodus, when Moses is told that the Israelites will be brought to "a land flowing with milk and honey." This wasn't just poetic language; it had real meaning for ancient farmers. A land that "flows" with milk means pastures so rich that livestock produce more milk than people can use. It's a sign of extraordinary fertility and abundance. For enslaved Israelites suffering in Egypt, this promise represented the ultimate contrast: freedom instead of bondage, plenty instead of scarcity, blessing instead of cruelty. The image painted a picture of a life where basic needs would be met not through backbreaking labor, but through generous provision.

What makes milk especially meaningful is that it's an unearned gift. Unlike wheat that must be planted and harvested, or bread that requires grinding and baking, milk simply flows from animals naturally. A shepherd may care for the flock, but the milk itself comes without direct human effort. This makes milk a perfect symbol for grace—blessings that flow freely rather than from human achievement. At the same time, the tradition recognizes that maintaining these blessings requires faithfulness. The land will only continue flowing with milk if the people uphold their covenant.

Rabbinic sages took the milk metaphor further, comparing Torah study to a mother nursing her child. Just as milk provides complete nourishment for an infant, Torah offers everything the soul needs for spiritual growth. When the Song of Solomon describes words as "honey and milk under your tongue," the rabbis interpreted this as the sweetness of sacred learning. Milk also represents different levels of understanding—the "easy to digest" basics for beginners versus "solid food" for advanced students. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for milk, *chalav,* has a numerical value of forty, connecting it to Moses's forty days on Mount Sinai and the forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of milk in Jewish thought is its paradoxical nature. Milk is white, pure, and perfectly kosher to drink. Yet it comes from blood, which the Torah forbids consuming. How does the same body that produces forbidden blood also create permitted milk? For Jewish commentators, this transformation became a symbol of spiritual possibility—the ability to turn impure into pure, struggle into growth, ordinary experience into sacred meaning. Just as an animal mysteriously transforms grass and water into nourishing milk, a sincere student transforms the study of ancient texts into personal wisdom and moral refinement.

This transformation extends to cheese. If milk represents the raw gift of knowledge—pure, sustaining, and freely given—then cheese represents what happens when that gift is actively cared for and refined. Making cheese requires intention: adding culture, controlling temperature, applying pressure, aging. The process turns something simple and perishable into something complex and enduring. In the same way, wisdom doesn't remain abstract; it becomes part of daily life through study, practice, and the accumulated insights of generations.

Taken together, milk, cheese, and Shavuot tell a shared story. Milk represents the gift of Torah at Sinai—pure, sustaining, and freely given—while cheese represents what happens when that gift is cared for, studied, and shaped over time. By eating dairy on Shavuot, Jewish tradition reminds us that wisdom should not remain abstract, but rather become part of daily life, deepening with practice.

# Shavuot Humor

**Q. What kind of man was Boaz before he married?**
**A. Ruth-less.**


Up on Mt. Sinai, Moses is receiving the Torah.
God proclaims, "THOU SHALT NOT SEETHE THE KID IN ITS MOTHER'S MILK."
Moses is confused. "What does that mean, Lord? We should not cook meat in milk?"
God repeats "THOU SHALT NOT SEETHE THE KID IN ITS MOTHER'S MILK."
Moses responds, "But what do you mean, Lord? Should we never serve meat and dairy in the same meal?"
God repeats "THOU SHALT NOT SEETHE THE KID IN ITS MOTHER'S MILK."
Moses continues "Do you mean that we should have two separate sets of dishes and flatware and two ovens and two dishwashers? One for meat and one for milk?"
And God says, "OK, Moses, have it your way."

**Elijah the Prophet comes to New York City right before Chanukah. He gets very excited when he sees Chanukah decorations, Chanukah parties and Chanukah cards and hears Chanukah music. He exclaims, "If this is what Jews do for Chanukah, I can only imagine what they do for Shavuot!"**

## Cheesy Humor

*What do you call a cheese that doesn't belong to you?*
**Nacho cheese!**

*What did one cheese say to the other?*
**I'm quite fondue you.**

*What did the cheddar say when he tried on a blazer?*
**I look sharp!**

*What do you call a dinosaur made of cheese?*
**A Gorgonzilla.**

*Why don't they make movies about Swiss cheese?*
**The plot has too many holes**.

*Did you hear about the explosion at the French cheese factory?*
**All that was left was de Brie.**

# Jews and Lactose Intolerance

**Watch a Jewish grandmother's face when her grandchild says they're lactose intolerant. It's a profound existential crisis. "What do you mean you can't have dairy?" she'll cry, pointing to a table laden with blintzes, noodle kugel, yogurt, sour cream, and enough cheesecake to feed a small country. "What will you eat on *Shavuos*?"**

Lactose intolerance is one of the many conundrums of Jewish life. A cuisine built on dairy products meets a population of which a significant percentage literally cannot process milk. The science is straightforward. Sixty to eighty percent of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews are lactose intolerant, meaning their bodies stopped producing enough lactase enzyme to break down the lactose in milk. Ashkenazi Jews fare better, but they're not immune either. So on Shavuot, Jewish communities where three-quarters of the people can't properly digest milk, are celebrating a holiday where the main culinary custom is eating dairy. Ashkenazi Jews, blessed with higher rates of lactase persistence, built an entire culinary tradition around dairy. Blintzes! Cheese babka! Dairy kugel! Meanwhile, Sephardic and Mizrahi cuisine, developed in regions where lactose intolerance was the norm, cleverly emphasized yogurt, labneh, and aged cheeses. You can't handle milk? Fine, have some kefir.

A contemporary solution, of course, is the miracle of lactase supplements. Nothing says embracing your heritage quite like popping a Lactaid pill before eating bubbe's noodle kugel. And there's also lactose-free milk. Technology has caught up with tradition, allowing Jews to honor both their digestive systems and their grandmother's cooking.

# Matan Torah. Then Cheesecake.

**Shavuot falls seven weeks after Passover and celebrates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. It's one of the three pilgrimage festivals in Judaism, and over time, this holiday has become deeply associated with eating dairy foods, particularly cheesecake. There's something meaningful about a holiday that connects the receiving of divine law with sharing delicious food. Shavuot reminds us that spiritual life and earthly pleasures can coexist harmoniously.**

The explanations for the dairy tradition are varied. One suggests that when the Israelites received the Torah, they learned about kosher laws for the first time and realized their cooking utensils weren't kosher. Rather than deal with kashering everything immediately, they ate dairy instead. Another interpretation notes that the Torah is compared to "honey and milk under your tongue," making dairy foods symbolically appropriate. A third theory suggests that after standing at Mount Sinai for hours during the revelation, the people were too exhausted to prepare a meat meal, so they opted for the simpler dairy meal. There is also a numerological tradition: the Hebrew word for milk (*chalav*) has a numerical value of 40, corresponding to the 40 days Moses spent on Mount Sinai.

Cheesecake itself has ancient origins. The Greeks made a primitive version as early as the 5th century BCE. There's even a record of it being served to athletes during the first Olympic Games in 776 BCE. The Romans adapted the recipe and called it *libuma*, spreading cheesecake across Europe during their conquests. The Roman politician Cato the Elder included a recipe for *libum* in his agricultural writings from around 160 BCE, using cheese, flour, and egg, baked under a brick.

The cheesecake we know today is largely an American invention. In 1872, a dairyman named William Lawrence accidentally invented cream cheese while trying to recreate French Neufchâtel in his New York factory. He called it "Philadelphia Cream Cheese," and this denser, creamier product transformed cheesecake forever. The rich New York-style cheesecake was born.

By the 1900s, Jewish delis and restaurants in New York had perfected the art of cheesecake. Establishments like Lindy's and Junior's became legendary for their versions. Junior's, which opened in Brooklyn in 1950, became so famous that their recipe was reportedly kept in a vault. The Jewish community's embrace of this dessert created an inseparable connection between cheesecake and Shavuot.

Americans eat approximately 880 million pounds of cheesecake each year. The physics of making cheesecake are precise: a perfectly baked one should have just a slight jiggle in the center when you shake the pan, as it continues cooking after removal from the oven. Cracks in cheesecake occur when it cools too quickly or when it's overbaked. The window between underbaked and overbaked is narrow, which is why cheesecake-making requires both skill and patience. Professional bakers use water baths, precise temperatures, and careful cooling techniques to achieve that flawless surface.

Different cultures have created their own versions of cheesecake. Japanese cheesecake is light and fluffy, almost soufflé-like. Basque cheesecake features a deliberately burnt top and a creamy, nearly liquid center. German *käsekuchen* uses *quark* (warmed curdled soured milk strained to remove the whey) instead of cream cheese. Italian cheesecake often incorporates ricotta. Israeli cheesecake is lighter, airier, and tangier, using soft white cheese, *gvina levana*. Each culture has reimagined this dessert in distinctive ways.

For Shavuot, many families have their own cheesecake traditions. Debates over graham cracker versus cookie crusts, and whether sour cream topping is essential, are common among those who take their Shavuot desserts seriously. But whatever baking style, the flavor, the crust or the topping, cheesecake on Shavuot is a delicious Jewish culinary tradition.

## New York, California and Israeli Cheesecake

New York cheesecake is the quintessential American dessert, a testament to indulgence. Born in the early 20th century, it features a dense, rich filling made primarily from cream cheese, heavy cream, and eggs, nested in a graham cracker crust. Its texture is smooth and creamy, with a subtle tang that balances the sweetness. Baked in a water bath to prevent cracking, a proper New York cheesecake should be tall—often three inches or more—with a pale golden top and a firm yet velvety consistency. It's traditionally served plain or with a simple fruit topping, allowing the pure, unadulterated cream cheese flavor to shine.

California cheesecake takes a lighter, more playful approach to the classic dessert. Emerging from the West Coast's health-conscious culinary culture, it incorporates sour cream or yogurt into the filling, creating a tangier, airier texture. The crust might feature nuts or cookies beyond the traditional graham cracker, and the toppings are more adventurous—fresh berries, tropical fruits, or even chocolate ganache. Some versions reduce the cream cheese content or use Neufchâtel cheese, making for a less dense, more mousse-like consistency that feels contemporary and refreshing.

Israeli cheesecake presents an entirely different philosophy. It uses soft white cheeses like gvina levana (similar to farmer's cheese) instead of cream cheese, resulting in a remarkably light, almost soufflé-like texture. The filling is less sweet than its American cousins, allowing the gentle dairy flavor to dominate. Israeli cheesecake is often baked without a crust, or with just a thin layer of cookie crumbs on the bottom and typically stands shorter than New York style. It's commonly flavored with vanilla or lemon zest and served with seasonal fruit compotes, embodying a Mediterranean sensibility that prizes freshness and subtlety over decadent richness.

# God Spoke. Then We Ate Blintzes.

**Blintzes represent another pinnacle of Shavuot's dairy celebration. The thin pancakes, filled with sweetened farmer's cheese or ricotta and then pan-fried until golden, require patience and skill. The process involves making tender crepes, preparing the filling with cheese, sugar, eggs and vanilla, rolling each blintz with care, and finally achieving that perfect crispy exterior while keeping the inside creamy and warm.**

Eastern European Jewish communities elevated blintzes to an art form, with each family guarding their particular recipe. Some add lemon zest to brighten the filling; others include a hint of cinnamon or plump raisins. The blintzes emerge from the pan with lacy, buttery edges and are traditionally served with sour cream, berry compotes, or fruit preserves.

On Shavuot, tables overflow with blintzes alongside cheesecakes, kugels, and other dairy delicacies. The labor-intensive preparation becomes an act of devotion, honoring the Torah's gift through culinary craftsmanship. For generations of

Jews, the taste of warm blintzes has meant Shavuot—comfort, tradition, and celebration rolled into one perfect, golden package.

The making of blintzes often becomes a family affair, with multiple generations gathering in the kitchen. Grandmothers supervise the batter's consistency while children watch crepes bubble and brown on the griddle. The assembly line of rolling and filling creates its own rhythm, accompanied by stories and laughter. This communal preparation reinforces the holiday's themes of unity and shared heritage. Regional variations add character to the tradition. Some families prefer thick and substantial blintzes, while others prize paper-thin delicacy. Certain communities serve them as a main course for the holiday lunch, while others reserve them for dessert after a dairy feast of fish, salads, and quiches.

The enduring popularity of blintzes on Shavuot ultimately comes down to something simple: they're delicious. Crispy, creamy, and satisfying, they give everyone an excellent reason to look forward to the holiday each year.

# Lag B'Omer - The Haircut Holiday

*Israel Press and Photo Agency (I.P.P.A.) / Dan Hadani collection, National Library of Israel / CC BY 4.0*

**Every spring, Jewish barbershops get really busy on a single day. Boys who have been walking around for months with long locks suddenly find themselves in the barber's chair. Scissors come out and across the Jewish world, a minor holiday called *Lag B'Omer* is celebrated with haircuts.**

*Lag B'Omer* falls on the 33rd day of a seven-week period called the *Omer*, which is counted between Passover and Shavuot. The name "Lag" comes from the gematria of the letters lamed (30) and gimel (3), which add up to 33. Lag B'Omer literally means "the 33rd of the Omer." The seven weeks of the Omer are a period of semi-mourning in Jewish tradition. No weddings, no parties, no live music and no haircuts. The reasons for this go back over a thousand years and involve two different historical events. The first is a tragedy described in the Talmud: a plague swept through the students of the great Rabbi Akiva, killing 24,000 of them in a terrible epidemic. The Talmud says the plague lasted throughout much of the Omer period, and the mourning customs that developed over the centuries are partly a commemoration of that catastrophe. The second layer involves the Bar Kokhba revolt against Rome in the 2nd century CE, a doomed Jewish uprising that resulted in enormous loss of life. The solemn tone of the Omer is connected to that tragedy as well.

Why does it stop on day 33? According to tradition, the plague that killed Rabbi Akiva's students stopped on Lag B'Omer so the mourning stops, celebrations are permitted, and the haircut ban is lifted too. Lag b'Omer is a one-day holiday within a somber period.

Because in many Jewish communities, especially traditionally observant ones, boys are not given their first haircut until they turn three years old, Lag B'Omer becomes a haircut holiday. This ceremony is called an *upsherin* (Yiddish for "shearing off") and in Israel, thousands of families make a pilgrimage to Mount Meron in the Galilee, where Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is buried. Rabbi Shimon, who lived in the 2nd century CE and is the traditional author of the Zohar—the foundational text of Jewish mysticism—is said to have died on Lag B'Omer. Rather than mourning his passing, he asked his students to mark the day with joy, celebrating a life devoted entirely to Torah. That spirit of joyful celebration transformed his burial site into the heart of the holiday, and families travel there to celebrate their son's first haircut in a communal gathering that can number in the tens of thousands. There are bonfires, music, dancing, and the carefully snipped locks of three-year-olds. It's a rite of passage: the haircut isn't just cosmetic. It marks the beginning of a child's formal Jewish education, when he will start to learn the Hebrew alphabet and the first words of Torah. Something is ending, and something new is beginning.

# Shavuot and Older Americans Month

Shavuot and Older Americans Month share a profound connection that becomes deeply moving when we read the Book of Ruth. The protagonists are Naomi, an older woman who has lost everything—her husband, her sons, her home—and Ruth, her young daughter-in-law who refuses to abandon her. When Naomi urges Ruth to return to her own people, Ruth responds with words that echo across millennia: "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God." This isn't just loyalty—it's a younger woman recognizing that her life is enriched, not diminished, by walking alongside an elder through grief and uncertainty.

Naomi's story captures something very real about aging. She tells the townspeople of Bethlehem, "Call me not *Naomi* [pleasant], call me *Mara* [bitter], for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me." Yet it is precisely Naomi's wisdom, her knowledge of customs and people, that guides Ruth through an unfamiliar world and ultimately leads to redemption for both women. The Book of Ruth reminds us that older people aren't just repositories of the past. They are active participants in creating the future, their accumulated wisdom essential to the next generation's survival and flourishing. When *Shavuot* coincides with Older Americans Month in May, we're reminded that honoring our elders

isn't about obligation or sentimentality. It's about recognizing, as Ruth did, that our own lives are incomplete without their presence, their stories, and their hard-won understanding of what it means to endure.

# HADASHOT TOVOT GOOD NEWS! GOOD NEWS! GOOD NEWS!

Once considered a pastime of an older generation, mahjong has surged back into cultural relevance, embraced by younger players drawn to its blend of strategy, chance, and social intimacy. In an era of screen fatigue, the satisfying click of tiles and the face-to-face connection of the game table offer something no app can quite replicate. Forty-eight novice and experienced players had a great time playing "Mahj" at an event sponsored by the Federation's **Lions of Judah and Pomegranates** in early March.

Menorah Park announced that **Jill Allen** joined Menorah Park as Executive Director of the Foundation. Jill returned to Menorah Park after having been away for 15 years. She previously worked at the *Central New York Business Journal/BizEventz*, where she was the Director of *BizEventz*. Jill will be bringing her knowledge of the community, fundraising and strategic planning to her role at Menorah Park. "I am so happy to be back at Menorah Park, I feel like I have come home," says Allen. "I strongly believe in the mission of caring for our elders and giving them the best years." "We are thrilled to have Jill back with us and look forward to partnering with her," says Russ D'Amico, CEO at Menorah Park. "The Board is energized by Jill's return," said Joe Greenman, Chair of The Foundation Board. "She understands our mission at its core and has the strategic expertise to help advance it in meaningful and measurable ways".
**Menorah Park's 2026 Shining Stars Celebration** is set for Thursday, May 14, at 5:30 pm "under the tent" at 4101 East Genesee Street, Dewitt.
The celebration coincides with Older Americans' Month. "This celebration recognizes those members of the Menorah Park community who are known to 'shine brightly' on our campus," said Steven Sisskind, event co-chair. "My wife Robin and I are honored to recognize special individuals who bring their vitality, their generosity, and their compassion to all of us affiliated with Menorah Park." Tickets for the event, which include dinner, range from $36 to $144.
Reservations are required no later than May 1. ***For more information, go to www.menorahparkofcny.com/ or contact Susie Drazen at 315-748-2151 or sdrazen@menorahparkofcny.com.***


**Hannah Salmon** won the raffle at the Federation's *Wicked* Campaign Kickoff event in December and she and T had a wonderful time (and great seats) seeing *Wicked* on Broadway.

# Studying in Israel in a Time of War

***By Judah Eglash and Marian Spitzer***

**Being in Israel during this turbulent time has been plenty frightening, but at the same time it has been moving and inspiring. After being woken up at 8 am to a siren on a Shabbat morning in Tzfat, our whole program was unsure about what the next steps would be and if we would even be able to stay in Israel for the remaining time in the semester. But now, after ten days of a war that has started to look better and better for America and Israel, running to the bomb shelter has become a subtle act of nationalism for each one of us.**

After the first siren in Tzfat, we departed on our tour buses to head back to Hod HaSharon, the location of our campus. We were interrupted halfway through the trip with alerts going off from our phones. We thought it would be wise to pull over on the side of the road and take shelter under a bridge on the highway. It was the first wave of actual rockets from Iran, so many of us were worried and concerned. We proceeded to form a circle under the bridge and sing "HaTikvah" while sirens were blaring in the background. This moment was short but incredibly meaningful for everyone on the program. We were an oasis of hope in a country that was shaken up and scared.

When we returned to the bus to continue the journey home, we were stopped again, this time in a tunnel. Here we heard Israeli planes flying directly above us as we had our hands on our heads on the floor of the bus. It was agreed by most students on the program that this moment was the most frightening. We were scared, not necessarily for our own personal safety, but rather of what this coming war would bring us and the country. But as the planes flew away into the distance, so did that feeling in our stomachs, and things began to return to clarity. Ever since then, each trip to the shelter has felt exponentially more empowering.

Each time we find ourselves waiting those fifteen minutes underground, we are actually sending a message to every person who's ever doubted Israel's strength or right to defend itself. We are sending a message to every country that has turned its back on us and believed they could taunt us and cause us fear. We are sending a message to ourselves that if we unify under this shelter as one people and one cause, we will have the ability to stand against any opponent and any obstacle as one Jewish people.

*Judah Eglash and Marian Spitzer are junior-year study-abroad students at Alexander Muss High School in Israel/URJ Heller High School in Israel*

# Trip to Israel with Rabbi Saks

*By Joan Lowenstein*

**In February, I was fortunate to travel to Israel for the second time, having been there only once before as a teen with USY Pilgrimage. After weeks of worrying about whether the trip would happen, we gathered on February 16th at the Hotel Tal in Tel Aviv for orientation and dinner.**

Rabbi and Meira Saks, I and nine others from Central New York had the pleasure of getting to know Israel Maven founder, J.J. Jonah, and our tour guide, David Kerem. Both are educators, passionate about sharing Israel's story, and both have long histories with USCJ, USY, and Nativ.

It took only one round of Jewish Geography to realize how connected we all already were. Throughout the trip, we also realized how knowledgeable David was and how fortunate we were to have him leading our group. We all agreed, it was the trip of a lifetime.

One of the stops on day one was a Graffiti Tour and workshop in Tel Aviv with Grafitiyul, led by Leah Bud. Leah focused on the heroes of October 7, including Rachel Edry, who became a cultural icon for calmly engaging and feeding five Hamas terrorists who had invaded her home for roughly fifteen hours until Israeli security forces rescued her and her husband with the help of their police officer son.

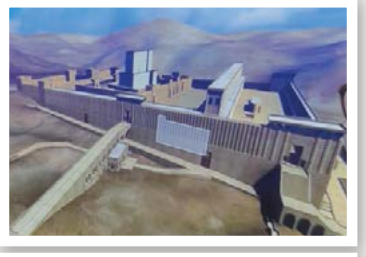
From there, we traveled north to Caesarea and Beit Shearim, the burial place of Rabbi Yehudah HaNassi. Interestingly at Beit Shearim, among the burial caves from the time of the Talmud and Mishnah, archeologists discovered artifacts, including a menorah. We then visited a Druze village where David explained that the Druze are always a minority wherever they live and are loyal to the country where they reside. Since 1956, Druze men have been subject to mandatory IDF service, and most enlist.

Lunch was at Nura's Kitchen in Daliyat al-Karmel, a glatt kosher Arab eatery owned by Nura Husseisi, a remarkable woman dedicated to bringing Druze and Jewish Israelis together. After October 7, she continued cooking for IDF soldiers throughout the country. One of her sons serves in the IDF, and another in the Israeli Police.

We also visited the beautiful city of Tzfat, wandering through the artists' colony and viewing the Syrian border from the Golan Heights. The lack of tourists was striking; in many places, our group was the only one there, and artists were literally starving for business.

In Jerusalem, Kabbalat Shabbat at Kehillat Shira Hadasha with the Kol Rina Choir was a treat. Shabbat morning offered Masorti/Conservative services and a walking tour or rest for those who wished. Following Havdalah, we spent the evening on Ben Yehuda Street, making sure to leave plenty of our shekels in Israel.

The remaining days were the most emotional. At Yad Vashem, rather than taking in the new exhibits, I found myself observing tourists encountering the Holocaust for the first time–I was mesmerized, simply watching them in stunned silence. At the Kotel, I found the "new" exhibit of the Western Wall Tunnels most fascinating. Seeing the rendering of the Temple Mount as it stood prior to its destruction, compared to the small portion of the Wall visible today, was mind-boggling.



Our most difficult day began in Sderot at the police station memorial, where we watched a film narrated by survivors of the October 7 battle.

We then visited Shuva Achim, a one-stop support center for soldiers that began as a makeshift coffee station on October 7 and has grown into a 24-hour depot supplying food, clothing, and equipment to the IDF.

From there, we returned to the heartbreak of October 7 at the Nova Festival site, now a memorial filled with photographs of the young people who had gathered there to celebrate music and nature. Photos cannot capture what it feels like to stand there or at the bomb shelter where Hersh Goldberg-Polin had taken refuge. No words.

Our final day took us to Masada and then to the Mt. Herzl Military Cemetery, where we learned about Michael Levin, z"l, a Lone Soldier from the United States who returned to Israel to serve with his unit during the 2006 Lebanon War. Rabbi Saks had known Michael from his congregation in Pennsylvania, and David had Michael on Nativ—another Jewish Geography connection. They both spoke fondly of Michael and how he wanted nothing more than to make Aliyah and serve in the IDF.

Michael was on leave with his family in Philadelphia in 2006 during the Lebanon War when he learned that his unit had been deployed. He returned to Israel and insisted he be reunited with his unit. He was killed in combat. His grave is one of the most visited at Mount Herzl, covered with USY and Nativ bracelets, hats, and thousands of other mementos left by visitors. His story was also told in the documentary *A Hero in Heaven* by Sally Mitlin, and his legacy continues through the Michael Levin Lone Soldier Foundation, created by his parents to ensure that lone soldiers are never alone.

While in Israel, I posted on Facebook daily. How fitting that a friend I know through my years of work on the Region and International board of Women's League for Conservative Judaism should comment and thank me for mentioning Michael. She said, "his parents are my dearest friends… Her father grew up with Michael's grandfather in Poland…" Jewish Geography strikes again.

A fitting way to end the trip, we had seen Israel's ancient history, its vibrant present, and the painful events that continue to shape life there today. And we all made it home by February 26, Baruch haShem.

# Storytelling with Children Festival Featuring Adam Gidwitz

*By Yolanda Febles*

**In memory of Dr. Alan Goldberg, a beloved longtime member of Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra Shas, and in honor of his educational legacy and advocacy for literacy, CBS-CS will launch its inaugural annual storytelling festival, *Storytelling with Children*, on Sunday, May 17, 2026, at the Museum of Science & Technology, the MOST. Created as a celebration of early literacy and oral storytelling traditions, the festival will also shine a light on Jewish art and artists, reflecting CBS-CS's commitment to the beauty and diversity of the Jewish experience and of the greater Central New York region.**

The festival marks the beginning of a multi-year initiative centered on storytelling, cultural exchange, and children's engagement with language, imagination, and reading. Storytellers representing a range of traditions will present throughout the day, including Jewish maggidim, Central New York local storytellers, Griot and Black African storytellers, Onondaga and Turtle Clan storytellers, Deaf storytellers, and other local artists. Families can also explore hands-on folk art and storytelling activity stations throughout The MOST, with opportunities for children to tell their own stories through art, illustration, prose, and audio and video recording.

Featured guest Adam Gidwitz, the renowned Jewish author and storyteller behind *A Tale Dark & Grimm*, the Newbery Honor-winning *The Inquisitor's Tale*, and the *Unicorn Rescue Society* series, will bring a nationally recognized voice in children's literature to the festival. His work has also reached wider audiences through the Emmy-nominated Netflix adaptation of *A Tale Dark & Grimm* and the award-winning podcast *Grimm, Grimmer, Grimmest*. During the festival, Gidwitz will present a live taping of the podcast featuring a new Grimm tale not previously heard on the show, inviting children in the audience to help shape the imagery and literary commentary of the story and making their words and reactions part of the performance itself. VIP ticket holders will also have the opportunity to meet Adam at a children's sticker signing and meet-and-greet. CBS-CS also plans to partner with area school districts to schedule Adam Gidwitz visits to kindergarten through second-grade assemblies, engaging young students in storytelling as a pathway to early literacy.

The day will include storytelling from 10 am to 4 pm, with live storytelling on the hour, craft booths, and literacy resources throughout the festival. At 10:30 a.m., Gidwitz's live storytelling event will take place in the ExploraDome. At 3 pm, he will appear for a book signing at Parthenon Books. For adults, a 7 pm panel discussion, *Storytelling Art & Industry*, hosted by Parthenon Books, will explore the art and profession of storytelling. ***To purchase tickets and for more information, visit tinyurl.com/storytelling-festival.***





# Crafting for a Cause with the JCC

On January 18 the JCC hosted its 2nd Annual Knit & Crochet-a-Thon, this year in partnership with Temple Adath Yeshurun. The JCC welcomed 13 people for the in-person event. Through scarves and hats made that day, along with handmade items crafted after the fact, the event produced 24 hats, nine scarves and one pair of children's mittens. These were then donated to We Rise Above the Streets to distribute to the local unhoused population. ***To stay in the know about upcoming Community Programming events, visit jccsyr.org/cp and follow the JCC of Syracuse on Facebook and Instagram!***

# JCC Writers Workshop Sparks Calls for More

The JCC was delighted to welcome 34 members of the Syracuse community for a Writer's Workshop on February 8.

Attendees spent the day studying and writing poetry with Georgia Popoff, short stories with Chris DelGuerci or memoirs with Mary Jumbelic. The only complaint? Everyone wanted MORE! More time to chat with other attendees, more time to work on their selected genre and the chance to study another genre. With that feedback, this is certainly just the beginning of in-person writing events at the JCC. ***To stay in the know on upcoming Community Programming events, visit jccsyr.org/cp and follow the JCC of Syracuse on Facebook and Instagram.***

# Dive into Summer at the JCC Pool, Opening May 23

*By Ashley Schmitz*

**Summer at the Sam Pomeranz Jewish Community Center of Syracuse officially kicks off when the JCC's two outdoor pools open for the season, from Saturday, May 23 through Monday, September 7. All summer long, the JCC Pool welcomes members and guests to swim, cool off, and enjoy sunny days with family and friends.**

There's something for everyone at the JCC Pool, including lap swimming, splashing with the kids, or simply enjoying a refreshing dip. The large pool ranges from 3½ to 9 feet deep, with lap lanes available for fitness swimmers and diving permitted at the far end of the pool for more experienced swimmers. Nearby, the smaller pool ranges from 2 to 3½ feet deep, creating a comfortable, kid-friendly environment that's ideal for younger swimmers or those just gaining confidence in the water.

Throughout the summer, the pool deck becomes a lively gathering space for families and friends looking to unwind, stay active, and soak up the season. Beyond recreational swimming, the JCC's Aquatics Department also offers a variety of programs designed to help swimmers of all ages build skills, stay healthy, and have fun in the water.

Swim lessons continue to anchor the JCC's aquatics program, welcoming children and adults of all skill levels. Led by Red Cross certified instructors, each class emphasizes water safety, skill development, and steady progress in a supportive, encouraging environment.

The JCC offers two class styles so families can choose the format that fits them best. Private lessons offer personalized, 30-minute one-on-one instruction, while small group lessons, capped at six swimmers, combine individualized attention with the energy and fun of learning alongside peers. Group sessions run in three four-week blocks throughout the summer: May 31 through June 27, June 28 through July 25, and July 26 through August 21.

When it comes to signing up, timing matters. Registration opens online for JCC fitness and non-fitness members on May 1 at 10 am, with non-member enrollment beginning May 4 at 10 am. With spots filled on a first-come, first-served basis and no paper applications accepted, families are encouraged to log on early and secure their place before lanes fill up.

For children entering grades 1-6 looking to take their swim skills further, the J Rays Swim Club blends skill-building with team spirit, giving children the opportunity to improve endurance, refine strokes, and learn the value of teamwork. To join, swimmers must be able to swim front crawl with their face in the water, the width of the pool, and tread water with their head above water for 30 seconds. The club meets from 8 am-8:45 am on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from June 29 through August 21. The program costs $375 and requires a JCC family membership.

"We are excited for our upcoming pool season," says Amy Bisnett of the Aquatics

Department. "Our member swim program gives children a fun, safe space to grow their abilities, build confidence, and make unforgettable summer memories. The J-Rays Swim Club program also provides a wonderful opportunity for children to enhance their skills, build endurance, and gain exposure to the world of competitive swimming in a fun, engaging way."

Adults also have opportunities to make waves through the JCC's Aqua Fitness classes. These low-impact workouts use the resistance of the water to boost strength, flexibility, and cardiovascular health while remaining gentle on joints. These classes are free for members and available to non-members for $10 per class.

Ready to plan a day at the pool? Make check-in quick and easy by checking in at the lifeguard desk with a JCC membership card. For members looking to bring guests, passes can be purchased at reception or the pool deck for $5 each or at a discounted rate of five passes for $20. The JCC also recommends reviewing all pool rules upon arrival to ensure a safe and fun environment for everyone. ***For more information on the JCC's Aquatics Program and pool opening, visit jccsyr.org/pool, email aquatics@jccsyr.org, or call 315-445-2360.***

# Why the *JO* Matters Now More Than Ever

**Recently the *Syracuse Business Journal* folded. The *Eagle Bulletin*, sold to an out-of-town company, switched from free home delivery to paid subscriptions. The *Syracuse Herald Journal* ceased publication and the *Post Standard* became syracuse.com with limited print days.**

Over the past two decades, the American newspaper industry has experienced unprecedented collapse. Since 2005, the United States has lost one-third of all the newspapers that existed at the start of the century. Jewish newspapers were not immune. Prominent publications like *The Forward, The New York Jewish Week* and *The Canadian Jewish News* went online or ceased publication.

Our *Jewish Observer* is a bright light in this dismal landscape because we are doing several things right. We are building digital audiences while maintaining print editions for readers who want them. We have diversified revenue beyond advertising. And we lean into what only we can do: the specific, the local, the communal.


The *JO* recently received letters from two readers. One expressed appreciation for the paper's touching "on very important issues that need to be better understood and accepted by the community," adding that "important issues that divide us (especially between young and old) should not be ignored." The second letter praised an issue as being "especially rich in content and sophisticated in how you treat challenging topics."

This is why the *JO* exists and why it needs to continue to exist.

The *JO* covers the local Jewish world from the inside, because it *is* the inside. The *JO* is not just a local news source, it's a connector. It's where snowbirds and seniors learn about what's happening at our schools and shuls, where young families learn about community and congregational programs, where our rabbis share their wisdom, and where we learn about Jewish holidays, Jewish foods, Jewish books and Jewish businesses. The *JO* keeps us connected.

The *JO* is also an educator. When hard topics come up, whether it's antisemitism, questions of faith and belonging, the complicated feelings many of us have about Israel, or the tensions between generations, the *JO* creates a space to think things through together, to air these subjects with the nuance they deserve and as they apply to us, in cold, snowy Central New York.

And maybe most importantly right now, the *JO* is a uniter. It gives our community (even those who have moved to warmer, sunnier Florida) a shared space. At a moment when American Jewish life feels more stressed and more scrutinized than it has in decades, having a local paper that says ***this community is worth covering, worth knowing, worth celebrating*** really matters.

We do not charge, as many communities do, for the *Jewish Observer*. But we do need to raise funds to support it. That's why we have a *JO* Appeal. It starts on May 1 and ends on June 30. We try to keep it painless, and maybe even entertaining. But most importantly, we need it to be effective. So please respond—and know that every contribution, large or small, helps keep your *Jewish Observer* covering the community you love.

**MERLE MALOFF TROGMAN**
**March 3, 2026**

Merle Maloff Trogman, 76, passed away on March 3, 2026 at Upstate University Hospital. Born on June 13, 1949 to Dr. Harding and Beatrice Maloff, she had been a life resident of Syracuse.

Merle was a graduate of Nottingham High School, earned both a bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Pittsburgh, and then an additional master's degree from Syracuse University.

She established The Accredited Electrolysis Studio in 1979. It continues today as Smart Choice Electrolysis. She was a trusted and caring person to many hundreds of customers. Her early detection of skin cancers saved countless lives.

She will be remembered for how she put her patients at ease. Her skill at her profession and her subtle counseling were invaluable.

Her family includes her husband Marco of 42 years, and her brother Dr. Perry (Gail) Maloff. She was pre-deceased by her parents and her brother Jan.

Contributions to perpetuate her memory may be made to Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra Shas.

*www.sisskindfuneralservice.com*

**BERNICE SPEVAK SILVERMAN**
**March 24, 2026**

Bernice Spevak Silverman, 102, passed away in Natick, MA on March 24, 2026. Bernice was born in Newark, NJ on February 5, 1924 to Ephraim and Fannie Kramer Spevak.

Bernice was living independently (with a little help) in the same home in Natick where she had lived since 1958. She enjoyed an active social life with her family and friends. Bernice loved playing mah jongg but her true passion was travelling. She visited every continent with the exception of Australia, and Antarctica.

Her family includes her sons Gary (Pauline), Steven, and Paul (Barbara); grandchildren Bryan, Alissa (William), Bethany (Justin), and Benjamin (Emma); and great-grandchldren Joseph, Isabella, Dymitry and Emilia.

**JAMES JAY ROTHFELD**
**March 4, 2026**

James "Jimmy" Rothfeld, 77, of Syracuse, passed away on March 4, 2026. Born on May 3, 1948, Jimmy spent his entire life in Syracuse, a community he loved and where he became a familiar face to many. As the second-generation owner and operator of Harrison Bakery, he proudly continued the family business, which has been handed down to the third Rothfeld generation.

Jimmy was a devoted father who believed the best way to love his kids was to be there. He spent countless hours coaching youth sports: girls softball, baseball, and Pop Warner football and rarely missed a chance to be on a field, a sideline, or in the stands. He instilled the passion of sport and sportsmanship. He was also a lifelong, and often long-suffering, fan of the Cleveland Browns and the Atlanta Braves, standing by "his" teams through every heartbreaking loss and rare triumph with unwavering loyalty.

Jimmy had a gift for humor and was known for his quick wit and constant playful barbs. If he teased you, it meant you were one of his people. "Blackjack Jimmy," as he was called, had a deep love for Las Vegas, a place he returned to often and insisted was "better than Maine."

Jimmy was preceded in death by his beloved wife, Donna Rothfeld, and his parents, Arthur and Eve Rothfeld. He is survived by his children, Suzanne (John) Steven, Michelle Rothfeld, and Michael (Melissa) Rothfeld, his sister, Karen (David) Freel, his cherished grandchildren Arthur, Sophia, Madison, and Jacqueline and many beloved nieces and nephews.

Jimmy will be remembered for his humor, his loyalty to the people and teams he loved, and the many memories he created with family, friends, and customers throughout his life. Gifts in Jimmy's memory may be made to the CNY SPCA.

*www.sisskindfuneralservice.com*


Shavuot reminds us that the greatest gifts are those that transcend generations.
Just as we received the Torah and continue to pass it forward,
your legacy can ensure a thriving Jewish community in Central New York for years to come.

Establish an endowment with the Jewish Community Foundation of Central New York
and create a permanent source of support for the causes you cherish most—
Jewish education, social services, cultural programs,
and the vital work that keeps our community strong.

## YOUR GIFT TODAY. THEIR TOMORROW. OUR FOREVER.

The Jewish Community Foundation OF CENTRAL NEW YORK

**Contact Mark Segel, Foundation Executive Director**
**at msegel@jewishfoundationcny.org or 315-445-0270.**