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News

DECEMBER 2025 | KISLEV 5786

The voice of Jewish Hamilton

HAMILTON JEWISH FILM FESTIVAL

Family bonds take centre stage

The 2026 Hamilton Jewish Film Festival features stories of mothers, fathers and families who love fiercely to persevere against all odds

BY **HELAINE ORTMANN**
HAMILTON JEWISH NEWS

THE HAMILTON Jewish Federation is pleased to announce the return of the Hamilton Jewish Film Festival (HJFF) on Sunday, March 15 and Monday, March 16, 2026, to Peller Hall, Ancaster Memorial Arts Centre. Now in its sixth year, the Festival remains committed to its mission: to engage the Jewish community and foster understanding of Jewish culture, Israel, and Jewish history within the broader Hamilton community. While all four films selected for this year's Festival feature the universal themes of hope, courage and resilience; to a one, the light they shine on family love, parenthood, and relationships between siblings is spellbinding. Filmmakers hit all the notes: drama to comedy, separation to reconciliation, chaos to order.

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PHOTO: MARIE-CAMILLE ORLANDO

Hamilton Jewish Film Festival: Still photo from 'Once Upon My Mother', opening film of this year's festival.

A CHANUKAH REFLECTION BY BEN SHRAGGE:
PUTTING AWAY OUR MODERN IDOLS
SEE P9

Creating opportunities for children to thrive

New Federation enrichment fund helps kids explore their passions

SEE STORY P8

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Building a safer community:

One year working with SCN



Glen
Manella
REGIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR
HAMILTON JEWISH FEDERATION

AS PART of Hamilton Jewish Federation’s ongoing commitment to keeping our community safe, the HJN asked Federation’s community security director, Glenn Manella to reflect on the first year of its partnership with the Secure Community Network (SCN) — the official security organization of the Jewish Federations of North America.

- Q** When did the Hamilton Jewish Federation start working with the Secure Community Network (SCN)?
- A** This November marks one year since we launched our partnership with SCN — and it’s already made a real difference in how we keep our community safe.
- Q** What exactly does SCN do for us?
- SCN gives us access to their 24/7 Duty Desk and National Jewish Security Operations Command Center — basically a high-tech hub that monitors threats, shares real-time intelligence, and coordinates directly with law enforcement and security directors across North America.
- Q** Why is this kind of support so important right now?
- Unfortunately, the kind of hateful rhetoric we see online has inspired real-world violence against Jewish communities. Having direct access to SCN’s resources helps us identify local threats quickly and connect with police, campus security, and other partners before problems escalate.
- Q** How has the first year of the program gone?
- Every new SCN program has a checklist of key goals to meet in the first 14 months — and thanks to strong community support, we’re actually ahead of schedule in every category.
- Q** What kinds of training sessions have you offered?
- Since we started, we’ve run 18 training sessions on everything from first aid and CPR to Run/Hide/Fight, personal awareness, Stop the Bleed, and The Power of Hello. We’ve also completed inspections and threat assessments at every Jewish facility in the area.
- Q** What have you observed over the past year in terms of antisemitism and security concerns?
- Sadly, I’ve seen a rise in protests and demonstrations that use the language of peace to mask antisemitism. These false narratives often twist political disagreements into religious hatred. We’ve had community members verbally and even physically assaulted just for being Jewish.
- Q** How are these incidents handled?
- Every incident is reported to police and logged by SCN’s analysts for follow-up. I stay in regular contact with Hamilton Police and really appreciate the support and collaboration we’ve built with them.
- Q** You’ve mentioned being involved on campus as well – what does that look like?
- SCN works closely with Hillel International, and I’m in regular contact with Hillel McMaster and McMaster University’s Campus Safety Services to make sure Jewish students feel supported and protected.
- Q** What’s next for year two of this program?
- I really want to encourage everyone in our community to stay involved — attend our training sessions, stay alert, and report anything that feels off. Hate incidents should always be reported to Hamilton Police and through jewishhamilton.org/scn,
- Q** How can people learn more or get in touch?
- It’s simple — join a training session! SCN’s programs are designed to build awareness and confidence so everyone knows how to respond if something happens. Feel free to reach out to me directly at: gmannella@securecommunitynetwork.org.

The HJN welcomes letters to the editor. To submit a letter for publication, email wschneider@jewishhamilton.org.

Federation CEO Gustavo Rymberg nominated for 2025 YMCA Peace Medal



PHOTO BY WENDY SCHNEIDER, HAMILTON JEWISH NEWS

Federation CEO Gustavo Rymberg (fifth from left) is pictured with family, staff, and community members at the YMCA’s annual Peace Medal Breakfast on Nov. 18 at the Hamilton Convention Centre. Rymberg was nominated for “bringing people together in times of tension, fostering dialogue over division, and standing up against hate with compassion and clarity.” Event organizers praised him for exemplifying “peace through action, empathy, and courage,” and for helping transform the Federation into “a hub for dialogue, inclusion, and resilience.”

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HJN

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“Film makers hit all the notes: drama to comedy, separation to reconcillation, chaos to order.”

Hamilton Jewish Film Festival

CONTINUED FROM THE FRONT PAGE

THE FESTIVAL opens on Sunday, March 15 at 2 p.m. with the 2025 Canadian documentary “The Road Between Us” (95 minutes). In the early morning moments of the Oct. 7, 2023 terrorist attack, locked in their safe room of their family home on Kibbutz Nahal Oz on the Gazan border, Amir calls the only person he could trust to help: his father Noam Tibon, retired Major-General of the Israeli army. With wife Gali by his side to drive their car, “911” (his family nickname) sets out on his “mission”: to save son Amir, his daughter-in-law, and two young granddaughters. In this riveting and suspenseful film, Noam retraces his steps on Oct. 7 and, with steely calm and focus, tells the true story (accompanied by archival footage) of his harrowing journey from Tel Aviv, south to Nahal Oz.

At its heart, “The Road Between Us” is a thrilling account of a man’s leadership (“this is what we need to do,” he says early on to Gali) and heroism —Noam rescues Nova survivors and wounded soldiers during the rescue, and organizes the safe evacuation of 400 people on his son’s Kibbutz reflecting, “I didn’t leave anyone behind me.” Most indelible though is this film’s long-lasting and universal gift to viewers: the straight-forward and unadorned account of this parent’s love for his family — bold, courageous and steadfast.

An opening reception will take place between the afternoon and evening screenings, immediately following The Road Between Us and leading into the next film.

At 6:00 p.m., HJFF screens “Mazel Tov” (97 minutes); a 2025 Argentine comedy-drama that, in an emotional and exuberant way, unfolds the complex bond between four siblings (three brothers and their sister) against the backdrop of their father’s sudden death; the pregnant sister’s wedding and simultaneous labour/delivery of her baby boy; and a fraught Yom Kippur supper with the extended family. As the siblings spend a month together to grieve their father



PHOTO: TULLY CHEN

and reconnect, director Adrián Suar spends the film’s carefully crafted minutes teasing out the eccentricities and foibles of each of the adult children; ultimately bringing them together in a loving passionate embrace at the film’s conclusion. “Mazel Tov” is messy, touching and poignant; much like any family’s story. There will be a lively post-film program, moderated by Gustavo Rymberg, CEO of the Hamilton Jewish Foundation, to explore the history and current culture of Argentinian Jewry.

Two films will be screened on Monday, March 16. The first at 5 p.m. is “Ada: My Mother, the Architect;” a 2024 biographical film (81 minutes) directed by Yael Melamede about her mother, Ada Karmi-Melamede, a ground-breaking architect renowned for her design of public buildings in Israel such as the Supreme Court in Jerusalem which was a seven-year creative and business partnership with her brother Rami. Yael chronicles her mother’s early years as a pioneer encountering the challenges of working in a male-dominated industry; overcoming her lack of confidence when asked to teach at Columbia University, and stoically absorbing the personal “losses” resulting from her decision to pursue her career in Israel, full-time, living away from her husband and children in the



PHOTO: SUPPLIED



PHOTO: SUPPLIED

United States. With love and admiration, Yael reviews her mother’s beautiful sketches and walks hand-in-hand with her through her bricks-and-mortar projects (before, during and upon completion). The film is a master class; with Ada giving poetic voice to how she creates with her pencil, experiences the centre and heart of physical form, and manages the relationships of light and shadow. So eloquent in both Hebrew and English when she describes her process, Ada turns taciturn, stubborn and remote when Yael seeks to probe her mother’s private life: her disconnect as an absentee mother and wife, and the loneliness and lack of support she endured throughout her career.

At 7 p.m., the Festival screens

“Once Upon My Mother” (102 minutes). Set in France in the 1960s, this is a poignant film with both comedic and dramatic notes that tells the true story of lawyer, journalist and broadcaster Roland Perez, the sixth child in a Moroccan Jewish family who was born with a clubfoot; and his mother Esther, whose unconditional love and audacious determination secured him the “fabulous life” she promised him as a baby. As fierce and brave as her namesake in the Old Testament, Esther pleads, pushes, and prays her way through Roland’s childhood, adolescence and adulthood to create a miracle; never wavering in her dedication to save her son from a lesser life. Directed by French Canadian Ken Scott, this inspirational 2025 film showcases the power of a mother’s love as well as the healing power of music; in this instance through the compelling voice and presence of French singer and actress, Sylvie Vartan. An absorbing discussion and Q&A follows with Toronto-based Israeli psychologist Michal Gilboa-Hermel, who will explore the duelling psychological and cultural aspects of motherhood depicted in the two films.

Ticket price per film is \$10 with a Festival pass at \$36 and \$30 for students. Administration fees apply.

For more information visit jewish-hamilton.org or contact Jewish film festival coordinator Wendy Schneider at wschneider@jewishhamilton.org.

Above: Scene from the Argentinian film “Mazel Tov”

Far left: “My Mom the Architect” director Yael Melamede with her mother Ada Karmi Melamede, one of Israel’s most accomplished architects.

Left: Noam Tibon, whose heroic efforts to save his family and dozens of others on Kibbutz Nahal Oz are recounted in the film “The Road Between Us.”

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Daughters honour their mother’s lifework and legacy

Family of Judy Schwartz leads effort to make local Holocaust survivor interviews she conducted for the Spielberg Shoah Foundation publicly accessible

BY **WENDY SCHNEIDER**
HAMILTON JEWISH NEWS

NEARLY 60 Holocaust survivor testimonies from the Greater Hamilton area will soon be accessible to the public through a new interactive installation at the Margaret’s Legacy Holocaust Learning and Jewish Advocacy Centre.

The collection — recorded for Steven Spielberg’s Shoah Visual History Foundation — was gathered in the late 1990s by community volunteer Judy Schwartz, who interviewed survivors from Hamilton and surrounding communities. Her daughters, Noa Daniel and Ora Goldin, together with their father, Dennis Schwartz, are now working to make those recordings publicly available as part of a new exhibit, set to open in October 2026, coinciding with Judy’s 80th birthday.

The installation, titled “Windows to Witness,” will allow visitors to search by keyword through all 57 interviews conducted by Schwartz, including her conversation with the late Margaret and Arthur Weisz, grandparents of Danna Horwood, whose survivor stories inspired the creation of the Margaret’s Legacy Centre.

The Weisz and Schwartz families shared a deep, decades-long friendship rooted in community service and a shared commitment to Holocaust remembrance. “We kept Danna and David Horwood involved in everything we were doing,” said Goldin. “We wanted to ensure it felt right for the space and true to her vision.”



PHOTO: DONNA WAXMAN PHOTOGRAPHY

The idea to license the interviews came from Jewish Federation CEO Gustavo Rymberg, after Daniel and Goldin approached him about honouring their mother’s lifelong dedication to Holocaust education. “Gustavo was an amazing collaborator from the start,” said Daniel. “He asked, ‘What about the interviews?’ and it was like — of course! How did we not think of that?”

In conversations with the Shoah Foundation, the sisters learned their mother had been among the project’s most prolific volunteers. “They were effusive about her work,” said Daniel, recalling the countless hours Schwartz spent preparing interviews and building trust with survivors.

Schwartz later deepened those bonds as outreach chair of Federation’s Holocaust education committee, launching a speakers bureau that brought survivors into schools and to Federation’s annual student symposium on the Holocaust, attended by up to 1,200 students. “My mother



PHOTO: COURTESY OF NOA DANIEL AND ORA GOLDIN

Above: From left, Ora Goldin, Noa Daniel and their children at Margaret’s Legacy in September during a surprise presentation to their mother.

Above left: Judy Schwartz has spent decades advancing Holocaust education in Hamilton.

really ingrained herself in Holocaust education,” said Daniel. “She’d pick survivors up, stay with them through their talks, and help them decompress afterward. Many had never spoken publicly before.”

Schwartz brought the same passion to her 16 years as director of the Jewish Student Association at McMaster University, where she championed interfaith dialogue at a time when antisemitism on campus was emerging. “Her whole model was that Abraham came out of the tent,” said Goldin. “She always asked — How can we build understanding?”

Schwartz learned about the project on Sept. 26, when her daughters

surprised her at JHamilton with an image on a screen reading Gibora Yehudiya — Hebrew for “Jewish heroine.” “She truly is a Jewish heroine,” said Goldin. “She’s humble, and her work has always been about others. While this project honours her, it’s really about creating a living legacy.”

The family plans to fundraise for the project over the next year. “We want it done well — something that truly serves the community and offers an entry point for families for generations,” said Goldin.

For those interested in contributing, please visit hamiltonjewishfederation.givingfuel.com/windows-to-witness.





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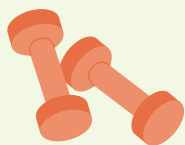


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Holocaust Education Week

Moral courage and need to confront antisemitism were program highlights

BY **WENDY SCHNEIDER**
HAMILTON JEWISH NEWS

HOLOCAUST Education Week 2025 brought people of all ages together for a meaningful series of programs throughout November. The week began with a BBYO teen tour of the Margaret’s Legacy Holocaust Centre, where participants heard Jantina DeVries share her parents’ remarkable story of hiding five Jews during the Second World War. On Nov. 9, the community gathered at McMaster University to mark the 87th anniversary of Kristallnacht with a screening of the acclaimed film “Among Neighbours.” The week concluded with more than 700 high school and middle school students from across the city attending Holocaust education sessions at the Ancaster Memorial Arts Centre, where they learned about the impact of antisemitic propaganda (then and now) and heard author Karen Levine reflect on her best-selling book Hana’s Suitcase.



PHOTOS: WENDY SCHNEIDER, HAMILTON JEWISH NEWS



Left: Hundreds of high school and middle school students attended Federation’s annual symposium on the Holocaust, held at the Ancaster Memorial Arts Centre.



McMaster Dean of Humanities, Pamela Swett, speaking at the community Kristallnacht commemoration.



Antisemitic posters served as powerful propaganda tools in the Third Reich’s campaign against Jews.



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Creating opportunities that help children thrive and shine

The Witelson Children’s Enrichment Program seeks to overcome financial barriers to enable children to access music, sports, and creative learning experiences

BY **WENDY SCHNEIDER**
HAMILTON JEWISH NEWS

THE HAMILTON Jewish Federation has launched a new fund that is expanding access to enrichment programs for families facing financial barriers. Seeded by a gift from Dr. Sandra Witelson and strengthened by a major contribution from the Sherman Foundation, the Witelson Children’s Enrichment Program is giving local children the chance to develop new talents.

Working closely with Federation CEO Gustavo Rymberg, Witelson envisioned a fund that would help Jewish children from financially limited households participate in cultural, athletic, and artistic activities beyond the school day—experiences that can shape confidence, identity, and a lifelong love of learning.

Her inspiration was deeply personal. “So many middle class families like mine were able to give their children ballet or piano lessons,” she said. “You never know when this could become an important event for a child who suddenly realizes they’re a great swimmer or they just love music. I thought this would be an opportunity for kids who wouldn’t have it otherwise.”

But for Witelson, the fund had a second purpose as well—one rooted in strengthening Jewish belonging in Hamilton. She hoped the program would allow Jewish children to engage with the wider Hamilton community through shared activities in

public arts, music, and sports settings. “Inter-group communication is a good thing,” she said. “I liked the possibility that Jewish children would have an opportunity to go out and be part of little communities in the broader Hamilton community.”

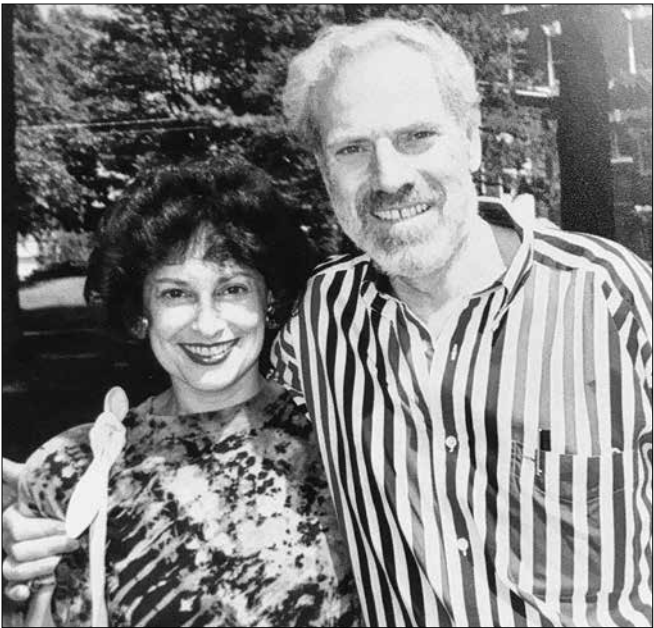
In consultation with Witelson, Federation developed a memorandum of agreement that outlined the program’s structure, including access, privacy, logistics, and implementation.

The first year of funding included \$12,000 from Witelson, which Rymberg divided into four sessions so that up to 10 children per session could participate. Children aged 4 to 12 were invited to apply, with no requirement to disclose personal finances. Families simply needed to indicate that the activity was financially out of reach.

To Witelson’s delight, interest came immediately. “One child wanted to take martial arts, and another wanted to take violin, and there was swimming and ballet ... Everything was very good,” said Witelson.

As participation grew, Federation staff also began to see the program’s broader communal impact. Parents expressed gratitude for the relief of financial pressure. For Federation, the fund has become a model of how targeted support can strengthen both individual families and the community’s relationship to Jewish life.

The program is still evolving—particularly when it comes to the



Sandra and the late Dr. Henry Witelson in an undated photograph taken in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

question of continuing lessons for children who fall in love with their activities—but early feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. Families have begun submitting testimonials describing how much the experience meant to their children.

For Witelson, this initiative is not only an act of generosity but also a tribute to her late husband, Henry Witelson, whose childhood stands in stark contrast to the opportunities the program now provides.

Henry was born in Łódź, Poland, in 1937 into a small business family. Forced into the Warsaw Ghetto and eventually orphaned, he survived the war largely alone and in hiding. After an arduous journey, he reached Israel around 1942, where he was raised on Kibbutz Kfar Aza—just kilometers from Gaza—by a foster family that became Witelson’s own extended Israeli family.

“Henry grew up with none of this,” she said, “So this has been a way of

honouring his memory.” Early success brought an unexpected but transformative development. Rymberg approached the Sherman Foundation, known to many through its historic ties to the Canadian candy industry, and secured a major new donation to dramatically expand the program.

“That was Gustavo,” Witelson emphasized. “He personally approached them. The new funding will allow many more children to participate. It means the program’s future is strong.”

At the same time she founded the children’s fund, Witelson also created the Orphan Enrichment Program at Shalom Village, designed to bring joy and stimulation to apartment-living residents who often have limited evening activities.

With modest funding, Shalom Village has been able to bring in musicians, host karaoke nights, arrange animal visits, and even hold pizza picnics—small pleasures that mean a great deal to residents.

“So it was the same principle,” Witelson said, “just helping people get a little bit of extra enrichment.”

Reflecting on the program’s first months, Witelson speaks not of numbers but of emotion. “From a personal point of view, this donation has really given me a lot of pleasure thinking of these children who couldn’t have had these little extras who are now getting something.”

A fund born from gratitude, shaped by Jewish values, and rooted in memory has become a program that strengthens Jewish life while connecting children to the broader world around them.

For Sandra Witelson, that is exactly the point.



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If we don't choose where we place our attention, algorithms will choose for us



BY BEN SHRAGGE
HAMILTON JEWISH NEWS

“IMAGINE if your cellphone only had enough power for one day, but lasted for eight.” So goes a well-worn meme that tries to put a modern spin on the miracle of Chanukah. Of course, the actual Chanukah story recounts how the Maccabees expelled the Syrian Greeks from Judea and restored the defiled Temple in Jerusalem. Though they only had enough oil to kindle the menorah for one day, it miraculously stayed lit for eight. During those eight days, the Jews were able to produce more ritually pure oil, and so the menorah's holy light never went out. Chanukah literally means “dedication,” in reference to the Maccabees’ rededication of the Temple.

Obviously, the meme is all in good fun, but there's an unintended edge to its boomer humour. After all, what does it say about us that we see our devices in the same way that our ancestors once saw a symbol of God's eternal light? The ancient Jews couldn't go eight days without worshipping their Creator. Apparently, we can't go eight days without mindlessly scrolling social media. Ironically, instead of modernizing the story of Chanukah, the meme actually recalls the eternal relevance of Passover. There is physical enslavement of the kind that the Jews endured in Egypt, but also psychological enslavement, which the Jews still

experienced while wandering the desert. In many ways, we are wandering still.

The rise of smartphones has been linked to declining literacy rates and shorter attention spans, particularly among the digitally native young. The number of Americans who reported reading for pleasure has dropped 40 per cent over the last 20 years. The share of final-year high school students who reported difficulty thinking, concentrating, and learning new things began climbing rapidly in the mid-2010s. In a reversal of long-standing trends, even global IQ scores — which measure cognitive skills such as short-term memory and problem-solving speed — have been falling.

While we don't know the exact cause of these related trends, our relationship with technology is likely a contributing factor. As John Burn-Murdoch writes in the Financial Times, even when it comes to internet usage, we have moved from “finite web pages to infinite, constantly refreshed feeds” and thus “from directed behavior to passive consumption.” In other words, into a form of digital slavery.

I'm old enough to remember when accessing the internet required connecting via phone line in my family's closet-like “computer room,” and “social media” as limited to text-only chatrooms. Now the internet is available in your pocket 24/7, with short-form videos and clickbait posts algorithmically designed to keep you constantly refreshing. The average person spends around seven

Algorithms that promote the most attention-grabbing, often rage-inducing content accelerate their cultural dominance, Ben Shragge writes.



PHOTO: ISTOCK

hours looking at a screen each day, including two hours on social media. For American teenagers, that number is nine hours per day on screens, with five hours dedicated to social media. Sustained reading, conversation, and engagement with the real world can barely compete with our constantly ping-ponging distraction machines.

In the aggregate, we are entering a post-literate society. Of course, there have long been demagogues, conspiracy theories, and “fake news.” But algorithms that promote the most attention-grabbing, often rage-inducing content accelerate their cultural dominance. And a population less able to read, focus, and think critically is more susceptible to their influence. Needless to say, antisemitism also preceded the rise of social media, but its resurgence is no surprise given an informational ecosystem that favors misinformation. “Blame the Jews” is an ancient meme used by unsavory leaders to stir up the pre-literate mob. Now, in a sign of modern progress, it's used by unsavory influencers to stir up the post-literate mob. AI has even jumped on the bandwagon, as in the recent

antisemitic tirade by Grok, the in-house chatbot of Elon Musk's X platform.

When the Syrian Greeks demanded that Mattathias lead his village in a sacrifice to pagan gods, he refused.

Mattathias killed the Jew who agreed to do so in his place, as well as a government official, and fled to the hills with his sons. Mattathias then raised a guerrilla army of Jews who rejected forced paganization.

One of his sons, Judah Maccabee, ultimately defeated the Syrian Greeks and cleansed the land of false idols. While the solution to post-literacy isn't violent revolt, we can still take heed of the Maccabee example. Just because society has taken a dark turn, that doesn't mean we need to comply. We can opt out of worshipping today's false idols, even if just through digital sabbaths to start. The Maccabee Revolt began with an individual, spread to a family, and finally became a mass movement. Perhaps today's Chanukah miracle would be to put away your smartphone for eight days, and for the rest of the world to follow.



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Barry Yellin

A MOTHER AND DAUGHTER’S QUEST:
The passion to save
a family’s history

Through the “Proud To Be” project, Jen and Susan Gilbert trace their ancestors’ journeys from Eastern Europe to Hamilton, preserving their stories of courage, faith and determination

BY **JEN GILBERT**
SPECIAL TO HAMILTON
JEWISH NEWS

LAST YEAR, I lost both of my grandmothers. Their generation is mostly gone now — and with them, a lifetime of stories, that if never told and carried forward, will be lost forever. That would be a tragedy. My ancestors were respected and incredible people, many of whom escaped to Canada from unthinkable persecution, and went on to build meaningful lives. My mom, Susan, and I felt the need to record and share their stories, and recognized that with today’s rise in antisemitism, our need became a responsibility. Thus, the project Proud To Be was born.

Our goal was to produce a book my mom will give to her grandchildren at the time of their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. It’s important they understand the struggles and fights for survival their ancestors experienced that allows them the life they have today.

Proud To Be tells my family’s history. My mom compiled the stories and gathered the photographs, and I designed the book, telling the stories through a layout that balances hand-written letters, and archival photographs/ documents with storytelling. Working together, we unpacked a century plus worth of stories. We even got caught chasing a story in which two famous rabbis of Slavuta were falsely accused of murder. For years, our Shapiro family grew up hearing about the legacy of these rabbis. Contrary to the belief that they are our ancestors, recent genetic testing revealed they’re not.

How do I begin to share the vast stories of my ancestors? Some are so unbelievable I couldn’t comprehend they’d happened. Months after having heard them, I’m still haunted. Some are so incredible, I’m in awe. Each person’s legacy is powerful, and these stories are a testament to their strength and resilience. I’m grateful I get to share some with you.

A business story

From rags to riches, to the stock market crash of 1929, to receivership, to the great depression of the 1930s, and then back to riches, the Goldblatt family business went full circle. It’s an amazing story!

The Goldblatt legacy started with my great-great grandfather

Jacob Goldblatt, a man with a brilliant business mind. Not only did he build an uber-successful family business from nothing, more importantly, he was a pillar of his community, a philanthropist of legendary proportions, and adored by all. He helped everyone — Jewish and non-Jewish — and taught his children to do the same. Many immigrants had him to thank for getting them started in business.

After the stock market crash of 1929, the Goldblatt family lost everything (at that point Jacob’s sons, Frank and George (my great grandfather), were involved). The people Jacob previously helped came to his rescue and the family started up in business again. They thrived because of their reputation for honesty and integrity. They continued paying it forward. Tzedakah was one of Jacob, Frank and George’s greatest joys.

Jacob was president of Beth Jacob Synagogue for 25 years.

A rabbi’s story

Hamilton’s history would not have been the same without my great-great grandfather, Samuel Levine, an extremely well-educated and kind man, who was the rabbi for over 40 years at Ohev Zedeck Synagogue (Hess Street Shul). As an aside, the shul’s furnishings are now in Shalom Village’s shul. Samuel was considered the “chief rabbi” of the Southwestern Ontario Jewish communities, presiding over the *bet din* (Jewish court). He heard countless cases of business, marital, and community disputes. He was a profound thinker, with a way of enlightening people and bringing them to their senses. Impressively, there was no “chief rabbi” before or after Rabbi Levine. He started the Talmud Torah (Hebrew school) in 1911.

Rabbi Levine did what no other rabbi would — he negotiated with the gangster Rocco Perri. Rocco and his wife, Bessie Starkman, were known as two of the most notorious crime bosses in Canada during the 1920s. After Bessie was murdered, Rocco wanted her buried in a Jewish cemetery. After the negotiation, the Ohev Zedeck congregation ended up with a fully paid, large cemetery property on Upper James Street.

A refugee story

My Rosenfeld ancestors survived multiple pogroms in their shtetl



PHOTO: WENDY SCHNEIDER, HAMILTON JEWISH NEWS



PHOTO: COURTESY JEN GILBERT

Above: Jen and Susan Gilbert with their project, “Proud To Be”, a compilation of archival photographs, documents and family stories preserved for future generations.

Left: page spreads from Gilbert’s award-winning book Proud To Be.

of Pavalitch, Russia, and witnessed members of their family murdered by the Cossacks and Bolsheviks. Life was hard. My great-great grandparents, Benjamin and Maita Rosenfeld, were stepbrother and sister, married out of convenience because the family couldn’t afford a shadchan (matchmaker).

The family escaped illegally in the dead of night, were arrested on route, and held hostage in a guard shack. Thankfully they were released and crossed the frozen Dniester River undetected, ending up in Romania.

Incredibly, when I think of the word hero, many of my ancestors are worthy of that label. Benjamin is one of them. After escaping to Romania, and while waiting to immigrate to Canada, he made several trips back home to help others escape. One time, he didn’t return, and his family feared the worst. Several months

later, he miraculously appeared!

Rose Shapiro (née Rosenfeld), my great grandmother, worked from the time she was 10; she sewed clothes, first in a Romanian factory, then in a Hamilton factory. She didn’t have the opportunity to attend school, yet was a very smart woman, loved by everyone. A few years after the family settled in Hamilton, Rose contracted tuberculosis. She spent two years in the Mountain Sanatorium, and every day, Maita would cook for her. Maita would walk from her home on Locke St and up the escarpment stairs to deliver the food.

Benjamin was active in Beth Jacob Synagogue, and a passionate Zionist, raising money for Histadrut in Israel.

A dreamer’s story

My Shapiro family’s story began in Eastern Europe in the late 1800s with my great-great

grandparents, Herschel and Yetta. In Russia, Jews were drafted into the Russian army and given positions where it was unlikely they would survive. Boys were exempt from conscription if they were the only male child in their household. Herschel’s parents had three sons; the youngest son was given up for adoption, and Herschel was sent to Yeshiva in Lemberg, where he met Yetta. Their other son could remain at home.

Yetta had blonde hair and could pass as a gentile peasant. During the First World War, she saved her family by becoming a smuggler, bartering items like food and tobacco to meet her family’s needs — Herschel and Yetta had five children, including Jack, my great grandfather.

Jack dreamed of becoming a doctor. Medical school in Lemberg wasn’t an option for Jews, so at age 20, he immigrated to Hamilton in hopes of pursuing his

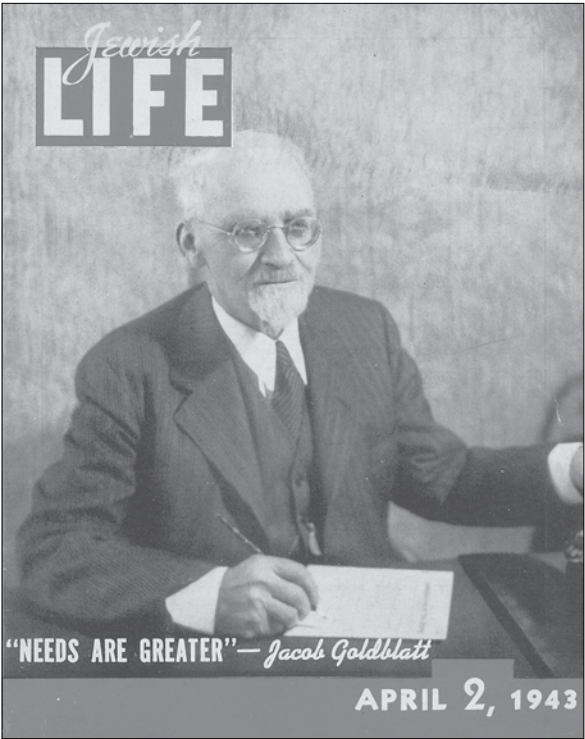
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My grandparents, Samuel and Ruth Gilbert, 1948: Their story is one of resilience and strong survival instincts.



My great grandparents, Jack and Rose Shapiro: Jack was a proud man and the inspiration for the book's title.



The cover of the Hamilton Jewish Life magazine: My great-great grandfather, Jacob Goldblatt, mere months before his death, was still active in his community, heading the Hamilton 1943 UJA campaign.



My great grandparents George and Jessie Goldblatt and family at the dedication of Beth Jacob's George Goldblatt Hebrew school, 1970. This was a rare moment in the spotlight for George, as most of his donations were anonymous.



My great-great grandparents Herschel and Yetta Shapiro: My mom was fortunate to spend time with her great grandmother, Yetta, who lived until she was 94 years old.



My great-great grandfather, Rabbi Samuel Levine: He proudly took part in the dedication of the new JCC on Delaware Avenue in 1950 in his role as the chief rabbi of Hamilton.

CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE
dream. Reality quickly changed his path, as he had no money. He worked hard and saved enough to bring his family to Canada.

Herschel was the rabbi of B'nai Israel Synagogue in St. Catharines for 25 years. Rabbi Shapiro, as the shochet, could often be found slaughtering his congregants' chickens behind the shul.

Jack was a kind man, full of pride, who loved to sing. In Lemberg, he sang in the children's opera choir. At every Beth Jacob service, his beautiful voice filled the sanctuary. His eyes glistened with tears when he watched his granddaughter walk across the stage at her medical school graduation. She was living his dream.

I didn't get to know Jacob, George, Samuel, Benjamin, Maita, Rose, Herschel, Yetta, or Jack. But it got me thinking: even if you get to know someone, do you really know them? Like so many Holocaust survivors, my grandfather, Sam Gilbert, didn't talk about his experiences. And it was only near her end of life that my grandmother, Ruth Gilbert,

began to share. Neither my parents nor I knew their unbelievable and daring survival stories until recently.

A survival story x2

Sam did the unthinkable — at least, to me. At 17 years old, he made a daring escape from his shtetl of Nasielsk, Poland, just before the Nazis invaded in 1939. He snuck underneath a train, holding himself up using the rails. Along his survival journey, he hid in forests and sewers; was arrested and thrown in jail, where he bribed the guards for his freedom by doing their tailoring; was deported to Siberia; worked under horrific conditions on the frozen tundra in a labour camp; and miraculously made it to Kyrgyzstan, where he worked in a factory.

Returning home after the war, a neighbour said to him, "The Germans didn't kill you, but we will." He quickly left and ended up in a displaced persons (DP) camp in Austria where he met my grandmother, Ruth, at a Chanukah dance. He was the sole survivor of his family.

From Odessa, as a young girl,

"I'm proud to be a descendant of my ancestors. They were remarkable, brave and generous people. I'm proud to honour them, learn from them and keep their spirit alive. This is more than a book; it's a living legacy."

JEN GILBERT

Co-creator of "Proud To Be"

Ruth and her family were evacuated by the Russians and sent to Samarkand, Uzbekistan, where she was put in an orphanage. The conditions in the orphanage were grim. Typhus was rampant and took the lives of her father, Sender, and brother.

After the war, without a husband, and with seven children to feed, Ruth's mother, Mariam, did what she had to — she made and sold lingerie on the black market.

Ruth left Odessa at 16 with her older sister, posing as her sister's daughter. Their journey took them to the DP camp in Austria.

In Hamilton, at his first job, and without speaking fluent English, Sam became the top salesman at an insurance company, while also working part-time as a tailor. He eventually bought a men's clothing store on Ottawa St. His drive to provide for his family capitalized on his tailoring skills, the same ones he used to secure his

freedom. A full-circle moment!

I admire my grandparents immensely. Considering what they went through, they loved life and lived to the fullest.

I can't help but think that these people, shaped by their experiences, helped shape me. I can feel it in my veins; it's inherent to me. Most of all, I feel it as ambition. To quote Harley Finkelstein, president of Shopify: "People talk about multi-generational trauma too much. I don't think they talk about multi-generational ambition nearly enough." My ancestors experienced more trauma than I can imagine, and on the other side of that trauma, each person was ambitious. They not only just got by in Canada: they thrived, and never gave up.

It makes my mom happy that when I am at the cemetery visiting my grandmothers, I'm honoured to put a stone on the

headstones of my ancestors, the people she fondly remembers. Having seen their photographs, I can picture them, and know who they were, and the positive impact they made on their community. I can thank them for always moving forward, and for their bravery that allowed me to be here today.

I'm proud to share that Proud To Be received an award for the Editorial Design Entire Book/Magazine category from Applied Arts, an organization that has been recognizing outstanding creative excellence in design worldwide since 1992. You can see more pages from the book at JenGilbertDesign.ca.

I encourage you to start your journey and document your family's history today — I'd be happy to help! You never know what you'll discover.

Jen Gilbert is a graphic designer and can be contacted through JenGilbertDesign.ca.

PHOTOS: COURTESY SUSAN GILBERT

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Hamilton
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NO DENYING WHO WE ARE:
Jewish life and pride flourish in Argentina

Argentinian Jews—from traditional worship to youth-led livestreams—put identity, unity, and resilience first

BY **JAZMIN RYMBERG**
HAMILTON JEWISH NEWS

ARGENTINA’S Jewish population — the largest in Latin America— is fully woven into national life. Jews are active across cultural and political spheres, and Buenos Aires has long been recognized as one of the world’s great centres of interreligious dialogue and coexistence, a city where Jewish identity can be expressed openly and with pride.

This cultural backdrop set the stage for a conversation I had with my 28-year-old cousin Julian Barki, who was born and raised in Buenos Aires and has been deeply involved in Jewish community life since childhood. A systems analyst, airplane pilot, and educator, Julian Barki is a young Jewish community leader with more than a decade of experience in hadrajá — Jewish informal education — serving as a youth leader and educational mentor in various institutions. Over the years, Julian has led more than 200 young people on educational and community trips to Israel, New York, and other cities around the world, helping to strengthen Jewish identity and a sense of global connection. Today, he also plays an active role in community security, dedicated to the well-being and protection of Jewish institutions.

Our discussion began with “Mazel Tov,” an Argentine comedy-drama by Adrián Suar that will be featured in the 2026 Hamilton Jewish Film Festival. The film follows four siblings navigating their father’s death and the complexities of family ties.

“For me,” I told Julian, “categorizing it a film about Jewish life in Argentina feels like a stretch. It’s really just a story about a Jewish family that happens to live there — it could take place anywhere.”

“I actually agree,” he said. “Jewish life has a shared essence wherever you go. You can sit at a Shabbat table in Buenos Aires, Berlin, or New Zealand and find the same rhythm — the same songs, the same warmth. Of course, we Argentinians are more expressive,” he laughed, “But the foundation is universal.”

Julian reminded me that Argentina’s Jewish community is among the largest in the world, with an estimated 200,000 Jews — most of them in Buenos Aires. “Many came after wars and persecutions,” he said. “They started out in the provinces, like Entre Ríos, and later moved to the big cities. Today, the community is strong and influential. Jews are visible in politics, business, culture — everywhere.”

Julian has been part of that world his entire life, first through youth

movements and community clubs, and later through teaching and volunteering in synagogue security.

“Judaism doesn’t require a synagogue to live a Jewish life,” he said, “but synagogues are the heart of our community. They’re where people gather, celebrate, and support one another. Kids start attending programs at age four and often stay involved into adulthood.”

When I asked if Jewish life in Buenos Aires changed after Oct. 7, 2023, Julian said there had been a shift. “Even people who weren’t very connected suddenly felt a pull toward the community,” he said. “The attacks touched everyone. Synagogues were packed for the High Holidays — more than in years. It’s sad that tragedy brought it out, but it reignited Jewish pride.”

Julian’s renewed sense of Jewish pride inspired him and his friends to launch a weekly livestream show, “Bamba,” a digital platform where rabbis and young people talk about real issues — anxiety, faith, humor, current events.

“There aren’t enough positive Jewish voices online,” he said, “and we wanted to create something that informs and inspires.”

He also feels that Jews in Argentina feel free to express themselves more freely than in many other places. “We do face antisemitism — graffiti, slurs, online hate — but overall, Jews live proudly and safely. After the AMIA bombing, all institutions strengthened security. We learned to be vigilant without hiding who we are.”

He credits that freedom, in part, to Argentina’s current president, Javier Milei, whose open support for Israel and frequent references to Torah have made headlines worldwide. “Some worry it could backfire if he fails politically,” Julian said, “but I see it as something positive. Argentina hasn’t experienced the same radicalization as parts of Europe or North America. Jews can live openly and proudly here.”

When I told him about our own struggles in Hamilton — how our Jewish Film Festival was nearly canceled back in 2024 because the venue was “worried about security” — Julian nodded knowingly. “That’s exactly how terrorism wins,” he said. “Not with bombs, but with fear. When Jews start hiding or their events get canceled, terror succeeds. Our job as community leaders is to make sure people can live their Judaism proudly and safely.”

He emphasized that the foundation of strong communal life is a sense of belonging. “People shouldn’t go to synagogue just because it’s ‘the Jewish place,’” he said. “They need to feel part of it — to feel heard, valued, involved. Let them lead programs, make decisions, bring ideas. That’s what creates loyalty and emotional connection.”

He explained that Argentina’s youth movements work because they invest



PHOTOS: JULIAN BARKI, SPECIAL TO HAMILTON JEWISH NEWS

Above: A packed Neilah service in the closing hours of Yom Kippur at Buenos Aires’ Iona Hebrew Centre.

Right: Julian Barki, at far right, and friends celebrate a havdalah service to mark the end of Shabbat.



“People need to feel heard, valued and involved ... That’s what creates loyalty and emotional connection.”

JULIAN BARKI
Young Jewish community leader

in that sense of belonging early. “Kids join at four and stay through their teens. They grow up feeling ownership. That’s what keeps Jewish life strong; it’s not numbers, it’s identity.”

Of course, Argentina faces challenges too. “Some Jewish schools have closed because of low enrolment,” Julian admitted. “Many families make aliyah. It’s natural, but it means fewer children here. Communities have to adapt — merge, cooperate, find new models. We need less division between Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, and more unity. That’s how we’ll stay strong.”

As our conversation wound down, he left me with a thought that’s stayed

with me since. “We may be only 0.1 per cent of the global population,” he said, “but our impact is enormous. The future of Jewish life — here in Argentina, in Canada, everywhere — depends on unity. We can’t wait for tragedy to remind us of who we are.”

That pride isn’t unique to the Jewish community — it’s distinctly Argentine. It’s the same kind of passion that spills into the streets during the World Cup, when millions wave flags, sing from balconies, and cry openly over a goal. Argentinians don’t do things halfway; pride there is visceral, loud, and collective. And that’s exactly how Jewish life feels in Buenos Aires.

How Palestinianism seeks to undermine Jewish morality

Golda Meir’s words, once dismissed as self-righteous now, illuminate Israel’s enduring moral struggle in the aftermath of war

BY **PAT JOHNSON**
FROM AUTHOR’S “BEATEN WITH A SHTICK” SUBSTACK

“WE CAN forgive the Arabs for killing our children, but we can never forgive them for forcing us to kill their children.”

This is a quote from Golda Meir that has always seemed to me to be condescending and sanctimonious. But as I considered her words more deeply after the ceasefire agreement, the return of the remaining hostages and the end (for now) of the conflict — I have a different perspective on what she meant. I think her words expose the heart of this conflict in a way nothing else does.

In the long history of anti-Jewish agitation and atrocities, Palestinianism stands out as having perfected the artform. This is to take nothing away from the enemies of the past, whose imagination and creativity in devising new and ever more effective ways of tormenting and annihilating Jews has been outstanding. But Palestinianism has identified an Achilles heel that no other enemy has devised.

On the streets of Israel right now, we are seeing jubilation. But this jubilation is not the triumphalism of victors of past wars in human history. Overwhelmingly, Israelis are celebrating an end to the death and destruction on both sides. This is something that may be almost unknown in the history of humans fighting one another.

This is where Golda’s words took on fresh meaning for me. Despite the incessant wall of noise we have heard worldwide over the past two years about Israelis (and Jews) embodying the essence of immorality and malevolence, precisely the opposite has been proven true.

Jews literally invented, “thou shalt not kill.” This was a central part of the covenant that took place when the Hebrew people became a nation at Mount Sinai. This is at the heart of what it is to be a Jew.

Across the centuries, partly because of their tenacity in clinging to these ethical values, Jews were cast out and their sense of belonging was systematically negated by the societies in which they lived. Their religiosity was denied — seen as outside the realm of societal and divine acceptance and relegated to the margins of spiritual legitimacy. This negation transformed into a racial one: Jews were told they did not fit into the national or ethnic categories of the lands they called home. And then, under the Nazis, this negation reached its most horrifying form: a denial of their very humanity, a monstrous lie that Jews did not even belong to the human species.

And yet, even that ultimate attempt to physically annihilate the Jews failed. Not only that, but the surviving Jews incredibly clung no less tenaciously to the ethical values of their ancestors. Even the most comprehensive, thorough, genocidal external forces could not eradicate the Jewish presence from the world.

This is around the time when a group of Arab and Muslim thinkers invented a new strategy, exploiting the people who would come to be called Palestinians in a backdoor strategy to undermine Jewish identity and existence from the inside. They would devise a strategy in which the Jews were forced to act against their own values and, if all went according to plan, destroy the only thing no one else could take away from them: their morality, their struggle to seek justice, their censorious duty to thou shalt not kill.

Palestinianism, the motivating ideology of Hamas, raises children to kill and be killed, to view martyrdom as the acme of human achievement. It emphatically teaches young Palestinians that death is sacred and desirable. This message is inculcated into young Palestinians with their mother’s milk, through every aspect of Palestinian society — education, religion, popular



PHOTO: UPI/NEWSCOM

Israelis in Hostage Square in Tel Aviv on Monday, Oct. 13 2025 celebrate the return of all living and most of the dead Israeli hostages taken captive on October 7, 2023.

“Palestinianism seeks to “prove” the Jews not only have no claim to the land Palestinians claim as theirs, but no claim to the morality upon which Jews have built their entire identity.”

culture. There are millions of examples of this, perhaps none more succinct than the monument at Al-Quds University declaring: “Beware of natural death; do not die, but amidst the hail of bullets.”

Palestinianism has mastered a strategy that even the most venal enemies of the past had never perfected. It is to “prove” that, for all the holier-than-thou Jewish words of morality, justice and sanctity of life, they are not only no better than the rest of us reprobates but arguably the worst of our entire sinful species.

This was the brilliance of the genocide libel. There is no moral affront greater than genocide. And there is no affront to Jewish values greater than this. Indeed, the very term had to be invented to describe the 20th-century Jewish historical experience. So the genocide libel does triple duty. It inverts Jewish victimhood, accusing the Jews of perpetrating the worst atrocities of their own people. It turns the world against the Jews the way accusations of well-poisonings and blood libels did in centuries past. But — and here is the brilliance of Palestinianism — it does what every external attempt to annihilate the Jews could not: it discredits and subverts the very thing that makes Jews who they are.

Jews, in the strategy of Palestinianism, will be proven not only as imposters with no claim to the land but imposters with no claim to the thing that, even above the sanctity of the Jewish people’s connection to the land of Zion and Jerusalem itself, defines them: their claim to be the carriers of ethical monotheism, strivers for morality and pursuers of justice. Palestinianism seeks to “prove” the Jews not only have no claim to the land Palestinians claim as theirs, but no claim to the morality upon which Jews have built their entire identity.

Palestinianism has found the Achilles heel that millennia of enemies of the Jews, for all their creativity and innovation, could never quite figure, not only to steal the land where their history resides, but to undermine the very things that define them to themselves, to the world and, for those who believe, to God. To force them to betray their own most sacred values: to kill.

Has Palestinianism — and through it, the broader Arab and Muslim consensus and the

marching millions worldwide — finally done what all the combined enemies of the Jewish people through history have failed to do, to divest from Jewish people the only thing more important to their identity than the land of Israel itself: their claim to morality, their quest for justice, the covenant they have to bring to humanity humanity itself?

Decidedly not. Because everything I read and everything I hear from my Jewish friends and from Jewish commentators is that now is a time for moral reckoning. A political one, yes. But a moral reckoning, above all. The very fact that, for so many Jews, this moment is seen not as a time for triumphalism or resting on laurels of victory, but as the beginning of a time of reflection and teshuvah, is evidence of the real victory.

Now that the war is over (for now), Jews are responding as they do — by agonizing over their state’s actions, by agitating for justice not only for themselves but for Palestinians. They are not engaged in gloating, chest-beating, jingoism or anything resembling triumphalism.

On the contrary, Israelis and Jews worldwide seem overwhelmingly to be launching a process of introspection, analyzing what they were forced to do in the horrific depths of an unprecedented war, what moral compromises and affronts to justice were perpetrated in their names.

If there is any triumph in this war, this is it. It is not military victory that is the victory here. It is the joy that the hostages have returned and the realization that (for now) the dying on both sides will end.

This is what Golda meant with her words. Above all, the fact that Jewish people are engaged in that process of moral interrogation, and have never stopped questioning what is ethical and just, especially in the most unimaginably trying situations like we have witnessed in the past two years, is the surest proof that the culmination of 2,000 years of increasingly imaginative strategies to strip the Jewish people not only of their lives but of that which is most sacred to them, their commitment to all life but also to morality and justice, have failed profoundly.

Pat Johnson is founder of Upstanders Canada, which was created to mobilize non-Jewish Canadians to stand up against antisemitism and anti-Zionism.



Your Grey Matters

Podcast co-hosts Neil and Jason Silvert bridge the miles through conversation

A Shared Journey in Curiosity

When my son Jason and I launched Your Grey Matters, our purpose was simple: to maintain a meaningful bond across the miles separating us — me in Hamilton, Jason in Edmonton. What began as a father-and-son effort to stay close has evolved into one of the most engaging independent podcasts, known for its thought-provoking guests and emotional depth.

The guiding belief behind “Your Grey Matters” is that the human mind cannot be defeated, and that conversation, curiosity, and connection have the power to overcome distance and division.

“Even though we’re three provinces apart, this podcast keeps us close,” Jason says. “It’s something we build together every week.”

Throughout my life, I’ve been deeply engaged in community work. A graduate of the Jewish Federations of North America practicum program in 1983, I served in Jewish communal leadership before moving into entrepreneurship. Since 1994, I’ve remained an active volunteer — mentoring, organizing, and inspiring others.

My purpose has never changed: to connect people and share meaningful ideas is uncovering someone’s story and learning from it. Everyone has a message worth hearing.

Jason, 42, attended the Hamilton Hebrew Academy and developed a lifelong love of learning. After a decade with Apple, he transitioned into entrepreneurship, applying his technical and creative skills to new ventures. As the technical director and co-creator of “Your Grey Matters,” he manages production, editing, and creative direction.

Conversations That Inspire

Since its inception, “Your Grey Matters” has featured guests whose expertise and experiences span politics, technology, business, and personal growth. Among them:

- Gustavo Rymberg, Hamilton Jewish Federation CEO, who spoke about “How are we doing as Jews in Canada?”
- Harvey Brownstone, who discussed his journey from the courtroom to the microphone and the intersection of justice and compassion.

- MPs Dan Muys, Larry Brock, and Connie Cody, who shared insights on leadership, justice reform, and women’s roles in politics.
- Justice Harry LaForme, Canada’s first Indigenous appellate judge, on reconciliation and jurisprudence.
- Amy Back and Elaine Lynas, on community empowerment and ethical entrepreneurship.

Each conversation blends intellect and emotion — qualities that define the “Your Grey Matters” approach.

A Defining Moment

The interview with Harvey Brownstone proved pivotal. His reflections on empathy, justice, and storytelling resonated deeply and helped the podcast reach a national audience. Brownstone reminded us that the best interviewers don’t perform — they listen.

In recent months, the show has turned increasingly toward Canadian political issues. Episodes with parliamentarians and policy thinkers have drawn a broader audience, surpassing 1,000 subscribers on YouTube.

My interest in politics is shaped by concern for community well-being, Jewish identity, and freedom of expression. Both Jason and I believe open, respectful discussion — especially in a polarized world — is essential to democracy.

We often approach issues from different perspectives — I lean right, Jason leans left — but we don’t aim to change each other’s minds. “We don’t have to agree,” I say. “We just have to listen.”

Living in the Grey

The name “Your Grey Matters” captures our philosophy: that the human mind cannot be defeated — we will always find a way.

As the podcast grows, Jason and I plan to feature more Canadian innovators and changemakers — voices that challenge assumptions and inspire reflection. I’m particularly drawn to “disruptive technology,” innovation that transforms entire industries, much like how the cell phone reshaped the world.

What began as a family project has evolved into a meaningful national conversation. Curiosity, compassion, and connection remain the strongest forces in bridging distance, difference, and doubt. My other child is a social service worker, accomplished writer, and my biggest fan.

The easiest way to watch “Your Grey Matters” is by going to yourgreymatterspod.com/youtube. You can also listen wherever you get your podcasts.

We’re in a defining moment

Conservative Judaism must evolve to meet this moment



Ari Levin

The year 5785 may not be a good one for the Conservative movement in North America. I stress the word “may,” because I firmly believe that while the writing is the wall, the book has not yet been sealed. The past three decades have been challenging for the Conservative movement.

A 2020 Pew Research report on Jewish demographics highlighted several concerning trends:

- The number of self-identifying Conservative Jews has declined from a peak of 1.6 million to roughly 500,000.
- The share of American Jews identifying as Conservative dropped from 43 percent in 1990 to just 17 percent in 2020.
- The mean age of Conservative Jews is 62 — significantly higher than that of Reform Jews (53) and Orthodox Jews (35).
- The Conservative movement’s Schechter day schools, once numbering 73, have dwindled to just 30.
- The Jewish Theological Seminary experienced a steep decline in rabbinical candidates over the same period.

The Oct. 7, 2023 attacks and the subsequent rise in global antisemitism served as a catalyst for renewed unity among Jews worldwide. In 2025, the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA) reported that 72 percent of Jews who increased their engagement following the attacks have sustained that involvement. A report by the Foundation for Jewish Camping saw enrolment at Jewish summer camps spike 5 per cent in 2024, surpassing pre-enrolment levels from before the pandemic. Enrolment at Camp Ramah, the largest Conservative Jewish summer camp in Canada, for instance, is at record levels. In fact, nearly all Ramah camps across North America have seen spikes in enrolment. There’s also been a marked rise in Jewish day school attendance. A Prizma study in February of 2025 found that enrolment across

a sampling of Jewish day schools was up nearly 1.5 per cent in 2024-2025 over the previous year, with more than half the schools reporting that 60 per cent of new students had never attended any Jewish day schools beforehand.

So what does all this tell us? On one hand, Conservative Judaism has experienced a significant decline over the past several decades. On the other, Jewish engagement and participation have risen more broadly across a range of organizations and communities. It’s clear to me that we’re in a defining moment for those of us in my generation who are looking for a sense of belonging, connection, and community.

The question for us, as Conservative Jews, is how we can truly rise to this moment. When Conservative Judaism was at its peak 30 years ago, people needed different things from Judaism and from the Jewish community than we need today. Clearly, this moment calls for something different to succeed. How can we change, grow, and reimagine what our own flavor of Judaism can offer this community today? I present no concrete answers, but in the Talmudic tradition I ask a simple question. What does it mean to be a Conservative Jew in Hamilton today?

For me, Conservative Judaism has always stood for pluralism, egalitarianism, and a deep commitment to ritual and tradition — continually renewed through an evolving interpretation of Jewish law. It’s a flavor of Judaism that at once strives to balance our rich history with an honest acceptance and accounting of the world we live in today.

I believe the task before us is to strengthen the Hamilton Jewish community as a whole. How can we reimagine what Judaism can offer — not only for those already engaged, but for the many who feel disconnected, yet still long for connection and a sense of continuity for their families? There are no easy answers, but if we come together with vision and openness, we can create a community that thrives for generations to come.

Ari Levin, a father of three, gave the above address during Beth Jacob Synagogue’s Yom Kippur services.

“How can we reimagine what Judaism can offer ... for the many who feel disconnected?”

*Wishing the community
a very happy Chanukah!*



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My love language

Of the many genes I inherited, hospitality is most dominant



Helaine Ortmann

“What is your love language?” my friend asked, a seemingly random question in our conversation. Or, maybe it was because I was sharing, at great length, the details of the desserts I had made in honour of a visit from my husband’s family, eager to pull out all the stops and prepare something special for them: *Chocolat Marquise* and *Gâteau Basque*.

I thought for a moment. In my working life, my love language had been time. Being fully present, listening deeply, offering up my expertise to meet needs or respond to requests. Time was my gift and I was humbled to share it, in abundance and without reserve. Now?

“Hospitality,” I answered; remembering what it was like to grow up with parents who shared generously with family and friends. Where more meant more; where it would have been a *shanda* for someone to leave the table hungry; where, after a sumptuous supper of gefilte fish, chicken soup with *lokshen* or rice, challah, stuffed peppers, breaded chicken and brisket, vegetables, and a number of desserts, my mother might end the meal with the shriek that she forgot to put out the corn on the cob, still simmering in the pot on the stove.

Of the many genes I inherited from my parents, hospitality is surely one of the most dominant. When I invite family and friends to our house, I search out recipes, weeks in advance, that in terms of taste, presentation and effort, let my guests know they are important to me.

I’ve come to rely on a diverse group of cooks and bakers like Bonnie, Ina, Sally, Sivan, Ruhama, Rose, Noreen, and Audrey; reading and rereading their cookbooks, or watching and rewatching their videos on Instagram; paying close attention to their instructions, notes, tips, and reviews. I thrill to recipes that challenge me, and perhaps foolhardily, that I try for the first time then serve to my company.

Which brings me back to the *Chocolat Marquise*: a “mousse-meets-fudge” dessert (her words not mine) refrigerated or

frozen in the shape of a loaf. Who would dare say no to Audrey, a French-born-and-bred cookbook author who purports to make French cooking easy and stipulates a list of ingredients that includes the best quality 70 per cent dark bittersweet chocolate, eggs at least three to four days old, and, good-quality European butter, *noch*?

All well and good, until she made it clear that *la Marquise* would not be amused or successful if you mixed even a hint of egg yolk into the egg white. Six eggs later, I was beside myself with separation anxiety. Cupping my palm to cradle the yolks and let the whites ooze out of my fingers did not work. I returned to my decades-old practice of cracking the shells then transferring the yolks back and forth, letting the whites fall between the shell halves. Not perfect, but it did the trick. *Bashert* it was, a week after re-enacting my “I Love Lucy-like” episode to my friend Michele, that she surprised me with a stainless steel egg separator. “Who knew?” I said, as she rolled her eyes.

On to the *Gâteau Basque*, “halfway between a cake and a pie,” I rolled out the crusts, using yet more European butter with two organic eggs plus two egg yolks (sans separator). I made the cream filling, continuously hand whisking the butter and whole milk over medium heat, followed by a splash of rum. Petrified I would burn the filling, I stopped stirring when I thought it reached the “thin” pudding consistency Audrey had described in word and image.

I flipped the bottom crust into the prepared pan, poured the pastry cream over, then lowered in the top crust. It was then that Vesuvius erupted, a much too loose and liquidy cream overflowing the shallow tart pan, cascading in rivulets down three sets of kitchen drawers to pool on the floor. *Mitten drinnen*, the top crust sank and disappeared into the filling. *Merde!*

Somewhat daunted, I baked and served the *Gâteau Basque* as it was: delicious but without its golden egg wash and elegant crosshatch pattern on top. Not one to shy away from comedy or drama, I regaled my husband’s family with the backstories to these two desserts.

Anyway, in the end, all you really need is love, *non*?

The circle of life

A celebration of love, family and the moments that make a life



Phyllis Shragge

It was the cry of the newborn baby announcing her presence to the world. It was her innocence coupled with her determination to change everything about her parents’ lives from that day forward. It was her sweetness, her softness, and her magic intertwined. It was the beginning.

It was the jolt of the baby’s cry in the middle of the night.

It was the mother saying: “Your turn,” and rolling over for much-needed sleep. It was the father mumbling: “I’m up,” then groaning as he shuffled towards the baby’s room. It was the father’s sigh when he slid back into bed. It was the mother’s hand reaching over and giving his hand a squeeze.

It was the parents’ joy when their baby crawled towards a toy. It was their delight when the baby took her first steps. It was the baby becoming a toddler.

It was the mother’s worry and sense of guilt as she dropped her toddler off at daycare. It was the toddler’s panic on that first day when she realized her mother was gone, and the toddler’s change of heart just a few days later when she realized daycare was fun.

It was the parents telling their little girl how junior kindergarten would be better than daycare. It was the girl’s shyness and her hope that the other children would like her. It was the girl glowing weeks later because now she had a best friend. It was the parents wondering, months later, how the school year could be almost over.

It was the girl easing into Grade One and her whizzing through elementary school before the parents knew what happened. It was the years in middle school when she and her parents seemed to argue all the time. It was the stress of planning for her Bat Mitzvah and the parents’ eventual relief and pride when she chanted her Haftorah beautifully. It was the girl’s preference for all-black clothes, black eyeliner and her new bright pink hair as she entered her first year of high school. It was the parents’ holding

hands as they watched their daughter’s high school graduation. It was their joy on her first day of university and their sobbing as they drove away leaving her among strangers.

It was the mother squeezing the father’s hand as they watched their daughter’s university convocation. It was the parents’ pride when the daughter found a job she loved. It was the daughter’s smile as she announced her engagement to a wonderful man and the joy everyone felt the following year at the wedding. It was the mother’s sad eyes as she digested the news of their daughter and son-in-law moving to another city. It was the parents’ hesitant suggestion that they move there as well so they could be closer to their daughter and son-in-law. It was the daughter’s initial surprise, then her reassuring words, “Mom and Dad, we’d love you to be nearby.”

It was the mother and father’s overwhelming delight when the daughter announced she was pregnant.

It was the cry of the newborn baby announcing his presence to the world. It was the grandparents’ joy at the bris, and months later when the baby said his first words. It was the birth of another grandchild, this time a girl, and how the grandparents couldn’t have imagined such happiness.

It was the love the grandparents felt for their grandchildren. It was the grandparents’ sadness when their daughter interpreted their advice on child rearing as criticism, and their decision to zip up their lips because their relationship with their daughter was so important. It was the grandparents’ frustration, wishing their daughter could learn from their experience.

It was the overwhelming sadness when first the grandfather died, and then a few years later when the grandmother passed away. It was the love the family felt when they remembered the cherished grandparents. It was the grandchildren growing up and having babies of their own. It was the naming of one baby after the grandfather who had been such an integral part of the family.

It was the subsequent naming of another baby, this time after the devoted grandmother. It was the circle of life.

Happy Chanukah



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Strategies for concussion recovery



BY **ANDREA ZIANS**
ADVICE COLUMNIST

I was in a car accident at the start of the semester that left me with a concussion. Months later, I’m still struggling with fatigue, headaches, and I’m worried about how to keep up with my courses. Do you have any strategies that could help me manage school and recovery?
NOT FEELING BACK TO NORMAL

RETURNING to university after a concussion takes courage and patience. The first thing to ensure is that your return happens under medical supervision. I’ve seen many students push themselves back too quickly and find their symptoms getting worse. Concussion recovery is unpredictable. A gradual, well-monitored return will give you the best chance for success. It’s important to know that a concussion is recognized as a temporary disability and will be accommodated by your school’s accessibility office. You’ll need medical documentation outlining your functional limitations as you heal, such as fatigue, light sensitivity, or trouble focusing. Medical documentation helps the accessibility staff determine which support will be most helpful for you. Once you have that documentation, reach out to your school’s accessibility office. They will help you develop a plan that fits your situation. Every concussion looks slightly different, and your plan

should reflect your current needs. A full range of support is available, and here are a few common ones: flexible deadlines, note-taking assistance, or quieter testing and study spaces. The goal is to help you keep learning while giving you allowances for your new working method during recovery. You should book an appointment with your school’s assistive technologist, who can show you how to adjust your computer or laptop to reduce eye strain. Simple changes like lowering brightness, switching to darker backgrounds, or using a blue-light filter can make a real difference. Almost all colleges and universities have someone responsible for converting your textbooks into digital files to make using this technology feasible. If you’re at McMaster University, you’re lucky to have access to the Campus Accessible Tech Space (CATS), in the library. It’s calm, quiet, and designed for students with concussions and other accessibility needs. There are specialized computer screens that reduce visual strain, which can be beneficial while recovering from a head injury. Because a concussion is an invisible injury, it’s easy to feel pressure to perform the way you did before. But pushing too hard can set you back. By getting medical guidance, connecting with your accessibility office, and using the right tools, you’re setting yourself up for success. And remember, reaching out for help is a sign of strength, not weakness. Find CATS resources and information: <https://library.mcmaster.ca/spaces/las#tab-campus-accessible-tech-space-cats> If you have a question about school success, email andrea@andreaizans.com. You might see your question answered in a future column.



Holocaust survivors enjoy an outing at Hamilton Jewish Family Services.

PHOTO: CHRISTINE NUSCA

HAMILTON JEWISH FAMILY SERVICES Introducing Café Europa

CARA BENSIMON

HAMILTON JEWISH Family Services is pleased to announce the launch of Café Europa — a welcoming and engaging program designed for Holocaust survivors to enjoy good company and participate in meaningful activities. The concept of Café Europa dates back to a small café in Stockholm, Sweden, where Holocaust survivors gathered after the war in search of family, friends, and a renewed sense of belonging. What began as a simple meeting place soon evolved into a powerful symbol of resilience, shared history, and the unbreakable bonds formed through collective experience. Hamilton Jewish Family Services is proud to join this global network. The program will provide survivors with opportunities to enjoy live music and singing, participate in intergenerational programming and storytelling, engage in thoughtful discussions, and connect

with friends and community members in a warm, welcoming setting. These gatherings offer a deep sense of belonging that continues to enrich the lives of survivors. Hamilton’s Café Europa is open to anyone who lived in or fled from Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Leningrad, the Czech Republic, the former Soviet Union, or other European regions between 1933 and 1945. This includes those born *in utero* or in a camp, ghetto, or *Mellah*, as well as individuals who were in forced labour, hiding, or living under a false identity during the war. As Hamilton Jewish Family Services prepares to welcome participants in 2026, the mission is to create a space where survivors can gather, share stories and strengthen connections. For more information, please contact Hamilton Jewish Family Services at 905-627-9922 or visit www.hamiltonjfs.ca.



SPECIAL OFFER

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*offer ends on April 15, 2026

Please join us for our *free**

CHANUKAH DINNER

Friday, Dec. 19, 2025

SERVICE at 5:15pm
DINNER at 6:00pm

REGISTER by Monday, Dec. 15 to joanne@bethjacobsynagogue.com.

*for unaffiliated families and singles under 40

KEHILA HESCHEL

What’s new at Kehila?

LISHAI PEEL

IT’S BEEN an exciting fall at Kehila Heschel School, where a number of new initiatives are enriching student learning and building stronger ties across generations. This year, we’ve launched our “Meet the Elder” program, a revival of our intergenerational learning initiative that brings grandparents and older community members into the classroom once a month to share their experiences and wisdom. Students prepare thoughtful questions in advance and practice active listening and reflective writing after each visit. The program helps students see themselves as part of a continuum, learning from those who came before them while imagining their own contributions to the future. We’ve also strengthened our science curriculum with weekly STEM Lab Fridays, where students engage in experiments that make learning come alive, from exploring chemical reactions and energy transfer to designing and testing their own engineering creations. Language learning is another cornerstone of our program. Our new partnership with *Les Petites Pommes* provides high-quality French instruction and introduces “French Club Fridays,” where students play language games, sing songs, and discover French culture in an immersive way. Beyond our classrooms, we’re deepening ties across the Jewish community through joint programming with Temple



PHOTO: COURTESY KEHILA HESCHEL

Kehila Heschel students share a moment of connection and joy outdoors.

Anshe Shalom, creating shared opportunities for learning and celebration. At Kehila, education is woven from connection — between subjects, generations, and community partners. Together, we’re creating a school where Jewish learning is alive, creative, and inclusive. To enrol for our winter semester, please email principal@kehilaschool.ca

BETH JACOB SYNAGOGUE

Join us for a musical weekend

RABBI BENI WAJNBERG

AS THE DAYS get darker, we gather with our families to invite more light into our lives. Remembering miracles of old, we raise our awareness for the many miracles of our time. Community, too, is miraculous. In that spirit, we look back to the ways that our own congregation was enriched recently. At the same time, we look forward with great excitement for what lies ahead. Beth Jacob was honoured to have Cantor Faith Steinsnyder for the High Holidays, completing our bimah. In a short time, she has inspired our congregation with her depth of knowledge, musical skills and abundance of smiles. She inspired those who came to services, and left them with a feeling of joy and meaning. She embodies the way in which our congregation practices Judaism: tradition and modernity hand in hand. Beth Jacob is pleased to announce her return for a musical weekend. Cantor Faith will be joining us for a congregational dinner on Jan. 30 with an engaging service. On Saturday, Jan. 31, we will have a special and musical *Shabbat Shira* service. The Torah portion that week contains our ancestors’ crossing of the sea and Miriam’s song — Miriam, Moses’ sister, who both sang and led the people in dance. Men and women danced together, played instruments together *and* were led by a woman too! This is an excellent opportunity for us to celebrate Jewish joy in all of its diversity



PHOTO: COURTESY BETH JACOB

Cantor Faith Steinsnyder

and inclusivity. Last but not least, on that Sunday Feb. 1, we will gather for a wine tasting/Tu Bishvat seder. We will of course offer non-alcoholic options for those who don’t drink and to make this event friendly to all generations. We are pleased to open this to the community at large. Whether you have been a member of the synagogue for a long time, whether you have never stepped into our sanctuary, or whether you are somewhere in between, please know: our doors are open. And we would be honoured to have you join us! To express your interest, please reach out to the Beth Jacob Synagogue at office@bethjacobsynagogue.ca.

BBYO

A safe space for Jewish students



PHOTO: COURTESY BBYO HAMILTON

Limo scavenger hunt participants gather after a jam-packed day.

MELISSA DUBINSKY

THE AMAZING time I’ve had with BBYO over the past four years inspired me to volunteer to run “BBYO Connect:” our new program for kids in Grades 6-8. In Hamilton and Oakville there is a big Jewish community, with a lot of kids of a variety of ages. I believe that those kids should get an opportunity to meet each other and have fun together, like my friends and I do at BBYO. Our first “BBYO Connect” event this year was a limo scavenger hunt. Throughout the event we gave the kids envelopes that contained clues that led to destinations around Hamilton. For some they had to unscramble words or pictures, then we hopped into limousines once they solved each clue. At each location we had an activity to complete. For example, at Mastermind Toys, they had to find a toy that resembled them and explain why. It was a very fun time. There were so many kids from different schools and different areas, including Oakville, Hamilton, Dundas, and even St Catherines! Some already knew

each other and stuck together, while others were nervous and didn’t know anyone. My role was to be like a camp counselor and bring people together. I was supposed to make this event exciting, while ensuring each kid felt welcomed and included. Throughout the day, I made sure to facilitate group conversations to encourage them to talk to each other, leading some games, asking some questions, and just keeping up an overall positive vibe. By the end of the trip the kids were laughing, talking like long-time friends, and were so eager for the next event! Events like these are so important for our community. I’m proud that I created a safe space where Jewish middle schoolers could simply just hang out with each other — a space where they only needed to worry about having fun. Any Jewish kid in Grade 6-8 is welcomed to come to “BBYO Connect!” Our next event is a snow tubing trip on Jan. 18. Check out all the details at bbyo.ca/connect. We would love to have you there! For more information, email hamilton@bbyo.ca.

HAMILTON JEWISH FAMILY SERVICES

What sets your soul on fire?

NATALIE SOBEL

THE LAST two years have been profoundly painful for the Jewish people. Our collective grief, fear, anger, and sense of betrayal have been immense; at times it can feel difficult to function. The emotional weight of ongoing uncertainty, combined with a renewed sense of vulnerability in the face of rising anti-semitism, has left many of us feeling unmoored. The question becomes: how can we ground ourselves and move forward as Jews living in the Canadian diaspora? One answer lies in Chanukah itself. The story of the Maccabees reminds us of resilience and renewal through the rededication of the Second Temple after its desecration. Chanukah invites us to rededicate ourselves as well — to our values, our goals, and our sense of purpose. It’s a perfect moment to revisit those Rosh Hashanah resolutions that may have drifted aside and to remind ourselves that light and hope are always within reach. Of course, Chanukah also falls during the darkest days of the year, when sunlight is scarce and motivation can wane. Yet each night, as we add one more candle to the *chanukiah*, we see that

change begins modestly, even amidst fear or uncertainty. By the eighth night, those small flames become a brilliant blaze. It’s a reminder for us to be fearless in pursuing what sets our soul on fire. The hostages who have returned home embody that same courage and rededication to hope and life itself — a true Chanukah moment that inspires us all. To live with purpose and strength, we need both light and courage — light to see ourselves clearly, and courage to face what we find. When we name our difficult emotions, we illuminate them. When we recognize that others share our pain, we embrace our common humanity. And when we ask what we need in this moment, we practice self-kindness. These are the foundations of Mindful Self-Compassion, and they are among the many tools available through the Hamilton Jewish Family Services mental health and well-being program. If you are seeking support, or simply a hand to help your own light shine, please reach out. Together, we can nurture resilience, purpose, and hope. To learn more about what HJFS has to offer, visit www.hamiltonjfs.ca Natalie Sobel is HJFS’s new director of clinical services mental health and well-being.

TEMPLE ANSHE SHOLOM

Facilitating interfaith marriage

CANTOR PAULA BARUCH, RICHARD LEVY AND PAUL JAYE

AT OUR recent Annual General Meeting, Temple Anshe Sholom voted to allow our clergy to perform interfaith weddings within the walls of our temple. This moment represents more than a policy change; it is a statement of faith in the future of Jewish life in Hamilton. By welcoming interfaith couples into the heart of our community, we affirm that love, family, and belonging strengthen Judaism rather than threaten it.

Across North America, Jewish communities are undergoing profound change. Younger generations are redefining what it means to live Jewishly, and interfaith marriage has become part of that story. The 2018 survey of Jews in Canada found that 30 percent of married Jews in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area have non-Jewish spouses, and among non-Orthodox Jews under 40, that number is much higher. In the United States, 72 percent of non-Orthodox Jews who married after 2010 married partners from outside the faith. These numbers tell us what we already see: interfaith families are part of

our community’s future. Research shows that when interfaith families feel welcome, Jewish engagement deepens. They celebrate holidays together, raise Jewish children, and strengthen communal life. Continuity depends not on whom someone marries, but on whether our community opens its doors after they do. By meeting interfaith couples with respect, education, and compassion, we ensure that Judaism remains vibrant for generations to come. Temple Anshe Sholom welcomes Jews and the people who love them. Our congregation is built on the values of kindness, learning, and shared purpose. As we take this next step, we do so with confidence that inclusion is the surest path to continuity. Interfaith marriage is not an obstacle to Jewish life; it is an opportunity to renew it, deepen it, and pass it forward with joy. Our process for any prospective couple includes pre-marital counselling with Jewish learning, a sole Jewish officiant for the ceremony, and a shared commitment to create a Jewish household and raise Jewish children. To learn more, please read our new policy at anshesholom.ca.

ADAS ISRAEL

Shabbat programs cater to all ages

OLIVER BORR

AS THE new director of community engagement for the Adas Israel synagogue and the HHA, my guiding philosophy is that the best type of growth happens when we work together. This approach was essential when I received feedback on Shabbat programming. The clear message was that this was the time to take Shabbat youth groups to the next level. With shul attendance at an all-time high, both kids and adults are seeking a meaningful and uplifting shul experience now more than ever. I took this feedback and immediately began building new Shabbat programs to cater to kids of all ages and affiliations. Practically, what does this look like? In the past two months, our Shabbat programs have included a weekly *parsha* puppet show, *parsha*-themed escape rooms, jumbo games, *Jew-parody*, *parsha* charades, teen and youth-led services, deluxe meat *kiddushes*, and much more.



PHOTO: COURTESY ADAS ISRAEL
A Parsha-themed puppet show.

The result? Every Shabbat, we have between 70 and 100 kids excited and eager to go to shul! And in true Adas-fashion, we still have more to come. This momentum is the perfect example of our “Growth Together” philosophy in action. It started with community feedback, was brought to life through the energy of our community, and is succeeding because of your participation. This success belongs to all of us, and I’m so excited to see what we will build next, together.

SHALOM VILLAGE

A Chanukah message



PHOTO: COURTESY SHALOM VILLAGE
Helen Metz, (third from right) surrounded by Shalom Village staff and friends, received the Leadership Award at the 30th Annual City of Hamilton Senior of the Year Awards.

MARIANNE KLEIN

AS WE gather to celebrate the Festival of Lights, I am reminded of the enduring strength and warmth of our community. Chanukah is a time to reflect on resilience, hope, and the power of light to overcome darkness — values that guide us every day at Shalom Village. This year, we are proud to be part of the “Cultural Homes Pilot,” a transformative initiative that reimagines elder care through the lens of cultural identity and belonging. By embracing the traditions, languages, and values of our residents, we are creating spaces that feel not just safe, but truly like home. This pilot is more than a program — it’s a promise to honour the lives and legacies of those we serve. Please contact our team for more information. We also celebrated a deeply meaningful moment earlier this year when Helen Metz, a cherished member of our Shalom Village family, received the Leadership Award at the 30th Annual City of Hamilton Senior of the Year Awards. Helen’s dedication and spirit exemplify the heart of our mission, and her recognition is a proud milestone for all of us. This Chanukah, as we celebrate the Festival of Lights, I am deeply moved by the vibrant sense of connection and vitality within our Shalom Village community — especially as seen in our SPARK program. SPARK stands as the heartbeat of

our commitment to helping older adults stay active and engaged, offering a wide range of free activities such as chair yoga, gentle stretching, balance exercises, and our popular walkercize class. Thanks to the generous support of a grant from the Ministry of Seniors and Accessibility, these programs are provided at no cost, empowering seniors and caregivers throughout Hamilton with opportunities for wellness, learning, and laughter. Each week, SPARK members enjoy “Hydration and Health” socials and friendly wellness talks, forging new friendships and sharing practical tips for healthy living. Led by Stacy Bennett — whose enthusiasm and compassion inspire all who participate — SPARK welcomes everyone just as they are, focusing on safety, confidence, and small steps that make daily living brighter and easier. We invite you to join us, to learn more please visit shalomvillage.ca/services/community-activities/seniors-spark-program/ On behalf of our entire Shalom Village Team, we thank our incredible donors for their continued support and generosity for our beloved “Ladies Auxiliary Tea,” we could not do it without you! As we light the Chanukiah, may each candle remind us of the light we carry within and the strength we find in each other. From all of us at Shalom Village, we wish you a season filled with peace, love, and the warmth of community. Chag Chanukah Sameach!

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Happy Hanukkah!
Wishing you a holiday filled with light, joy and peace – from all of us at KMB Law

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For the love of Jewish learning

DORA ANN COHEN ELLISON

TEMPLE ANSHE Sholom’s learning program welcomed 74 students this year! Our school classrooms are filled with laughter and excitement each Shabbat morning and Wednesday afternoon, as we continue to strengthen our community connections, and help our students find their own passion for Jewish learning and make new Jewish friendships outside our classroom walls.

On Dec. 5 we invited all of the new Kehila Heschel students to join our new Temple students on the bimah for a very special blessing.

As families start their formal Jewish learning, all of our new students and parents will gather and Cantor Baruch will offer words of guidance and blessing. Each student will be presented a mezuzah to hang on their bedroom door and will continue to get to know each other after the service at a delicious dessert Shabbat Oneg. This event, as well as several others throughout the year that bring our two schools together, is made possible as part of a special grant from the Hamilton Jewish Federation.

As we help our students find their Jewish interests, we continue our Wednesday elective program where students in Kindergarten through Grade 6 choose to learn in a way that is of interest to them. We are offering; ukelele sessions and Shabbat songs, people and places of Israel through games and art, Jewish cooking, drama, and crochet for community. Enrolment is still open.

Following our month-long exploration of *Betzelem Elohim*, we begin our study of spiritual courage and the willingness to take risks for the right causes, and incorporating the idea that we all can be heroic in our everyday lives by living an



PHOTO: DORA ANN COHEN ELLISON

Hands-on Hebrew in K/1.

exemplary life, helping others where we can and doing what is right and just.

These lessons kicked off our annual food and toiletry drive on Nov. 27, during which we encouraged anyone visiting the Temple to drop off items to our collection bin in the front foyer through Dec. 6. Our high school students once again went door to door in our community collecting donations. Please bring non-perishable items with you when you join us Dec. 5 at 6 p.m. for our pot-luck Shabbat dinner and 7 p.m. for a family Kabbalat Shabbat and consecration service. Mark your calendars for our Chanukah dinner and party on Sunday, Dec. 14. Don’t forget your chanukiah and candles, as we gather for food, fun, and schmoozing!

To register for the Dec. 14 Chanukah dinner party or for more information about joining our Temple school community, please contact Dora-Ann Cohen Ellison at dacellison@anshesholom.ca or visit anshesholom.ca

The future is bright



PHOTO: COURTESY ADAS ISRAEL

NCSY Hamilton is the local division of the international Jewish teen organization.

OLIVER BORR

I’VE LIVED many types of Judaism — from secular, to traditional, to very religious, to somewhere in between. I currently find myself in a “religious-yet-culturally-ambiguous” space. Somewhere along the way, I learned that it’s difficult to find a community that truly caters to all types of Jews. That was, until I found Hamilton, a community that doesn’t have square pegs or round holes — just uniquely shaped pegs, and organizations that exist to accommodate them.

This openness is most evident in NCSY Hamilton, the local division of the international Jewish teen organization.

NCSY Hamilton isn’t trying to fit teens into a predefined box of what “Jewish” should look like. It’s not for the “religious” kids or the “secular” kids; it’s for all Jewish kids. It’s a place where every teen, regardless of background, affiliation, or knowledge, can walk in and feel like they belong. This community is built on

connection, energy, and authentic Jewish experiences. It is, in a word, vibrant. NCSY Hamilton is growing because we’ve created a space that is magnetic: fun, engaging, and completely non-judgmental.

Every Wednesday from 7:30 to 9 p.m. at the Hamilton Hebrew Academy, local Jewish teens get together for exciting activities, real conversations, and a meaningful Jewish experience. Plus, there’s always pizza.

Here’s the unique part: kids literally get paid to participate. We believe so strongly in the value of their time that we offer a stipend. It’s not a gimmick; it’s a literal investment in the teenagers as they develop their Jewish identity. It’s a place where teens want to be, and we’re thrilled to reward them for it.

At NCSY, we aren’t just building a teen community for square or round pegs. We’re building a community for Jewish pegs of all shapes and sizes — and in Hamilton, it turns out, there’s a whole lot of them.

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DECEMBER 2025 • HAMILTON JEWISH NEWS 21

A week in Israel that changed everything, brought hope

Seven years after his last visit, physician Bill Nisker returned to Israel and rediscovered light, pride and a sense of belonging

BY **WENDY SCHNEIDER**
HAMILTON JEWISH NEWS

SEVEN YEARS had passed since local geriatrician Dr. Bill Nisker last set foot in Israel, and the idea of returning filled him with mixed emotions. The pandemic, the war, the unending tide of grim headlines — all had left their mark. But his grand-nephew’s bar mitzvah was approaching, his niece wanted him there, and his sister was determined to see the mobile ICU they’d donated to Magen David Adom in their parents’ memory. In the end, family won out over hesitation.

It’s often said that more can happen in a week in Israel than anywhere else in the world — and for Nisker, that proved true. He never expected his visit to coincide with the release of the final hostages and President Trump’s historic address to the Knesset. Yet each moment — touring the Magen David Adom command centre in Ramla, people watching in Modi’in and Jerusalem, or sitting with family as history unfolded on screen — filled him with deep gratitude, relief, and joy.

The Magen David Adom National Command Centre, which happened to open just two days after the traumatic events of October 7, 2023, oversees Israel’s blood supply and coordinates emergency medical response services across the country.

“It’s an amazing place,” said Nisker, describing how the fortified complex is built around an underground facility that houses ambulances, mobile units, and the national blood supply.

The site also features a memorial to the 17 Magen David Adom

Bill Nisker, third from right, together with his sister and other family members at the Magen David Adom National Operations Centre in Ramla. The group is standing in front of the mobile ICU they donated to honour their parents.



PHOTOS: COURTESY BILL NISKER

“This was the first time I felt some light again — some hope.”

DR. BILL NISKER

volunteers who lost their lives on October 7. Nisker was deeply moved to learn how the organization had mobilized in the chaotic days following the Hamas attacks. “From my niece’s point of view, it was very much a people-led effort,” he said. “Magen David Adom truly stepped up.”

For Nisker, the trip was meaningful not only as an opportunity to support his family but also as a chance to witness a defining moment in Israel’s recent history. His niece, who has been deeply involved in efforts to support the hostage families, joined

the crowds at Hostage Square on the morning the final hostages were released. Nisker chose to stay behind, observing from her apartment as the events unfolded live on television. He spent hours following the coverage — including President Trump’s address to the Knesset, a moment, he noted, that was met with gratitude by many Israelis, even among those who disagreed with Trump politically.

Overall, being in Israel reaffirmed Nisker’s belief in the country and, as he put it, felt like “a weight coming off my chest.” He believes it’s important

for people to go “to see how enterprising and advanced Israeli society is,” he said. “You realize how different the reality is from the way it’s sometimes portrayed. For me, it was a big reaffirmation that Israel should be supported.”

The experience also brought him a personal sense of renewal. “Over the last few years, I’ve carried a kind of heaviness, almost a continuation of COVID. It’s like we went through that, and then October 7 happened right after. This was the first time I felt some light again — some hope.”

CHANUKAH SAMEACH!

May your candles shine brightly with love and joy.

MAYOR ANDREA HORWATH
CITY OF HAMILTON
905-546-4200
mayor@hamilton.ca

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