

The Seder: A Pathway to Spiritual Well-Being

By Paul Steinberg

Encino, CA (JTA) — I am addicted to the news. Something enormously dramatic and extraordinary seems to be happening all the time, whether it's war, terrorism, natural disasters, corruption, environmental destruction or economic upheaval.

With this constant tumult, one may wonder if the state of the world is growing more dismal.

More likely it was always like this, but without the Internet and television it was lesser known.

People seem to be constantly seeking answers on how to cope, gain more control of their lives and remain spiritually whole.

"Positive thinking" is one of the more en vogue means to spiritual healing and an unquestionable hot seller. It's a terrific practice and one that Judaism supports through the prayer book's daily blessings and affirmations. The power of positive thinking is also found in Chasidic circles: As the Yiddish expression goes, "Tracht gutt, vet zein gutt" or "Think good, and it will be good."

But would Judaism support the notion that how one thinks is, as the best-seller "The Secret" puts it, "The law that determines the complete order in the Universe, every moment of your life, and every single thing you experience in your life ... You are the one who calls the law of attraction into action, and you do it through your thoughts."

The thinking seems to be that we become rich or poor, suffer or are contented, because of how we think. Even the High Holidays prayer book doesn't go quite that far when it notably declares that prayer, repentance and righteous acts are able only to "lessen the severity of evil" in our lives — not entirely "determine the complete order of the universe."

Frankly, it seems terribly stressful to accept the idea that how we think is the total determinant in our lives. What if I just cannot think positively because terrible things are happening? And the added realization that my subsequent unhelpful thinking is only dragging me down further, bringing even more pain and misfortune to my life is a bitter message to

embrace. This is especially true when one loses his or her job in a frightful economic climate, suffers a family tragedy, or is simply born into the desperate conditions of impoverishment or ethnic genocide.

Judaism offers another alternative, as it does not assume that we can be or will be intellectually or emotionally impeccable. The Torah unapologetically recounts numerous examples of discontent, desire, lust and deceitfulness from Jacob to King David. And rabbinic literature frequently portrays the Rabbis with their human foibles rather than as blissful saints. In this spirit, the Talmud tells of God denying the heavenly angels' request to receive the Torah for themselves rather than for us: "God said to them [the angels]: 'Did you go down to Egypt; were you enslaved to Pharaoh: why then should the Torah be yours? ... Do you dwell among people that engage in idol worship; ... Do you perform work, that you need to rest [on the Sabbath]; ... Is there any business dealings among you; ... Is there jealousy among you [that you need to resist murder and adultery]; is the Evil Tempter among you!' Straightway they conceded to the Holy One, blessed be He" (Shabbat 88b).

The Torah serves as a guide to life, given to people, not angels, not merely because of what we do but also because of what we are. Human beings, unlike angels, feel and think — and by virtue of our earthly existence, we feel and think imperfectly.

So if Judaism does not prescribe positive thinking as the chief and sole method for spiritual health, what does it advise?

Consider the Passover Seder, today's most popular and arguably most profound Jewish observance. The Seder is essentially comprised of four elements, each representing Judaism's answer to how to live a healthy spiritual life.

1. **Family.** Biblical scholar Nahum Sarna posited, "Family life is the bedrock on which Jewish society stands." The Passover Seder is a family event. It is constructed so that parents and children each have a part. Creating a time, a place and a



structure for family events is vital to well-being.

2. **Learning.** Because we are innately imperfect, Judaism advises lifelong learning and truth seeking, not just for the young or uninitiated, but for the old and wise, too. The Seder is a ceremony of study, and the learning and intellectual growth generate a sense of joy and inspiration.

3. **Ritual.** Every culture has its own symbols that represent its deepest principles and values, even in secular American (e.g., flags, monuments). But identifying symbols alone is never enough. We must interact with our symbols and engage in symbolic behavior in order to remind us of those most important parts of our lives. Rituals bind us to others, to God and to our own sense of spirit.

4. **Communal heritage.** We are unified as a community by those who came before us. The lives we lead today are the reason our ancestors worked as they did. They endured suffering, fought injustices and built societies for us as much as for themselves. Acknowledging our historical and spiritual legacy develops our own sense of self-esteem and self-worth, as well as our hope for the future.

In times of doubt and even in times of grace, Judaism offers us multiple avenues to access self-healing. We cannot always think positively — who can in times of turmoil? But if we make time to act positively and participate in family, learning, ritual and matters of communal heritage such as the Passover seder, we will discover what transcends any obstacle we face. ✪

(Paul Steinberg is a rabbi and educator at Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, CA, and the author of the Jewish Publication Society's "Celebrating the Jewish Year" series.)

Holocaust Workshop Provides Resources for Area Teachers

By Michael Solender

Over 60 years have passed since the end of the Second World War and the atrocities of the Holocaust, yet questions linger that seemingly can never be answered, the greatest of all perhaps being: How could this happen? These terror filled pages of history must be studied and taught to subsequent generations in order to honor and commemorate those who perished and to apply the lessons learned in order to never allow such an occurrence again.

On Friday, February 27, Union County Public schools hosted almost 100 area teachers who participated in full day workshop, Teaching about the Holocaust at the Professional Development Center in Monroe. The program was developed, presented and sponsored by the North Carolina Council on the Holocaust and is designed to augment established Holocaust curriculum being taught in middle and high schools throughout North Carolina.

Established by the Governor's Office in 1981, the Council is a state agency currently organized under the Department of Public Instruction. Through its education and annual commemoration programs, the Council strives to prevent atrocities similar to the systematic program of mass murder by the Nazis of six million Jews and others including Gypsies (Roma), homosexuals, handicapped persons, and religious and political dissidents.

The Council holds between seven and nine similar workshops throughout the school year at sites across the state. Over 8500 teachers and administrators have attended these programs since the inception of the teacher workshops in 1990. Michael Abramson, Chair of the Council, said the interest and enthusiasm for the program is particularly acute in and around Charlotte and the surrounding metro area. "We are particularly grateful to the Charlotte Federation for their extremely generous support of the Council and this workshop," said Abramson. "With Federation's

support, teachers who otherwise could not attend due to substitute costs are able to experience the program and take this information back into their classrooms."

The workshop featured Karl Schleunes, Professor of History at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. Schleunes provided the historic context on the economic, political and religious situation of post WWI Germany that led to Hitler's rise to power and circumstances that allowed the Holocaust to take place. Gizella Abramson, a survivor from the Majdanek a German death camp in occupied Poland, lent a personal face to the workshop with her harrowing tale of her experience at the hands of the Nazis.

Linda Scher of Raleigh is the Director of Education for the Council. "Our work today is as important as it has ever been," stated Scher. "I get tremendous feedback from teachers who are able to incorporate the context and background they receive in our workshop directly back into instruction for their students. One need only look at events in Darfur or the former Yugoslavia to recognize that the lessons from the Holocaust are timeless and require study and understanding."

Stacy Moore is the High School Social Studies Curriculum Coordinator for Union County Public Schools. "Kids today get glimpses of the Holocaust whether from the media or in Hollywood movies," said Moore. "Providing them with historically accurate content is meaningful and helps shape their perspective on the subject. This program has gained a strong reputation over the years and I am not at all surprised to see such a large turnout."

Workshop participants were provided with a comprehensive teaching resource guide that included ten separate lesson plans appropriate for both middle and high school students. Many parallels are drawn to periods in American history where citizens have been treated unfairly, and the guidebook provides teachers with connections to North Carolina events and individuals that help show students that the impact of these events touched their state and their neighbors.

Many additional resources were identified for teachers including travelling exhibits on the Kindertransport, the rescue of over 10,000 children from Nazi controlled countries between 1938 and 1940. Additional information on this program and the NC Council on the Holocaust can be found at: www.ncpublicschools.org/holocaust_council. ✪

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Yom Hazikaron Program in Conjunction with the Jewish Federation of Greater Charlotte

April 27, 4:30 PM, Lerner Hall

Yom HaZikaron is the Israel's Memorial Day, when the many IDF soldiers who have died in defense of Israel are remembered.

The program on April 27 will be family oriented, but will be serious and solemn. Lights will be dimmed to create a mood, and Israeli battle music will be played in the background.

The program will begin with a three-minute film followed by stations that each family can participate in:

1) Mural- using a large banner sized sheet of paper or material, we will divide it up and let the

children decorate or write words of encouragement to the Israeli soldiers in the Hadera Base of the Israeli Army. We will provide pictures of the soldiers, army base, and names of soldiers that have sacrificed their lives so that the children may personalize their message.

2) Kotel- we will create a Western Wall so that the children can write notes to put in the wall.

3) Gift basket and cards - families are encouraged to bring Charlotte memorabilia to this station, i.e. (Panthers shirts, magnets, Bobcats signs, LJCC hats, books, shirts, NASCAR paraphernalia,

anything that represents Charlotte) to send to the soldiers in a gift basket with cards from our community.

4) Story about Yom HaZikaron
5) Stones - we will write the names of the soldiers who have sacrificed their lives for the state of Israel. We will create a memorial with these stones.

The final portion of the program will be a ceremony consisting of a prayer for the state of Israel followed by Hatikva. Volunteers from both the Israeli and American communities will read poetry, songs, etc.

This will be an hour long activ-

ity geared toward families. All activities will be family oriented. We are encouraging the parents of young children to go from station to station with their children. The room will be decorated with a timeline of pictures representing each of the major wars in Israel with short descriptions of the significance of the war. Participants will go through each station, allowing about ten minutes per station. After all of the stations have been finished, we will gather for a short 15 minute ceremony to remember those lost. ✪