



Lev Ha'inyan / לב העניין

"The Heart of the Matter"

Commentary on issues in Jewish Education by Schechter Manhattan's Head of School
Dr. Steven C. Lorch

October 2007 / Tishrei - Cheshvan 5768

Vol. 1 Number 2

Highlights

October 22-25 -

Fourth and Sixth graders travel to the Berkshires for Schechter Manhattan's annual TEVA environmental education retreat.

October 26 -

The school-wide Penny Harvest kicks off: the Third Grade class organizes the collection of thousands of pennies as part of a *tzedakah* (charitable giving) program. When the "harvest" is complete, they will hold roundtable discussions and decide which causes to support with the funds raised.

November 2 -

All grades gather together, within their respective divisions (Lower Elementary, Upper Elementary, and Middle School), for the year's first Divisional *Kabbalat Shabbat* ceremony.

November 9 -

The Middle School engages in a special program,

A Dream Deferred

by: Dr. Steven C. Lorch

Twenty-five years ago, I devised what I thought was a promising programming idea: an event in the days preceding Yom Kippur at which students would lead a s'lichot service. I imagined that this service would motivate them, first, to have a vivid, visceral sense of the reverence associated with the Days of Awe and, as well, to engage in hard, serious reflection on the nature of t'shuvah, personal change, and forgiveness.



I have a distinct recollection of this moment of clarity; I even remember the circumstances that triggered my thinking and led to the brain storm. In my youth, in my home synagogue, I had grown up with a s'lichot service that was both hauntingly beautiful and religiously inspiring. Even though the first s'lichot service of the season on the Saturday night preceding Rosh Hashanah was the featured event, it was actually the daily services over the following two weeks, culminating in Yom Kippur, that made the most indelible impression on me. These services were led by the rabbi - not by congregants who usually led daily services, and not even by the cantor, who led that first s'lichot, as he did all of the most important services throughout the year.

One of the elements that, to me as a teenager and a twenty-something, made a deep impression was the rabbi's simple, straightforward, but precise method of singing the service. Unpretentious, unembellished by cantorial ornamentation, it was nevertheless so palpably accurate and true to the liturgy that even the relatively uninitiated could sense its authenticity. The other factor was the rabbi's intense focus on the meaning of the words and the significance of the moment, so imbued with deep feeling

commemorating the 69th anniversary of

Kristallnacht, as part of its Holocaust curriculum.



For more information about any of these events please contact Lisa Stubbs at communications@sssm.org

Middle School Open House

for prospective parents and students

November 7th,
9:00-10:30 AM

Come and sit in on Middle School classes (Grades 6-8), speak to teachers, students and educational leaders. Experience the warm, nurturing and rigorous educational environment at Schechter Manhattan.

Reservations are required

For more information contact Dr. Cindy Dolgin, Director of Admissions and Placement
212.427.9500 ext. 23
admissions@sssm.org

Living Room Chats

for prospective parents

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Join Schechter Manhattan parents, in

that it swept the congregation up in its forcefulness.

Then I moved away and, for many years, was no longer able to experience my rabbi's daily s'lichot rendition. After a few years, I found myself in Philadelphia, where the daily s'lichot were led not by the rabbi (who sang in an unfortunate monotone) or the cantor (there was none), but by a congregant. The congregant who led the service most often did so in a manner that struck me as the antithesis of my rabbi's style: melodically imprecise, oversimplified, and often downright incorrect; harsh and unpleasant in vocal quality; shaky in pronunciation; and devoid of expressiveness in phrasing.

Needless to say, I found the experience deeply unsatisfying and frustrating, not only because of its lack of aesthetic appeal, but also, and perhaps especially because, without the inspiration of s'lichot services to propel my reflections, I found myself entering Yom Kippur spiritually unsettled. Out of this distress came the impetus to develop for my school a s'lichot program that would incorporate the most salient features of my most fondly remembered s'lichot experiences. If, I reasoned, I am unable to find a satisfying pre-Yom Kippur regimen here, my students must be unable even to imagine what a spiritually fulfilling Yom Kippur might feel like. I therefore resolved to help them discover in s'lichot the wellspring of religious fervor and self-examination that I had once taken for granted and now longed for.

For one reason or another, my dream went unfulfilled through my years as head of three schools. Either my colleagues on the faculty didn't share my appreciation of the power of classical liturgy to appeal to young people and influence them, or else the parent community harbored a deep suspicion of the school's religious agenda and motives, or else the role of schools was limited in its particular society to formal education, while informal activities were assigned to community centers, youth movements, and other institutions.

At Schechter Manhattan, I have bided my time, first, until students were old enough to pull off such an ambitious program and mature enough to benefit from it, and second, until the basic middle school program was well enough established that my colleagues and I could afford to devote our energies to developing an authentic and moving s'lichot experience. This year, the opportunity presented itself, and I jumped at it.

With the help of our Middle School Head Ben Mann and Middle School Student Activities Coordinator Amanda Pogany, and all the middle school Jewish Studies teachers, the students began to prepare for the s'lichot program by studying the background, origins, and meaning of parts of the s'lichot liturgy. They revisited the extraordinary midrash from Talmud Rosh Hashanah that describes God as having wrapped God's self in a talit and demonstrated to Moshe how to lead the congregation in s'lichot prayers. They examined closely the text of the Thirteen Divine

their homes.

Talk with current parents and the head of school Dr. Steven Lorch.

Meet fellow prospective families.

Here is your opportunity to ask questions, hear other people's views and ideas, or just sit back and listen in the comfort of an intimate, informal setting.

*

You can choose one of the following dates and locations:

Monday, Nov. 12:
Downtown

Wednesday, Nov. 14:
Upper West Side

Tuesday, Nov. 20:
Washington Heights

Tuesday, Nov. 27:
Upper East Side

To make a reservation contact Dr. Cindy Dolgin,
Director of Admissions and
Placement
212.427.9500 ext. 23
admissions@sssm.org

Attributes and of the Ashamnu confession. Finally, they traced the sources of s'lichot to feelings of vulnerability in the Bible (B'midbar and M'lachim) and to a precedent in the Mishnah (Ta'anit) during a time of drought.

Some of the students also planned an activity that would lead into the s'lichot service and help their schoolmates get into the mindset of t'shuvah. Using a feature film as a trigger, they prepared to lead a discussion that would explore the s'lichot themes in the movie and then relate them to the Yom Kippur season. All of the students learned the audience-participation parts of the service, while many of them studied the words and melodies of the entire s'lichot liturgy and practiced leading the service.

On Thursday evening, September 20, on the eve of Yom Kippur, the moment of truth came, as the students and teachers of the middle school gathered for the s'lichot program. Together, they viewed a movie, "Regarding Henry," in which the protagonist is radically transformed in the aftermath of a major life crisis. Then, in their student-led discussion groups, they earnestly and, at times, heatedly discussed Henry's change process and related it to self-reflection, t'shuvah, and forgiveness on Yom Kippur. Next, they gathered, with their teachers and parents, for the s'lichot service which they were about to lead.

The atmosphere in the room was hushed, special, even reverential. Students appreciated the adult character of the service and recognized the high responsibility with which they had been entrusted: to lead and participate with competence and authenticity, as well as to establish and maintain an atmosphere of serious engagement and focused purposefulness.

The students exceeded themselves. S'lichot were recited and sung with great care and feeling, producing, for many students, teachers, and parents alike, charged moments of meaning and reflection.

Here is how some of the students described their experience;

"In the beginning, I didn't want to attend the s'lichot service. / I arrived to the service narrow-minded, thinking that it would be a horrible event. As the movie progressed it got fascinating. I enjoyed the movie and understood the meaning of s'lichot according to the movie. After the movie, we started the prayers. The melodies gave a strong vibe of meaning and actual repentance." (Kim A., Grade 8)

"I felt included and glad for it. It felt fair, and good to be allowed to be an important part of a Jewish holiday. I was happy to be part of it." (Eli K., Grade 8)

"The s'lichot service enhanced my Yamim Noraim because some of the services on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are similar to s'lichot. Because the Yamim Noraim only come once a year, it is

hard to learn all of the t'filot, so learning s'lichot helped me follow the t'filot on Yom Kippur." (Avital M., Grade 8)

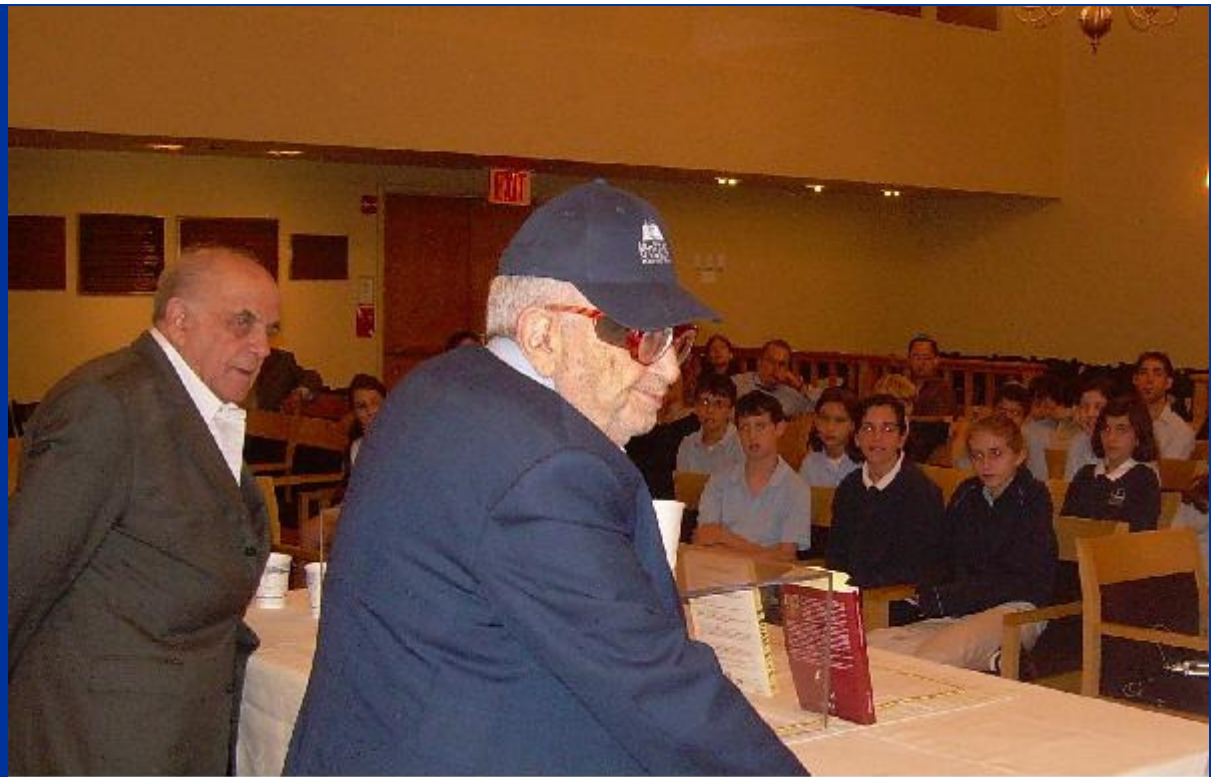
"Our middle school s'lichot service was meaningful because it made me think about repentance. I thought the movie was enjoyable and I could see how it relates to Yom Kippur. Since I was a participant of the t'filah, when the time came for my t'filah, I was anxious to sing and partake in my special part. During the service on Yom Kippur, I recognized my singing part. It is a unique activity which most schools do not do." (Lois W., Grade 8)

Twenty-five years later, it appears as though my intuitions about this program have been validated. I am profoundly grateful to have had the opportunity, at long last, to realize a dream deferred.

Clips From the Classroom



The Schechter Manhattan Middle School soccer team (blue) takes on Manhattan Country School (red) in a close game. In the final minutes of the last quarter Manhattan Country School scores a goal, squeaking past Schechter Manhattan for a 5-4 win. Despite this setback, Coach Mitch Sadovsky assures parents and fans that there is "a victory on the horizon" for Schechter's spirited, young team!



Holocaust survivors and friends, Chaim Ajzen (left) and Henry Orenstein (right) bring history to life, sharing their incredible stories of courage, ingenuity and perseverance with Schechter Manhattan's Middle School students, during a special visit to the school this past September.

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