



## Conservative movement hosts educators' confab

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About 70 educators gathered at Congregation Neve Shalom in Metuchen for the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism's first conference on synagogue education, held June 10. Many attended a class on teaching *tefila* given by Alex Weinberg, author of the Siddur Sim Shalom Remix 2.0 curriculum. In the class are, from left, front row, Nancy Parkes, education director of Temple Israel Center in White Plains; Sherri Morris, director of education at Congregation Beth El in South Orange; and Cantor Larry Brandspiegel of Beth El Synagogue in East Windsor; between Morris and Brandspiegel is Cantor Sheldon Levin of Neve Shalom.

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by [Johanna Ginsberg](#)

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What does a glow stick have to do with learning to daven? Which of the multiple intelligences does a Passover seder address? And why should high school students put Abraham on trial for the attempted murder of Isaac?

The answers are:

1. Just about everything, according to Alex Weinberg, author of the Siddur Sim Shalom Remix 2.0 curriculum.
2. All of them, according to Suzi Adelson Wainer, director of professional practice at the Partnership for Jewish Learning and Life of United Jewish Communities of MetroWest NJ.
3. It's one of many creative projects that grabs high schoolers' attention and keeps them engaged in Jewish learning, according to Ron Isaacs, rabbi of Temple Sholom in Bridgewater, where he also is a coordinator of the Hebrew high school.

The three educators were among the eight speakers at the Conservative movement's Conference on Synagogue Education held June 10 at Congregation Neve Shalom in Metuchen.

About 70 educators came for the day-long conference sponsored by United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism. It was a first for the Conservative movement's umbrella organization.

"We tried to come up with something that could give the teachers and the principals some in-service [training] — not really filling the total void of CAJE, because I'm not sure anything can, but to try to do this as a service to our congregations and to the neighboring regions," said Michelle Rich, director of education and youth activities for USCJ's New Jersey Region.

CAJE is the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education, which held a national Jewish education conference every summer for 33 years but canceled the 2009 conference due to the economic climate.

The USCJ conference covered tot Shabbats and Hebrew high school and just about everything in between.

"I want people to walk away with new methodologies, new ideas, something to recharge their batteries," said Rich.

Weinberg, a Princeton native who serves as director of congregational education at Chizuk Amuno Congregation in Baltimore, was the clear conference draw. His innovative methods for teaching prayer

are based on experiential learning.

For example, in explaining that glow stick-davening relationship, he said that when he begins a session on the “Yotzer Or” — “Creator of Light” — prayer, he distributes glow sticks to his students and has them identify their own association with light.

“When I do this with kids, they’re lying on their backs, they’re holding their glow sticks over their heads, and there’s a big, long string. They say what their connection to light is and put their glow stick on the string and it’s like a whole starry night,” Weinberg said.



Listening to what Ron Isaacs had to say about starting a Hebrew high school is Gail Buchbinder, religious school director at Temple Beth Ahm-Yisrael in Springfield.



Leah Beker of Temple Beth Shalom in Livingston shows off her glowstick from a session on teaching *tefila*.

He said that when the youngsters get to actually talking about the prayer after that experience, working through the *siddur* text “they have that anchor...to guide them through that discussion.”

The educators walked away wowed by his presentation.

“I came just for him, “ said Leah Beker, director of the religious school at Temple Beth Shalom in Livingston. “We try all the time to add more to our *tefila* curriculum and make it more meaningful and successful, and I know he’s another part of the puzzle that will help with my program.”

Sherri Morris, director of education at Congregation Beth El in South Orange, called the speaker “impressive” and said she plans to adapt Weinberg’s ideas for experiential prayer for a wide community of students at her synagogue.

While some teachers and religious school directors were soaking up what Weinberg had to offer, others were learning in concurrent sessions.

Sam Shapiro from Congregation B’nai Israel in Basking Ridge, just 20 and sporting a baseball cap, was among the younger teachers at the conference. He started his day at a session run by Dr. Shoshana Silberman focusing on how to run great ice breakers at the beginning of class. “I got a great book with a lot of different activities and some good notes on how to start a class off, how to make it active and how to warm kids up with brain teasers to get them interested in a subject, and where to go from there,” he said.

A little later in the day, Isaacs was busy sharing tips for running a successful Hebrew high school. Perhaps his most important tip came when he instructed educators to set a goal — student retention.

Offering the same creative programming each year sets students' expectations and provides the excitement of anticipation, he pointed out.

Meanwhile Wainer taught about multiple intelligences by analyzing the Passover seder — which parts of the ritual involve math, analysis, movement, art, and more.

Some educators attended the conference because they missed CAJE; most, however, said they came to learn.

“You need to take every opportunity to expand whatever knowledge base you have,” said Gail Buchbinder, religious school director at Temple Beth Ahm-Yisrael in Springfield. “These conferences are chock full of those sort of experiences. You see something new in the field, you meet with your colleagues — it's a treat. If you come away with one big idea, it's great. If you get more than that, it's a bonus.”

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