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Letter From the Editor

On Tu B'shvat, I think the ground everywhere in the South was completely frozen. So, how many of you braved the cold – and the chance that it would kill your tree before it had a chance to root?

We did what any plant-loving family would do under extraordinary circumstances and planted an indoor tropical explosion of some of our faves in hope that in a few weeks we could bring them outdoors. At least the house is full of greenery, which overshadows the groundhog's dreary prediction.

We also got busy rounding up hamantaschen recipes so we could keep the oven going and the house toasty warm. I thought I would ask the experts for advice. Cindi Weinstein, who along with Myrna Cohen and Diana Lazar leads a group of sisterhood volunteers at Baron Hirsch, joking relayed the message that, "We use the secret ASBEE recipe. If I shared it, they would have to kill us both!" Take a look at the group baking their secret recipe on page 17. When I asked Beth Sholom and Temple Israel reps they were as tight-lipped as ever. I guess I'm going to try my hand at the one Chef Dovid sent and see how it goes. I'll let you know!

Speaking of hamantaschen, Shoshana Cenker shares some of our community's favorite Purim traditions on page 14.

Join us as we get a closer understanding from the individuals and families who have embraced the traditions and spiritual relationship with Torah and Judaism. Whether it's Orthodox, Conservative or Reform Judaism we will follow their paths in our new series, Chosen Journeys. First up on page 10, meet Theresy and Yirmeyahu Yosef and their three daughters.

Congratulate Memphian Yocheved and Israeli-born Assaf Bendor as they celebrated their December wedding (page 6) at Baron Hirsch. The couple, along with her daughter, Naomi, will make their home in Nevada.

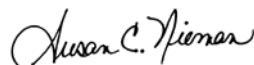
Let's also give a high five to firefighter Haley Levy, whose call to serve others makes everyday an adventure. Read about her extremely challenging career on page 12.

Melinda Lejman shares information about her recent career change and how you might need some guidance when it comes to Therapeutic Massage on page 8.

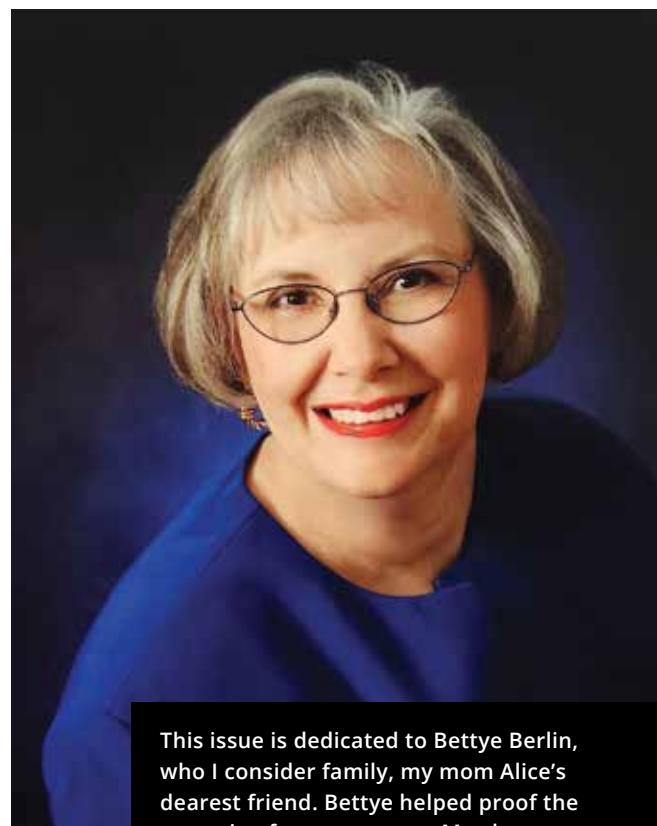
And finally, meet the cutest little pup Minnie on page 16. If that doesn't make you want to go snuggle with a tiny fur baby, I don't know what will!

Hope your year has been off to a great start, and we'll see you again when I hope it's a little warmer as we head into Passover.

Shalom,



Susan C. Nieman – Publisher/Editor



This issue is dedicated to Bettye Berlin, who I consider family, my mom Alice's dearest friend. Bettye helped proof the magazine for many years. May her memory be a blessing.

Contributors



Chef Dovid Cenker is the kitchen manager at Baron Hirsch Synagogue. He has been a caterer with over 30 years of experience in the kosher food industry. He can be reached at dovid@baronhirsch.org 901.683.7485.



Melinda Lejman is a lifelong Memphian and Jew by choice. She and her husband are the proud parents of three children and maintain a lively household of beloved four-legged companions. With a professional background spanning the nonprofit and education sectors, Melinda now brings her experience and compassion to her work as a massage therapist and coach, supporting individuals and groups in cultivating balance, wellness and personal growth.

Deeply committed to animal welfare, she volunteers for local organizations and is the founder of a charitable dog treat company that reflects her passion for giving back to the community.



Shoshana Y. Cenker is a word & grammar nerd with 20+ years in creative services. She's the managing editor of a media publishing firm and runs her freelance communications business, as a content writer, editor, proofreader, copywriter, marketing consultant and wordsmith extraordinaire. She and her three kiddos – twin boys Aiden and Kivi, and daughter Lyla – happily live in her hometown of Memphis. ShoshanaAY@gmail.com

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Publisher/Editor

Susan C. Nieman

Art Director

Dustin Green

Web and Social Media

Rebecca Schudel

Editorial Contributors

Toni Nieman

Advertising Sales Director

Larry Nieman

Chief Financial Officer

Donald Heitner

Administrative Assistant/Subscriptions

Toni Nieman

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Susan Nieman

901.827.7244

susan@jewishscenemagazine.com

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Yocheved and Assaf Bendor

A Celebration of Love, Tradition, & Community: *Yocheved & Assaf Bendor*

— By Shoshana Cenker :: Photos by Eli Ostrow

Surrounded by family, friends, and the warmth of a close-knit community, Yocheved (née Lobo-Hernandez) and Assaf Bendor celebrated their beautiful wedding in December 2025 at Baron Hirsch Congregation (BH) in Memphis.

Their story began through a mutual friend with deep ties to the Memphis Jewish community, who frequently visits family there and served as the bridge that connected Yocheved and Assaf. When the two met in person in Las Vegas, where Assaf lives, they formed an instant connection, which quickly deepened.

When it came time to plan their wedding, the couple took a hands-on approach, shaping nearly every detail. "We had 100% input in the wedding planning," explained Yocheved, "because we did not hire a professional planner."

From start to finish, the day reflected the couple's vision, which was brought to life by a group of incredibly supportive and loving community members. Memphis' *kehilla* (Jewish community) showed up in ways that made the wedding not just an event, but a shared experience – one rooted in connection, tradition, and collective happiness.

Sarah Ardestani designed stunning light blue and gold décor, accented with gorgeous flowers and candles. The sanctuary was lined with dozens of candles, transforming the space into a setting that felt especially elegant. Yocheved's sweet daughter, Naomi, walked down the aisle as the ring bearer; close family friend Liora served

Rabbi Joel Finkelstein giving Yocheved a bracha at the Bedeken.





as the flower girl with a little support from Sarit Grunwald; and Assaf's rabbi from Vegas, Rabbi Brochtain, officiated the lovely chuppah as friends and family participated in the brachos, including BH's Rabbi Joel Finkelstein and Rabbi Ian Lichter. Flanked by dear friends Theresy and Yirmeyahu Yosef, Yocheved looked like a dream gliding down the aisle in the wedding dress she borrowed from friend Emily Lennon.

The most meaningful moments for Yocheved came during Kabbalat Panim before the chuppah. She sat hand in hand with women surrounding her as they exchanged brachot and Yocheved intently davened for her friends and family. Guests could certainly feel the profound connection – not just to Assaf, but to generations of tradition and to the community that helped bring Yocheved and Naomi into the kehillah. "I loved seeing my community there celebrating with me," remembers Yocheved. "It was so very special."

After the chuppah ceremony, yichud room, and family photos, the bride and her adoring mother, Glenda Frazier, happily entered the reception area through a tunnel of women awaiting their arrival to kick off the festive reception. The couple chose an unexpected, super-fun rap song as their first dance: OG L'Chaim's "Big Siman Tov." To say the separate men's and women's dance floors were hoppin' is an understatement. The joy was palpable.

Throughout the afternoon and into the evening, Eli Ostrow captured the celebration through his photography. In between dances, BH's Chef Dovid Cenker catered the delicious dinner. And DJ Shane kept the energy flowing all night as guests danced with and for the chosson and kallah, shtick and chair lifting included!

What stands out most for the couple is the spirit that carried their beautiful day. "We especially loved the excitement, the joy, and the genuine love that the community had with planning the wedding, organizing, and ensuring that the day went smoothly," the newlyweds shared.

A native Memphian, Yocheved graduated from the University of Memphis and works as a nurse. Assaf grew up in Israel, later earning his degree from the University of Las Vegas, and now works in property management. Today, the couple makes their home together with Naomi in Nevada, blending their backgrounds, cultures, and shared values into a life they're building side by side.

Shortly after the wedding, the family embarked on a lovely honeymoon. "We took a road trip to Montana and Wyoming," shared Assaf, "and making Shabbat at Chabad of Wyoming was amazing!"

As they begin married life together in Nevada, Yocheved and Assaf carry with them all the way to the west coast the love, tradition, and community spirit of Memphis – a foundation that will continue to guide their family wherever life takes them. "We're so grateful to Hashem," added Yocheved, "and we appreciate this beautiful opportunity to learn and grow together in Torah and mitzvot."

Mazel tov!



Assaf, Yocheved and Naomi on their Montana honeymoon.



Beyond the Spa: The Therapeutic Value of Massage

By Melinda Lejman, Licensed Massage Therapist

When you think about the word massage, you may imagine dim lighting, calming music, and the soothing scent of aromatherapy. Massage therapy is often associated with luxury — a special treat reserved for vacations, spa days, or rare moments of relaxation. Many people see it as an indulgence: an hour of stress relief before returning to the demands of everyday life.

While massage certainly can be relaxing, its benefits go far beyond simple comfort. In recent years, massage therapy has become increasingly recognized not just as a luxury, but as a legitimate and effective form of therapeutic care. Research confirms that regular massage can play an important role in supporting both physical and emotional well-being. Studies have shown that therapeutic massage may help reduce cortisol levels, lower blood pressure, improve circulation, and even support immune function by increasing white blood cell count.

For individuals living with chronic pain, tension, or stress-related conditions, massage therapy can be a valuable part of an overall wellness routine. It may help ease muscle soreness, reduce inflammation, improve range of motion, and promote better sleep. Just as importantly, massage provides an opportunity to slow down, reconnect with the body, and address discomfort before it becomes more serious.

One reason massage therapy is so effective is that it includes a wide range of modalities, each designed to meet different needs. Swedish massage is one

of the most well-known approaches and is often recommended for relaxation and general muscle relief. Deep tissue massage targets deeper layers of muscle and connective tissue and can be especially helpful for chronic pain or tightness. Lymphatic massage focuses on encouraging fluid movement and reducing swelling, while Thai massage combines stretching and pressure techniques to improve mobility and energy flow.

With so many options available, you may wonder how to determine which type of massage will provide you with the most benefit. The key is finding a knowledgeable therapist who understands multiple approaches and can tailor treatment to your individual goals.

If you are new to massage therapy, starting with Swedish or general therapeutic massage can be a great introduction. These sessions provide full-body support while allowing you and your therapist to identify areas of tension or concern. More experienced clients — especially those managing chronic pain, injury recovery, or specific conditions — may want to seek out therapists with

specialized training in areas such as prenatal, medical, or sports massage.

One of the most important factors in a positive experience is choosing a licensed massage therapist. Licensed professionals have completed the required education and training and are held to the state's standards of practice. A therapist should display their license in their office and be listed on the state licensing website.

Unfortunately, many people have had the experience of leaving a session feeling disappointed or unheard. If you are unsure where to begin, asking a trusted friend or family member for a recommendation is often one of the best ways to find a therapist who is skilled, professional, and attentive.

Massage therapy is not just about relaxation — it is about investing in your long-term health and wellness.

As the saying goes, "If you don't make time for your wellness, you will be forced to make time for your illness."

For more information (and the Jewish Scene discount), email Melinda at melindalejmanlmt@gmail.com or visit her website at melindalejman.com.



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Theresy and
Yirmeyahu Yosef

Finding Home in Judaism Through Conversion The Yosef Family

By Shoshana Cenker

According to *halacha* (Jewish law), once someone has completed a conversion — including acceptance of mitzvot, immersion in a mikveh, and, for men, circumcision — they are as fully Jewish as someone born Jewish. What's more, the Torah repeatedly commands love and respect for the *ger tzedek* (righteous convert), even more than for a person born Jewish, in some cases.

Sources, like the Talmud (Bava Metzia 59b) and Midrash, praise converts for their courage and spiritual integrity. They left behind their previous faith or culture purely out of love for Hashem and Torah. The Midrash (Ruth Rabbah 2:12) calls them beloved like the High Priest.

In this new series, "Chosen Journeys," we're exploring the path of conversion from several recent converts to Judaism. First up, the Yosef family.

They Asked, They Learned, They Stayed: The Yosefs' Path to Judaism

Back in 2016, Yirmeyahu Yosef, originally from Illinois, was enjoying watching the Cubs win the World Series with his cousin. At the time, Yirmeyahu was very involved in Christianity, including leading Christian marriage groups. He and his cousin previously had disagreements over religion: antisemitism, strong language in the Bible, Jesus was Jewish, and more.

Jump to 2018, when Yirmeyahu, now

living in Memphis, was at a cousin's wedding in Chicago. He stayed with family who called themselves "Hebrews." Yirmeyahu soon learned they were Messianic, and he began researching what Hebrew meant, conversion info, Torah, and many things he hadn't learned before. "This was interesting — comparing and contrasting the Christian Bible and the Tanach," he remembers. "I also did a DNA test, thinking I might have Moroccan or Ethiopian Jewish connections — and I did in fact discover that ancestry."

As Yirmeyahu learned about Judaism, he shared his thoughts about the faith and conversion with his wife, Theresy, who was hesitant, at first. Like Yermiyahu, Theresy, of Haitian decent, had grown up in the church. Her dad was a global Baptist missionary.

But as they both continued learning, the path became clear. "Torah stories make more sense," they remembered thinking. They stopped attending church but continued sending their three young daughters to give them religious experience.

The Yosef family officially left Christianity to join a Messianic congregation in Jackson, Tenn., and Brit Hadasha in Memphis, briefly. "Those places gave us lots of Torah but kept the New Testament ideology that we thought was the foundation," said Theresy. "We were doing what we thought was Shabbat and learning a lot — we were introduced



The Yosef's Jewish wedding.

to the oral Torah, Talmud, Midrash, and some familiar stories — all of which gave us a fuller picture of the Bible."

Then, conflict crept in. "During Messianic services, we were singing worship songs geared to Jesus; that's who we were elevating," explained Yirmeyahu. "I noticed I was replacing his name with what I thought was Hashem's name — Jesus isn't god, but we need him for salvation? I felt conflicted about where I was putting my attention and who I was talking to — he's not god but still an important piece? If Hashem is the only G-d, why do we need Jesus? Why are we singing and praying to Jesus?"

So, they brought their myriad of questions to the Messianic leaders, who said Jesus is divine. "But I realized angels are divine. And for example, Jews don't say Rabbi Soloveichik is G-d — they pray in his merit, so G-d hears our prayers. They



The Yosefs' daughters, Grace, Chloe and Abigail.

don't pray to the Rebbe," noted Yirmeyahu of his moment of clarity. "We then went systematically through our questions of the Christian Bible, principles of faith, claims of the holy spirit, trinity, vicarious atonement, and human sacrifice — coming to the conclusion that none are true."

The Yosefs made some remarkable observations. Like Moshe makes clear — and later prophets like Ezekiel reaffirm — a father cannot atone for the sins of his kids; we are responsible and must carry that weight ourselves. But they'd been taught that Jesus atones for Christians' sins of today, yesterday, and tomorrow, essentially letting people do whatever they want, then pray it away on Sunday. "We saw friends who'd rely on Jesus' sacrifice to get them off the hook when they made bad decisions in life," shared Theresy.

"Blame is put on the Jewish people, not Christians, in the King James Bible," added Yermiyahu. "We decided to put Jesus on the stand to see if this works. We compared and contrasted the Christian Bible with the Tanach; we watched videos about missionaries and why some Jews believe in Jesus; we read articles; we found Christian translations and passages that were inconsistent and deliberately changed the wording from Jewish verses, which is worse than misinterpreting — the list of inaccuracies and problems we came across were endless. We had been taught to assume that Christian ministers were speaking the truth. But after our research, everything around Jesus fell apart for us."

The Yosefs were also drawn to an aspect that is unique to Judaism: asking questions and appropriate debates. "In churches, we're taught that Christianity is infallible, that if we don't believe, we're going to hell, your soul is lost," said the Yosefs. "But in Gamara and learning the Tanach, rabbis even say they struggle with certain issues or mishnahs or verses. Hearing them say struggling with religion is ok, that it's allowed, that doubt is ok, and we should talk about it all and raise questions — we love that about Judaism."

By summer 2023, the Yosefs had decided: They wanted community and to convert to Orthodox Judaism. "Orthodox is the closest expression of what we read

in the Torah and what they did back in Biblical days," explained Theresy of their choice. "If Moses was here today, he's coming to an Orthodox *shul* (synagogue)."

The Yosefs looked up Orthodox synagogues in Memphis and reached out to all of them. They were turned away three times, per Orthodox conversion customs to discourage a prospect. The idea comes from Talmudic precedent (Ruth Rabbah 2:16, Yevamot 47a) to ensure sincerity and commitment. If the person still insists after being turned away, they're considered genuinely devoted to joining the Jewish people. The third time, Yirmeyahu replied to the rabbi, "My soul was at Mt. Sinai, where do I go?"

From there, the Yosefs met with Rabbi Joel Finkelstein: rabbinic scholar at Baron Hirsch Congregation, who served as senior rabbi at Anshei Sphard-Beth El Emeth from 1997–2023 and has led the conversions of dozens of people. After Rabbi Finkelstein understood more about the Yosef's background — and as Black Southerners — he agreed to begin their conversion process, not just joining into promises made to the Jews, but also in persecution. October 7 made the Yosefs even more committed to their choice.

They spent the next year and half learning with Rabbi Finkelstein through the Chicago Rabbinical Council's (CRC) curriculum and on their own: Torah, halacha, Shabbos, kosher, brachas, minor vs. major fasts, Jewish history, and more. So much more. Nealy 20 books, one-on-one learning, videos, studying at home, attending shul, moving inside the *eruv* (boundary of an Orthodox community), and several Zoom meetings with CRC representatives in which the Yosefs were "grilled and tested" on specific sections of their studies.

"We had a lot to get through of this Jewish history and who we're becoming," said Yermiyahu. "From day one to 18 months, our goal was to be able to walk into any shul and blend in. Rabbi Finkelstein really believed in us."

"The questions got more intense as we went along," remembers Theresy. "When we completed our studies and went to the Chicago *beis din* (rabbinical court) for our final step, it was intimidating in person. Three rabbis asking us and our three daughters serious questions. It was intense. Plus, we had to read Hebrew to them. We had given our two older girls the choice to convert or not, and they chose to join. Our Jewish community in Memphis helped the girls throughout the process — they weren't used to asking questions about religion, they had to adjust their mindset. Our daughters were interested and courageous at the *beis din*, they did great, we're very proud of them."

When their conversion was finalized in Chicago, a weight was lifted off the Yosefs. A mix of emotions flooded in as they remembered the journey they'd taken to get here — the emotional roller coaster, knowing deep down this was meant for them, learning how to ask questions, constant studying, worries about properly keeping kosher, mikvah laws, all the things.

"We're so glad to be included in the Jewish faith as Jews, with our friends now able to come eat at our kosher, shomer Shabbos house," said Theresy. "It took a while to settle in: 'Oh my gosh, I'm Jewish, every action I do counts, and it matters — we're not just practicing anymore, we're doing the things.' Before Judaism, my relationship with G-d was special and important, but now it's at a new special level — I'm not just a random person, I'm part of the story of the Jewish people. It's surreal. I'm so happy to be in this environment that brought us in, and now we're part of that collective. I'm very aware of my actions. Everything matters at a different level. It's a weighty responsibility that feels good. We plan to continue learning as we grow in this community. I now feel settled."

"Rabbi Finkelstein was amazing," Yirmeyahu said with a giant, genuine smile. "I felt like I could breathe, we're here, we made it. After I dipped in the mikvah and it was official, I was very emotional when I wrapped tefillin and was counted as part of a minyan for the first time."

Growing up as a Black kid in a small town with poor people, I sounded white — I was never Black enough for Black kids, obviously not white, too liberal for Christianity, too radical for a liberal church, I never fit in. In Judaism, I fit. I feel like I've been a Jew for 50 years."

In their travels since converting, the Yosefs have been welcomed by other Jewish communities, including Toronto. They've been offered shomer Shabbos housing and kosher meals. The Memphis community embraced them from the very beginning and helped plan the Yosef's beautiful Jewish wedding. "They've been friendly, warm, and welcoming," Theresy said with sincerity. "We've been treated like real people and didn't ever feel like we were walking on eggshells."

"At Baron Hirsch, we all have different life experiences, and we can all still be part of the tribe here. There's no, 'You're too this or too that,'" Yirmeyahu added. "You're just a *Yid* (Jew)."

As the Yosefs take on Ashkenazi *minhagim* (customs) and discover new traditions for their family, like delicious Haitian Shabbat meals with "soul food," they are resolutely decisive on one main idea: "Judaism is 100% the right path for us."



Haley on the scene of an incident.

Answering the Call: Jewish Female Firefighter Finds Purpose

By Shoshana Cenker

On a typical morning, while much of Memphis is still waking up, Hayley Levy is already at work shortly after 6 a.m.: readying her gear, swapping radio batteries, scanning equipment for damage, reviewing previous calls, preparing for whatever the next 24 hours might bring, and more. Assigned to one of the busiest stations in the Bluff City, Hayley is a firefighter and advanced EMT with the Memphis Fire Department (MFD), stationed downtown where the calls rarely slow down.

“It’s hard to predict any day,” she said. “I can run fires, trauma calls, or spend time helping someone who’s fallen and needs assistance. Every shift is different.”

Growing up in East Memphis, Hayley’s parents, Julie and Marshall Levy, raised her and her three sisters with important life lessons. “They really instilled in us the value of putting all our effort into what we’re doing, making sure we’re focused on our goals, earning what we’ve been given, and being grateful for what we have.”

Hayley attended the Memphis Jewish Community Center for preschool, then the Margolin Hebrew Academy before transitioning to public school, then earned a bachelor’s degree in anthropology from Florida Atlantic University.

At first glance, anthropology and firefighting may seem like unrelated paths. Turns out, they’re actually quite fitting. “Anthropology is the study of people — humans, civilizations, cultures, societies, and how we function together,” she explained. “Working within our communities, I see firsthand how our cultures mesh together, and how we work together from all walks of life. In the end, we all need each other to function as a society and move forward, no matter how different we are.”

When Hayley told her parents she was leaving her credit union job to join MFD’s Training Academy, the reaction was, well, mixed. At first, there was disbelief. As they learned more, they came around.

“Dad told me he wasn’t surprised, because I’d always liked helping people,” she remembered. “I was a lifeguard, and I really



enjoy being of help to people. Once my parents realized I was serious, they were supportive — maybe a little scared — but supportive.”

Hayley began the fire academy in February 2024, graduated in September 2024, and is now based at Station 5, 1st Battalion, downtown. She works brutal 24-hour shifts, which include countless medical trauma calls, fires, and ambulance duty. Fires can take hours to manage. Downtime is limited. Hayley loves it all.

“Having such a direct impact on my community makes me the proudest,” she said with her beaming smile. “We’re first in for downtown, at the high-rises, the jail, the hospitals. We go to surrounding areas too. I spend a lot of time seeing all parts of the city. It’s intense but fun.”

Hayley acknowledges that her job comes with challenges. Firefighting remains a male-dominated field. That can, at times, lead to women firefighters not being taken seriously. “I’m really



fortunate that my interactions have been welcoming and positive. It's very family-oriented here," she says of her gracious colleagues. "And, we get really difficult emergency medical calls that can change your perspective. MFD is very good about making sure we have support resources. Some firefighters have been at our station 25-plus years, so they have really good perspectives for us."

What surprised her most, though, is how she's stepped up to the tough aspects of the role. "I've challenged myself in ways I never thought I could," she said. "Three years ago, I would've laughed if someone told me I'd make it through the academy as a recruit. I've surpassed my own expectations, and I'm still growing."

When she's off duty, Hayley prioritizes rest and the simple rhythms of everyday life. "For the most part," she says, "it's pretty easy to separate myself from the intensity." After a good full day of sleep, she'll spend her days off working out, seeing friends, watching movies, tidying up her home, loving on her pet cats, visiting her parents, and connecting with the Jewish community.

That community includes Baron Hirsch Congregation, where she attends synagogue when her schedule allows. "Seeing everyone there matters," she said. "I know I have them for support."

As a Jewish woman, with type 1 diabetes, in the fire department, Hayley's found her identity to be more of a conversation starter than a barrier. Many of her station colleagues had never met a Jew. Haley greeted their curiosity with openness and respect.

"They ask questions, which I welcome. They want to understand," she said. "After October 7, I actually felt incredibly supported. I've never felt safer as a Jew than I do being a firefighter in Memphis because they're all very supportive."

Hayley's sense of purpose extended beyond Memphis. In January, she spent a month in Israel, volunteering on an ambulance through a Masa Israel Journey program, stationed in Tel Aviv. "Being a firefighter in Memphis inspired me to do more. I thought, 'What can I do with my skills that I've been taught by Memphis Fire?'" she explained. "Everyone, including my chiefs, was really supportive."

In addition to her tremendous accomplishments, Hayley hopes her story resonates with others, especially young Jewish girls. "Growing up, I didn't see many career examples outside a few traditional paths," she said. "I want girls to look at me in my gear and think, 'I can do that, too. I can have a positive impact.'"

Though literally saving lives, Hayley admits she sometimes feels uncomfortable when she's thanked for her service. "I'm just doing my job," she said humbly. Still, her calm, capable, somewhat goofy and quietly determined demeanor tells a larger story. It's one of service, resilience, and the many ways Jewish women continue to shape and protect the communities they love. Stay safe, Hayley!



As a woman and a Jew, Haley feels safe and supported by her colleagues.



Academy graduation.



The Cenker's Roaring '20s matching shalach manos.

From Megillah to Mishloach Manot, the Magic of Purim Delights All

By Shoshana Cenker

Purim arrives every year like a burst of confetti: boisterous and joyful. After months of serious holidays of introspection, fasting, and long *davening* (praying), Purim gives us permission to laugh out loud, rock amazing costumes, eat too many hamentashen, and lean into a sort of holy silliness.

For many of us, that's exactly the point. "The ability to be creative and have fun, as my day-to-day life doesn't lend itself to much creativity," is how Shoshi Ryp conveys why Purim feels like oxygen after holding our breath. There's something deeply freeing about a holiday that insists joy is a mitzvah, similar to happiness on Sukkot.

Of course, under the masks and *graggers* (noisemakers), Purim is rich with structure and meaning. According to *halacha* (Jewish law), the day revolves around four core mitzvot: hearing the Megillah, giving *mishloach manot* (snack gift bags), giving *matanot la'evyonim* (gifts to the poor), and enjoying a festive meal.

The Megillah – Book of Esther – is read twice: once at night and once the next morning. It's critical to hear every

word precisely to fulfill the mitzvah of Megillah, so the room is eerily silent until... boos erupt at the mention of Haman's name, turning hushed participation into an animated space. "My dad played Haman one year during Purim," recalled Annie Harlow. "He came onstage and everyone booed him! I always think of this during Purim." The noise, the laughter, the drama all reinforce the story's central theme: Evil doesn't get the last word.

Then there's *mishloach manot*, exchanging small food packages, filling neighborhoods with movement and excitement. If you've been in a Jewish community on Purim day, surely you've noticed cars decked out in balloons and streamers and kids on bikes rushing to deliver the goodies. "Trying to think of themes for *mishloach manot* and the simcha that's floating in the air" are Leslee Morris' favorite parts of the festive holiday. For Chany Fleischhacker, "celebrating with my family," captures it all!

At the heart of Purim is *matanot la'evyonim*'s reminder that we must support others. Our faith teaches us that



Dr. Sherwin Butch Yaffe leining Megillah.

joy is incomplete if it's not shared.

And then there are hamentashen. So many hamentashen. So many tasty filling flavors. Baking them has become its own communal ritual. "Making Hamentasan at Baron Hirsch Congregation with everyone, I feel the love and family of all the women working closely together," shared Marci Platkin. "This makes me so happy – we all work as a team." Hamentashen are also Kathie Fox's favorite, as well as Edie Efron's, who echoed that she loves "making hamentashen with my kiddos," while Matt Timberlake enjoys "making hamentashen (Laura Linder's family recipe) and eating the ones from the [former] ASBEE sisterhood [now from Baron Hirsch]." All wonderful reminders that these moments are often how traditions are passed down.

Costumes, while technically a *minhag* (custom/tradition) rather than a law, may be Purim's most visible expression of enjoyment. "Celebrating with joy and raucous abandon," is Leah Fox-Greenberg's most loved part. "So many



Shoshana and her kids in their Roaring '20s costumes.

of our holidays are praying, thinking, fasting. Anything that lets you dress up in funny costumes... I'm all for!" Alyse Evans agrees, she loves "seeing all the kids dress up and their excitement for the Purim carnival... and the hamentashen!"

Here in Memphis, Purim is a pull-out-all-the-stops event. After Megillah reading, a community block party bursts open with bounce houses and countless food stations, as families wander around in costume. "Going around the neighborhood and visiting all the families' booths," is Kivi Cenker's favorite. "Our community's huge block party is always awesome," added Aiden Cenker, who also loves getting *shalach manos*. Lyla Cenker enjoys "the party at shul after the nighttime Megillah reading and leining for the women's Megillah reading."

I love a fun costume with matching *shalach manos*. Most special, though, is leining alongside my daughter, Lyla, with a fabulous group of women for our shul's women's Megillah reading. Lyla and I were both taught by my dad, her Zaydie Butch Yaffe, a master Ba'al Koreh and Ba'al Tefillah who's known for leining Megillah in a clown costume, tzitzit included!

Purim is not a Yom Tov – we can work, answer emails, live our regular lives. And yet, the day feels bigger than that. Because Purim teaches a subtle but powerful lesson: Holiness doesn't always announce itself with thunder. Sometimes it shows up disguised... as laughter, as friendship, as baked goods delivered in creative containers.

The Megillah famously never mentions G-d's name. Perhaps that's another takeaway Purim leaves us with: If G-d feels hidden, if life looks like a jumble of chaos and costumes, meaning is still there, waiting to be revealed.

Even the idea of drinking "*ad d'lo yada*" – "until one does not know" or "until one cannot distinguish" – is often misunderstood. While tradition encourages loosening up, Jewish law also emphasizes responsibility and safety. The joy of Purim is meant to elevate us, not undo us. Purim delightfully reminds us that holy joy can be an act of faith. And that sometimes, the most sacred thing we can do is show up for one another – with open hearts and maybe a little extra strawberry filling. *Freilichen Purim!*

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Hollywood Pet Stars

Lia Lansky & Minnie

By Susan C. Nieman

Minnie might be tiny, but she certainly draws big attention. "Everywhere we go, everyone asks to pet her. She puts a huge smile on everyone's face – from young children to older adults!" Lia Lansky shared proudly. "She isn't an official pet therapy dog, but she sure does give a lot of love!"

Lia was inspired to become a first-time pet parent by Boo, a popular Pomeranian on Facebook. Minnie, also a Pomeranian, was named by Lia's son, Ethan – aka Minnie's human brother.

Hollywood Feed is her go-to stop for grooming and special treats. "Minnie loves Melody at Hollywood Feed, and she knows she will get a new bone each time we go," says Lia.

JS: Do you travel with your pet?

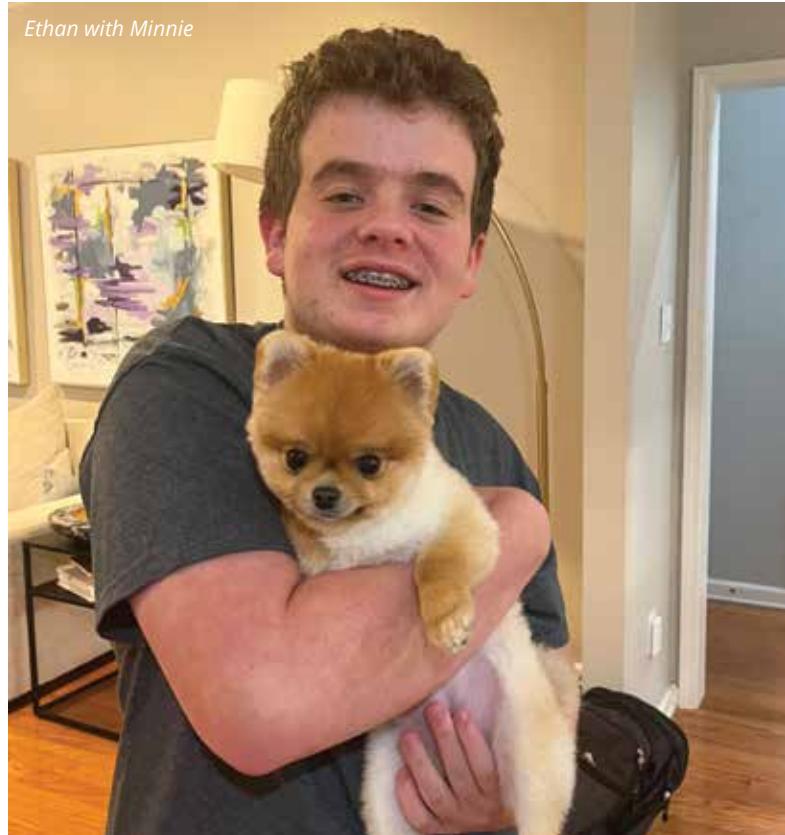
No, she doesn't like cars!

JS: What veterinarian do you use?

McGehee Clinic for Animals

JS: Does your pet go to work with you?

No, I would never get any work done!



Hamantaschen Baking

By Dovid Cenker :: Photos courtesy Baron Hirsch Sisterhood



Yield

3 inch ~ 60

4 inch ~ 45-50

Ingredients:

- 3 large eggs
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup vegetable oil
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup orange juice
- 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons vanilla extract
- 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups all-purpose flour, or as needed
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- 1 cup fruit preserves, any flavor, or chocolate chips

Directions:

- Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Lightly grease cookie sheets.
- Combine eggs and sugar in a large bowl; beat with an electric mixer until smooth and creamy. Stir in oil, orange juice and vanilla. Combine flour and baking powder; stir into batter to form a stiff dough, adding more flour if needed.
- Turn dough out onto a lightly floured surface and roll out into a 1/2-inch thickness. Cut into circles using a cookie cutter or the rim of a drinking glass; place 2 inches apart onto the prepared cookie sheets.
- Spoon about 1 to 2 teaspoons of preserves or chocolate into center of each cookie. Pinch edges to form three corners.
- Bake in the preheated oven until lightly browned, 12 to 15 minutes. Cool on the cookie sheets for 1 minute; transfer to a wire rack to cool completely.

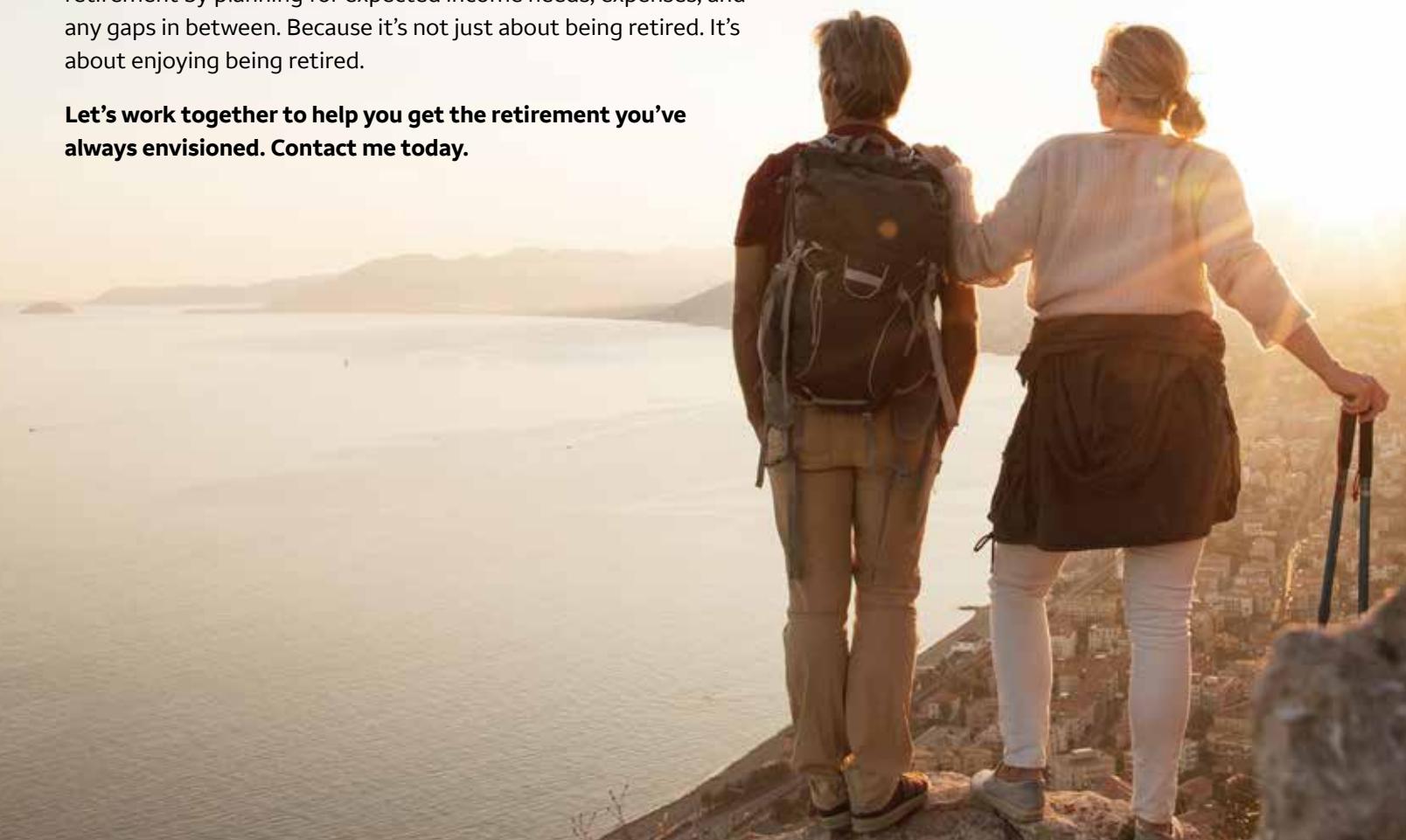
Myrna Cohen (right) and Cindi Weinstein (left), along with Diana Lazar, have co-chaired this event for the last three years at Baron Hirsch.



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