

month,” allowing musicians of all abilities to practice before the next musical Shabbat service.

In addition, MVHC was able to sponsor and host a concert by violinist and founding Klezmatics member Alicia Svigals, bring in visiting musicians to perform and to run workshops, and pay a cantor to teach the volunteer choir new songs for High Holiday services.

“Music is now becoming more of an integral part of the congregation,” says choir and music committee member Michelle Jasny.



When Jewish Family and Children’s Services (JFCS) of San Francisco was looking for synagogues to help Russian Jews resettling in the Bay Area in the late 1980s, Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos Hills, California (www.betham.org) was the logical choice.

The temple’s rabbi at the time, Richard Block, had met refuseniks during his travels to the former Soviet Union and “didn’t want them to get all the way to the United States and then disappear from the Jewish community.”

So, in 1989, JFCS awarded Beth Am a \$20,000 grant to create an émigré program that would provide social services as well as keep the newcomers connected to Judaism.

Beth Am provided free synagogue membership to émigré families and religious school for their children. Worship services were conducted in Russian and English. Jewish weddings and circumcisions were available for those who hadn’t been able to have them in the Soviet Union. (The latter, Rabbi Block admits, weren’t quite as popular as the former.) Other offerings included English as a Second Language classes, job-hunting workshops, one-on-one tutoring in conversational English, and hands-on sessions on check-writing and grocery shopping. Congregants contributed household items, furniture, bicycles, and even medical care. Émigrés were also matched with local Jewish families to accelerate the integration process.

JFCS has been funding a portion of the program (on average, providing \$27,000 annually) ever since.

In the late 1990s as the immigration

wave slowed to a trickle, the newcomers’ needs changed. Most could speak English, had found work, bought homes, and settled into the community. What they lacked was a grounding in Judaism. In response, émigré program director Inna Benjaminson (one of the 3,000+ émigrés who benefited from Beth Am’s initiative) realized that the focus needed to change from social services and integration to deepening immigrants’ Jewish identity and faith. “‘Let my people go’ was the first part,” Benjaminson says. “The second part is ‘let my people know.’”

Guided by Beth Am’s Senior Rabbi Janet Marder, Benjaminson and a staff of devoted Russian-speaking teachers developed programs for every age group. Émigrés can take classes in Jewish philosophy, traditions and values, and history. All educational, Shabbat, and holiday programs, including those for babies and toddlers, are offered in Russian and English. The synagogue’s prayer books and funeral booklet have been translated into Russian with Cyrillic transliterations.

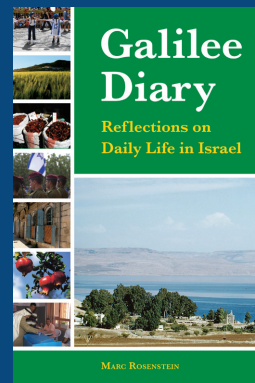
With additional grants from the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco (\$20,000/year for 2009 and 2010) and the San Francisco-based Koret Foundation (\$15,000 for 2010), staff hours have been increased and new programs added, such as Biblical Characters in World Art, taught in Russian for families with children 8–13. (Both Koret and JFCS have helped fund San Francisco’s Congregation Emanu-El émigré program, too.)

Beth Am’s liturgical and educational offerings have reached Jews as far away as the former Soviet Union, where synagogues, hospitals, and even a prison with Jewish inmates looking for a connection to Reform Judaism are using them. And, at home, 200 of the 700 families who have participated in the émigré program are now dues-paying members.

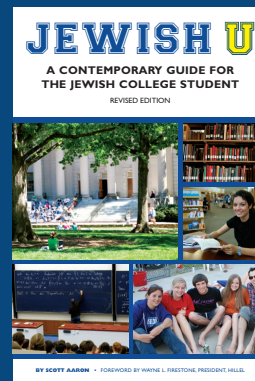


If its Legacy-funded project, the Individualized Jewish Path (IJP), succeeds, “It will change the very nature of what a congregation is about in the 21st century,” says Rabbi Arthur Nemitoff of Temple B’nai Jehudah in Overland

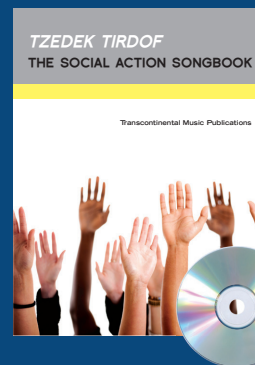
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