

Mentoring Forms Basis for Morei Derech Program

By Elisabeth Wechsler



In its second year, the Morei Derech ("guide") program matches Beth El members with bar/bat mitzvah candidates to help the students understand the process better and to answer any questions they may have. There is no

need to know trope or Hebrew, just a willingness to share the mentor's own bar or bat mitzvah experience.

The commitment involves working with the student three Shabbat mornings for an hour, explained Debra Sagan Massey, Beth El's Director of Education. Last year there were about 10 mentors of all age groups, evenly split between men and women. Depending on when the student's bar/bat mitzvah is scheduled, the assigned mentor will start at the most helpful point in the student's process.

Two Beth El members who joined the Morei Derech program are Jessica Brier and Lisa Feldman, who both highly valued their experiences and recommended that others volunteer. **[See related articles on pages 16 & 20 of the Spring 2012 Builder.]**

Jessica was a fairly new member of Beth El when she signed up last fall and was matched with Laurel Richardson. "I noticed the announcement in the e-Update and wanted to connect with people," she said. What she and Laurel discovered while working together on Laurel's Bat Mitzvah was their shared interest in art. Laurel had painted pairs of endangered species as part of her preparation for Parashat Noach, and Jessica is an assistant curator in the photography department at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA). "Having something else to start talking about helped Laurel get over her shyness," Jessica said.

Their study included going through Laurel's d'rash on the parashat (which she had already drafted), talking about the meaning of the event, discussing any anxieties that Laurel had, and examining the possibilities of future Jewish education. If the mentoring had started earlier, she and Jessica would

have spent more time reading and analyzing the parashat itself. Laurel's Bar Mitzvah was held last October.

"It's very important to be open and honest about the mentor's experience," Jessica said. "It's such a personal experience and it's important to help the student feel comfortable about the whole bat/bat mitzvah process." Jessica is from an interfaith family and had to consciously choose Judaism as her identity and shared her occasional doubts along her personal journey. "I would have loved this kind of mentoring," she said.

"It also helps to like teenagers and be able to relate to them in all experiences at that time in their lives," continued Jessica, who hopes to get a Ph.D. and teach art history in high school. "And, of course, it helps to be patient and a good listener."

Jessica's other activities include playing the cello in the Community Women's Orchestra (Oakland) and writing for Art Practical, an online San Francisco arts magazine, that goes to artists, curators, and scholars.

To sum it up, Jessica said, "The Morei Derech program is so rewarding for so little effort. It's one hour on top of going to the Shabbat morning service and there's almost no preparation."

For more information about the Morei Derech program, or to volunteer, contact Debra Massey at 510-848-3988, ext. 213 or email her at debra@bethelberkeley.org.