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Community's teens unite for Hanukkah

By Deborah Moon

"This is a beautiful moment—this opportunity to gather together teens from all over Portland," said Rabbi Michael Cahana, whose Congregation Beth Israel hosted more than 250 teens at a community-wide Hanukkah celebration Dec. 5.

Portland Area Jewish Educators invited all congregations with high school programs to gather for a special session of Wednesday Night School on the second night of Hanukkah.

The evening included kosher dinner, menorah lighting, singing, prayer service, presentations about the Teen Israel Experience and workshops led by three rabbis.

"Many adults ... should see what we are accomplishing here tonight," said Cahana, addressing the teens packed into Beth Israel's Pollin Chapter after dinner in Goodman Hall. "We are here to recognize our difference, to recognize our similarities. We are about bringing light into a darkened world."

The educators who organized the joint gathering—the first in several years—agreed with Cahana. Education Directors Ben Sandler (Beth Israel), Susan Bernstein (Neveh Shalom) and Dorice Horenstein (Shaarie Torah) met for many months to develop the joint program, with Havurah Education Director Deborah Eisenbach-Budner joining in some planning sessions.

"I am fortunate to have Ben Sandler and Susan Bernstein as colleagues," said Shaarie Torah Education Director Dorice Horenstein. "We wanted to have a shared, positive, Jewish experience for our schools, for our teens, for our community. Kids saw



WEDNESDAY NIGHT SCHOOL students from Congregation Beth Israel, Congregation Neveh Shalom, Congregation Shaarie Torah, Havurah Shalom and other congregations listen to CBI Rabbi Michael Cahana address the first joint high school gathering in many years. WEDNESDAY NIGHT SCHOOL students from Congregation Beth Israel, Congregation Neveh Shalom, Congregation Shaarie Torah, Havurah Shalom and other congregations listen to CBI Rabbi Michael Cahana address the first joint high school gathering in many years. At right, before services and classes, high school students from across the community gathered for a kosher dinner and socializing

Photos by DEBORAH MOON/Jewish Review

other youth they usually do not see, they ran into old friends from a while back, and they even got the opportunity to study with different teachers. I was impressed with the attendance and the respect that was given to everyone."

Bernstein, who likewise praised her colleagues, said promoting tolerance, acceptance of others and awareness of different ways of worshipping in the Jewish community is an important aspect of the joint programming, which the educators plan to continue around other holidays. Just a few days after the program, she said she had already received much positive feedback from parents and students. She also was pleased with the social opportunities provided.

“Our goal was to offer teens a Jewish experience around the holidays where they can broaden their social circles and know other Jewish teens in town,” said Bernstein. “It was a way to connect and build community.”

Sandler said he saw the gathering as an expansion of the youth’s connections. From initial friendships formed in Jewish preschools, to religious school, youth group and synagogue friends, he said a community-wide high school experience is another step of the expansion, which will continue in college. He also praised the learning opportunities of the evening.

“We have these great rabbis in town,” he said. “What a treat for the kids to get to learn from them. And to see how collegial they (the rabbis) are among themselves is also good to see.”

Following dinner and singing, teens gathered in the Pollin Chapel for services and presentations about Portland’s Teen Israel Experience. “For hundreds of years, we talked about the dream of Israel,” Cahana said. “What a miracle it is that we live in a time when we can go if we can find the money.”

Cahana told the high school students that the community’s leaders feel visiting Israel is so important that, “We want to make sure every teen who wants to go can go to Israel.”

With that, Cahana introduced a panel of teens who have participated in Portland’s Teen Israel Experience, a program of the Oregon Board of Rabbis and the Jewish Federation of Greater Portland with additional funding from the Arthur Krichevsky Fund of the Oregon Jewish Community Foundation. The program pays up to 80 percent of the cost of a peer trip to Israel for 11th-graders who meet religious school and service requirements.

Standing on the bimah, the teens briefly shared their varied experiences of hikes, camel rides, dinner in Bedouin tents, Masada and Jerusalem. One woman said when she saw Jewish necklaces on store mannequins, she really realized she was in a Jewish state.

“In America, Jews are always a minority,” said one

young man. “In Israel everybody around you is Jewish. The whole Jewish experience, the immersion, was the thing I found most amazing.” “You have to be there,” concluded another young woman as the teens trooped off the bimah.

After the teens finished selling their peers on the desirability of visiting Israel, community leaders described how TIE can make it a reality. OJCF Executive Director John Moss told the teens: “This is the opportunity of a lifetime. Up to 80 percent of it is paid for by the community. Every year we give 18 to 24 trips. Talk to your own rabbi.”

“This is exclusive to Portland,” Moss said. “You have the good fortune of living in Portland where people want to make sure you have this opportunity.”

JFGP Executive Vice President Charles Schiffman told the teens he hoped they would consider strongly the community’s desire to give them each “the trip of a lifetime.” “Going to Israel empowers you,” he told the teens. “You have joined the strongest force that flows through the history of the world—the Jewish people.”

“When you go to Israel, you see the continuity of 4,000 years of Jewish history; you see places you’ve read about in Torah,” Schiffman said. “Sign up for the Teen Israel Experience.”

The community-wide high school program concluded with three workshops. Cahana explored the issue of publicizing the miracle of Hanukkah versus the First Amendment church-state issue.

Rabbi Bradley Greenstein of Neveh Shalom presented, “Eight Crazy Lights—exploring the essence of Hanukkah miracles.” Shaarie Torah Rabbi Arthur Zuckerman taught a workshop on “Modern Day Maccabees,” bringing to life the commitment of those who dedicate themselves to securing and protecting the land of Israel.

Beth Israel Education Director Ben Sandler said that plans already are under way for more community-wide high school programs—one for Tu B Sh’vat at Neveh Shalom and one in May, possibly at Shaarie Torah.