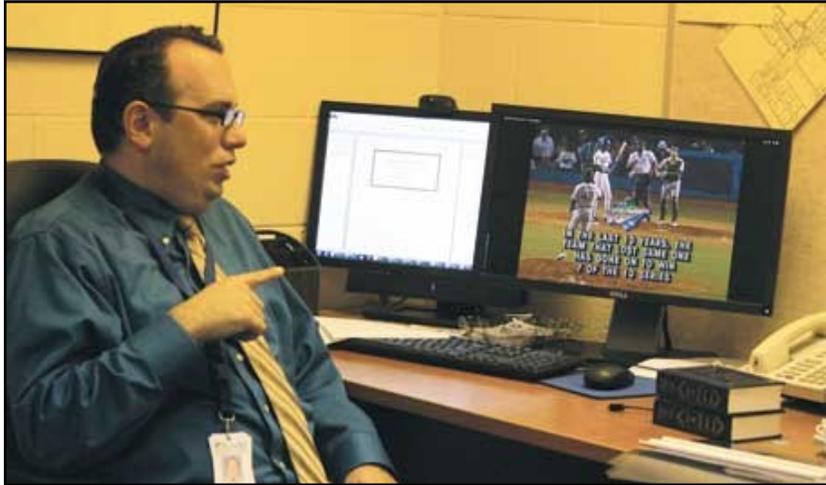


Other paths to God

Schechter students enjoy elective minyanim

Larry Yudelson • Local



The school's rabbi, Fred Elias, shows students a video as part of the Baseball as a Road to God minyan.

The Pew Research Center's study of American Jews, Can baseball be a path to God?

Some students at the Solomon Schechter Day School of Bergen County in New Milford are exploring that possibility.

The school has begun supplementing the school's traditional daily prayer services by offering seventh and eighth graders the chance to explore different avenues of spirituality every Tuesday and Wednesday morning.

The school's rabbi, Fred Elias, leads a group talking about the religious values that can be found in the great moments of baseball.

Students in "Minyan in the Gan" pray in the school's garden when the weather allows it, and they are developing an environmental siddur. In the "Five Senses" minyan, students experience meditation, yoga, and Zumba, and a music minyan has created a school worship band.

The idea is to find "different ways upon which the students can connect things they love to do with tefillah" — that is, with prayer — Rabbi Elias said.

Before the discussions, students pray an abbreviated service, which includes the most important prayers. And on the other three days of the week, the students join for the traditional full morning prayer service. Behind the notion of offering untraditional minyanim is the ancient conflict between structure and spirituality in prayer — or in Hebrew, keva and kavana. "We use the alternative minyanim as a complement to the keva portion," explained Ilan Marans, the school's music and video specialist.

In effect, the school is swapping some of the words of the prayer book for a chance to have students focus on the underlying questions of God and meaning. It turns out that the emphasis on kavanah, spirituality, two days a week pays dividends on the days when the worship fully conforms to the keva, the traditional structure.

"The students show a certain higher level appreciation for the time and space that we are in our regular minyan with the traditional davening," he said. "They feel stronger connections that come out with greater participation," he said. That connection can be seen in an increased desire to take on leadership roles in the regular minyan.

The students also have taken a leadership role in thinking up new ideas for minyanim that are scheduled to start in the spring semester. One new group, which will integrate contemporary fiction, will be called the “ShahaLit” — a play on Shacharit, the name of the morning service, which the school spells without the c — and look at contemporary fiction; the other, “ShahaShir,” will bring in Israeli songs. Mr. Marans leads the musical group, which is learning to play tunes from the liturgy “so that in the end we can bring our Shacharit Live Band to our main minyan” as an accompaniment to the regular service. The group includes a drummer, two saxophone players, a trumpet player, “and a student who doesn’t really have experience playing but plays a hand drum during lessons,” Mr. Marans said. They’ve been working on a tune for the lines at the conclusion of the Shmone Esrei, “practicing making that as perfect as we can,” he said. They’ve also spent time improvising, and talking about how music can communicate in a spiritual way. “Part of the purpose is to allow kids to experiment with how they approach their spirituality in different mediums,” Mr. Marans added.



Abe Teicher plays guitar during Shacharit Live, one of five elective minyanim at the Solomon Schechter Day School of Bergen County.
-PHOTOS COURTESY SSDS OF BERGEN COUNTY

Rabbi Elias’ prayer group, by contrast, is by the book — the book in this case being “Baseball as a Road to God: Seeing Beyond the Game,” which looks at the spiritual dimension of the game. When he picked up the book in June, he wondered whether he could start a minyan around the concept, “where kids look at elements of sacred time and sacred space” as they appear in baseball.

“While the book itself has allusions to Christian faith and belief, it has a number of reflections on Jewish faith and belief as well. It has really engaged some of our kids who are very enthusiastic about sports,” he said.

Last week, one of the authors of the book, Peter J. Schwartz, came to the school to talk about it. The Schechter educators emphasize that all this is a supplement, not a replacement, for traditional services, so don’t go replacing your synagogue membership with season tickets to the Yankees. While gathering together at the baseball field may offer a spiritual experience, Rabbi Elias said, “we also believe in the sanctity of people gathered in the purpose of spirituality. It takes place at a different religious and elevated level in a synagogue community,” he said.