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Feeding A ‘Spiritual Hunger’

Following successful special-needs High Holiday services, Rodeph Sholom offers Chanukah program. [11/23/10](#) | [Sandee Brawarsky](#) | [Special To The Jewish Week](#)

Three weeks before Congregation Rodeph Sholom hosted its first-ever prayer service for families with special needs on the second day of Rosh HaShanah, it had an RSVP list of one. The numbers began to inch upwards the week before, growing to 27.

Then, on the day, synagogue members had to keep bringing out chairs, and they had about 90 people in the room.

“Do I think there’s a spiritual hunger?” Rabbi Robert N. Levine, senior rabbi of Rodeph Sholom asks. “When people are denied something, that’s often where their hunger is deepest.”

Rabbi Benjamin Spratt, assistant rabbi of Rodeph Sholom, who led the Rosh HaShanah service, said that afterwards a number of families came up to offer thanks. Some of the kids asked if they could try to blow shofar and they had an impromptu shofar-blowing workshop. Some of the parents cried as they saw their children touching a shofar for the first time and making sounds. For another participant, a 30-year old, this was the first time he saw an open Torah up close. The mother of a 14-year old said that her son had never been able to attend a service before on the High Holidays.

Following up on the success of its Rosh HaShanah service, the Reform synagogue on the Upper West Side of Manhattan is hosting a Shabbat Chanukah service for families with special needs on Saturday, Dec. 4, from 11 a.m. until noon.

While the synagogue has long had an educational program in its religious school for children with special needs, the Steinman program, it began thinking about trying to meet the spiritual needs of this community over last summer.

“Leviticus 19 says, ‘You shall not put obstacles before the blind,’” Rabbi Levine explains. “Unwittingly, the Jewish community has put a lot of obstacles before people with special needs. There are all kinds of programs in the community, but when it came to spirituality, people didn’t know where to turn.”

“We’re very pleased to be able to provide this service. We’re on a mission to live out our Jewish values,” he says. “We want to make sure that every child is validated, that every child can feel the presence of God, the joy of prayer.”

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The synagogue did extensive preparation for the service, meeting with consultants and developing a "social story." A tool used with special-needs kids, this is an illustrated booklet that provides a simple explanation of everything that will happen, so that the children can familiarize themselves with the service beforehand. Rodeph Sholom also trained volunteers from the congregation.

Rabbi Levine explains that while the congregation plans to go ahead with this separate service four times a year and seek to form a community of people who will pray together, it would also like to sensitize the larger synagogue community to the needs of these families and embrace and include them.

For Chanukah, participants will discuss the story of the holiday and sing special songs, in addition to sharing prayers and the Torah service. Each child will be given a flame-shaped piece of construction paper with Velcro on the back and be invited to affix their flame to a large menorah. In addition, they'll do an actual lighting. The service will be interpreted into sign language, and several families with children who are typically developing will also be there.

"This is what a community-based experience should be like: to really open the doors, so that anyone and everyone can be there, and anyone and everyone can feel blessed by the person standing beside them," Rabbi Spratt says.

"Our overall message is light and hope, combining our light together."

The Dec. 4 service is open to the entire community but RSVPs are essential. If you have questions or to RSVP, please contact: specialneeds@crsnyc.org (<mailto:specialneeds@crsnyc.org>) or (646) 454-3124. Please specify your name, e-mail address and/or phone number, number of people attending, the age of the individual with the special needs and the nature of the special need.

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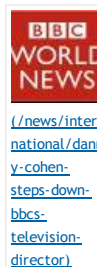
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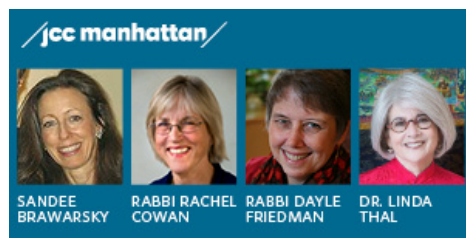


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