The canary in the coal mine

MARLA COHEN

I had gone to Reuben Gittelman Hebrew Day School to give a talk to Fallon Cofield’s 8th grade social studies class. I spoke about my career in newspapers and magazines, gave a short overview of how you structure a news story and then let the students interview one another, write a lead for a profile and then read their work aloud. I enjoyed the experience, watching them try and, to a great extent, succeed, in organizing their thoughts in very little time. They were quite exuberant. Some had trouble settling down. But in the end, they all did.

It was a good exercise. It helped distract me from the nagging thoughts about the meeting that was going to be held that night, just upstairs from the middle school wing where I was teaching, in the school’s gym/banch/room/auditorium. The email from the board of trustees had invited all parents and some community leaders to a meeting to keep them “apprised of the school’s future.”

Which, of course, meant that it did not have one.

Virginia Feldman stood solitary in front of a crowd of about 200 and announced that after 40 years of educating Jewish students in Rockland County the school would close in June.

It was crushing news. Both my children are Gittelman graduates. The school provided them with a sense of community, great friends, and a strong background in Hebrew and Jewish studies. For them, the school was a home away from home.

Beyond the school family though, Gittelman’s death portends something more. It confirms all our fears that Jewish life in Rockland County was a home away from home.

Non-Orthodox Judaism here is following some sort of national trend. We’ve heard rumblings of it for a while.

There was the merging of Congregation Sons of Israel in Suffern and Pomona Jewish Center, two Conservative congregations. The Reform Temple of Suffern marched its Torahs to New Jersey and closed shop. The JCC of Spring Valley became a fish out of water on Route 45, surrounded by an ever-increasing black hat population, and finally closed.

Mesorah Jewish Center and Congregation Shaarey T’filoh, traditional shuls both, merged and became Shaarey Israel.

The surveys say younger Jews — as do younger Americans in general — want to bowl alone. They have little use for the institutions that previously generations felt obligated to support. They aren’t connected to Israel in the same way as their elders; they don’t find communal life compelling, or consider it too expensive, or worse, both.

Those of us who remain are starting to wonder for how much longer.

All our organizations and institutions, the Jewish Federation of Rockland County, our synagogues, our Holocaust Museum & Study Center, our Jewish Family Service, this newspaper, the local Hillel, our beautiful Rockland Jewish Community Campus, are all in danger.

The loss of Gittelman throws this into stark contrast. The synagogue closures and mergers certainly heralded this. But there was only one Conservative day school and now it’s on the way out. True, a new school, the Rockland Jewish Academy is trying to start in its place, but unless we all begin to do something different, it will have as tough a time as Reuben Gittelman.

As if on cue, New City Jewish Center, my shul, held its Kallah Weekend shortly after the RGHDS announcement, where sociologist Samuel Heilman held forth as scholar-in-residence. He holds the Harold Proshansky Chair in Jewish Studies at the Graduate Center and is Distinguished Professor of Sociology at Queens College of the City University of New York. The author of 11 books, his most recent, “The Rebbe,” a biography of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, serves as a savvy dissection of Chabad culture.

Knowledgeable in the low-key way of someone who really knows his stuff, Heilman spoke about how the center of American Jewry is “falling apart.” Reflecting on broader societal trends, he joked that Jews were “like other Americans, only more so” as we abandon the institutions that once served us.

Today, the religious move ever rightward, institutionalizing more stringent definitions of kashrut that our great sages could not have possibly kept (because microbes in water need filters that would not have yet been invented in their day) and separating men and women in buses and on the street. The unaffiliated, he says, have found that being Jewish is just one component in whom they are. They can be Jewish when and how they want, in online communities or by attending Chabad a couple of times a year — basically finding low barrier ways to participate, if they do at all.

Broad sociological trends drive this change. In the majority Jewish culture, which is not observant, Jews can marry outside the faith without risking banishment. They also marry later and have fewer children as a result of spending more years in higher education.

Reuben Gittelman’s death was part of that center falling out. If I had been a member of a synagogue that had folded or merged, I may have taken heed much earlier. But Reuben Gittelman has educated students from most, if not all, of the Conservative congregations in the area, as well as some from Reform and Orthodox ones. It simply reached across the Rockland Jewish Academy and strong, meaningful Jewish education for all families, for all children. We believe that broad community support of RJA is critical to our Jewish future in this county.

We welcome a discussion about the merits of the Jewish day school option for families and encourage exploration and consideration of this new school. More information is available at its web site, www.rocklandjewishacademy.org or through email, info@rocklandjewishacademy.org.

THE ROCKLAND COUNTY BOARD OF RABBIS
Photographer captures Israeli haredi
“Hassidic Courts” exhibit comes to Rockland

SARA GILBERT

Most ultra-Orthodox communities, especially ones like Mea Shearim in Israel, are by their very nature secluded and insular. Unless one is born and brought up in that community, it’s not easy to get the opportunity to see first-hand what that world is like.

However, Gil Cohen-Magen was not only able to peer into that world; he was able to capture it as well.

Cohen-Magen was one of the first Israeli photographers to work for Reuters. It all began when he was given an assignment to get pictures of Jewish customs in preparation for Rosh HaShanah and so he began spending time in ultra-Orthodox and haredi communities.

Ten years later, he has written a book and produced a photography exhibit entitled “Hassidic Courts: a photographic journey,” which will open with Cohen-Magen speaking at JCC Rockland, 450 West Nyack Rd., West Nyack, at 7 p.m. on Thursday, Feb. 9. Following a lecture by Cohen-Magen, there will be a book signing. The price for JCC members is $8, for the public it is $10.

“Ultra-Orthodox Jews have been in every Israeli newspaper’s headlines in the past weeks,” said Daniel Sonnenschein. The community shialuah, which is in charge of bringing the program to the JCC. “Many controversial issues such as their political power and the segregation of women in Israeli public are resurfacing, creating turbulent, yet fascinating conversations in Israel.”

Sonnenschein says he particularly enjoys the fact that Cohen-Magen’s work is “unexpectedly vivid and colorful, every image is thought provoking, and his art shows controversy with sophistication and creativity.”

He hopes that the Rockland community will benefit from this exhibit due to the “labels and prejudices about Hassidim in our community as well,” he said. “I’m looking to expand the conversation, bringing a different perspective from Israel.”

After Reuters gave Cohen-Magen an assignment, he started off by taking pictures from a distance, when passing Hassidim by on the streets, he said. But eventually he developed a small group of “informers.” Mostly teenage haredi, some from notorious anti-Zionist groups, they would tell him inside information and taught him about some of the lesser known religious rituals.

“I found myself being drawn into a very different world, a world that I had kept at arm’s length and, at best, viewed with suspicion for most of my life,” he said recently in an email interview.

Not having grown up religious at all himself he took steps to fit in, putting on a kippa and eventually growing a beard and dressing in black and white.

It took about two years to develop the connections he needed to get in the behind the scenes of these communities.

“I developed connections with some of the local youth who were intrigued by my project, secretly aiding me in circumventing the barriers and teaching me how to lose myself in a crowded or among protesters,” said Cohen-Magen. With the help of these kids and “with the recognition that I was sincere and that my interest was genuine, their attitude began to soften.”

Cohen-Magen grew up himself with “little respect for that sector of society” and was “brainwashed by the secular media.” But after having daily contact with the haredi community his attitude about them and about religious practices changed drastically. After watching families in Meah She’arim build sukkot, he went home and decided to build one with his family. Then, on Chanakah, he no longer felt the candles were enough and bought olive oil and wicks. On Shabbat, he decided he wanted to Shabbat table and to have candles light at his home, too. Eventually he began sending his children to a private Jewish school. All these changes in himself, his family and his Judaism were a result of watching the haredi families and feeling like he wanted that connection to the religion as well.

Ironically, the group that Cohen-Magen said he felt most attracted to were the Hassidim of Toldot Aharon. “I connected specifically to the closed circles, where they despise cameras. I saw that everything there was authentic… materialism is de-emphasized,” he said. “I found a sense of family, a sense of community. Suddenly, I understood that Jewish tradition went far beyond eating sufganiyot on Chanakah.”

Prior to working for Reuters, Cohen-Magen worked for Yediot Aharonot newspaper and in 2000 with the outbreak of the second intifada and terrorism he was most often covering tragedy, bloody scenes and funerals. “I needed a break from the horror, blood and gore,” he said. “When Reuters asked me to supply pictures of the spiritual side of Jewish life, it was, in a way, a balm for my spirit.”

Cohen-Magen is still in touch with those he connected with through creating this project and continues to photograph haredi communities today. He said, he feels like an ambassador for the haredi community. “I feel it is my responsibility to douse the flames of estrangement and hatred. Through these photographs and the stories they tell, I hope to bring both worlds closer, the secular and the ultra-Orthodox.”

For more information about this event call Daniel Sonnenschein 862-8400 ext. 115 or email dahanna@jcrorockland.org.

EDITOR’S NOTEBOOK from p. 12

Borders in a way that synagogues do not.

We know the type of Jewish life we value, but it doesn’t have to be this way. If we don’t have to do this way, If we want something like a Rockland Jewish education that was very genuine, “that you can’t get anywhere else in the Hudson Valley. Gittelman gave me a road-map on how to live my life.” My daughter, Lily, said that RGHSDS students are known, “as the Gittelman kids. The school gave us a real sense of community.”

Do we really want to lose something like that? Obsolescence need not be our destiny. We do not have to become canaries in the coal mine.

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More than 48,000 people can’t be wrong. Can they? Apparently the International Olympic Committee (IOC) thinks so. Its president, Jacques Rogge, delivered that message in the form of a resounding “no” for a minute of silence for the Munich 11. The Munich 11 refers to the 11 Israeli athletes who were killed in the 1972 Olympics, deferring to fears that the Arab countries will boycott the games.

The publishing of a paid political advertisement is not the cause of the endorsement. The Rockland Jewish Federation of Rockland County, which was applied to a one year subscription.

Subscription price is $10.00 per year, with $5.00 of that going to Rockland Jewish Federation of Rockland County, 430 West Nyack Rd, W. Nyack, New York 10994.

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There have been nine Olympic Summer Games held since 1972. The IOC only began attending these ceremonies in more recent years. Rogge said, “It’s not about a million people. It’s about the right people. It’s about the right message. It’s about the right time.”

The Munich 11 family members have been asking for public recognition of the massacre since the 1976 Olympics in Montreal. Every four years, the IOC refuses. Now the organization wants to claim it’s been doing something all along. More than 48,000 people can’t be wrong. Can they? Apparently the International Olympic Committee (IOC) thinks so. Its president, Jacques Rogge, delivered that message in the form of a resounding “no” for a minute of silence for the Munich 11.

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how these wonderfully chosen books have brought Judaism into so many homes.”

Rockland PJ programs have been more or less monthly, with Krass and Pitkofsky working with area synagogues and to create events tailored around the Jewish calendar.

Tot Shabbat, modeled off of a Bergen County program, takes PJ to a different synagogue on the first Friday of each month. “It’s easier to walk into a place with a group of friends that you’ve become close with than on your own,” said Pitkofsky. “It gives those parents who might be intimidated, the opportunity to check each synagogue out in a no pressure environment.”

Rabbi Jeffrey Abraham of Congregation Sons of Israel in Nyack agrees. “I think it has the potential to allow people to see what different synagogues offer.”

One of the highlights last year was the ‘Hanukkah Hullabaloo’ program at CSI, which “was a huge success.”

Abraham’s son, Benny, 20 months, has been participating in PJ Library and its programs. According to Abraham, the best part is the free books. “It infuses Judaism into kids at such a young age and it encourages reading and story-time, which are important. I wish someone was sending me free Jewish books when I was a kid growing up.”

The programs are not all synagogue based, however. A huge hit last summer was the pool party at Camp Ramah in Nyack, which Pitkofsky says they will be doing again this year on Tuesday, July 10, with a backup rain date of Tuesday, July 31.

“The camp counselors acted out Jewish stories and interacted with the kids and then we all went swimming,” said Pitkofsky, who first connected with PJ Library when she and her husband, Robert, were living in Bergen County. When she heard the Federation was bringing PJ to Rockland, she immediately got involved.

A new PJ outreach launching this summer, also at Camp Ramah, is BinBam Shabbat. Every Friday at 9:30 a.m. from June 29-August 10, parents and children are invited for a “mini Shabbat” program, which includes songs, stories and crafts. “It’s non-threatening because it’s in a camp atmosphere,” said Pitkofsky. “Ramah really does a wonderful job and makes Judaism so welcoming.”

Even though the program is more successful than they could have anticipated, both Pitkofsky and Krass hope to get even more parents and children involved this year. “We still have a lot of work to do,” Pitkofsky says. They started with the easier to reach and “more aware Jewish families, but now we’re at the point of wanting to reach out to those who may not be comfortable walking into a shul or know very much at all about the community.”

To sign up for monthly free books or attend the programs, email pjlibrary@jewishrockland.org or visit www.pjlibrary.org.

 games in 1980 when the former Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan? Or the Soviet Union returning the favor in 1984 and boycotting the Los Angeles games? And we can give a nod to how Hitler commandeered the games in 1936 to be a showcase for Aryan racism that miraculously was upended when the United States runner Jesse Owens took gold.

Because the Olympics take place every four years, there will never be a summer games to take place on what we’d normally think of as a significant anniversary like the 50th. For that reason alone, the 40th anniversary looms large.

These men died as Jews and Israelis. Their loved ones will mark their deaths each year no matter the anniversary, no matter an Olympics. But it is time for the IOC to make things right. These men need to be remembered now, as human beings.

And more than 48,000 of people around the world say so.
EDITORS NOTEBOOK

Not so different, yet worlds apart

MARLA COHEN

When I was growing up, I remember going to SMU homecoming football games against the University of Texas. We were asked to "bow our heads in the name of Jesus Christ" and offer a prayer. I didn’t like it, and I didn’t bow my head; but I also did not bat an eye. This was, after all, Texas.

They probably don’t do that anymore. There’s just a tacit understanding that too many people out there might not think of Jesus as "our Lord."

But I’m not sure. I’m not even sure if there’s a church-state issue involved. SMU isn’t a state school, although UT is, but I think in the intervening years, Jews, atheists and others have spoken up enough to keep that particular practice at bay.

This is why the case of 16-year-old Cranston, Rhode Islander Jessica Ahlquist caught my eye. Jessica objected to prayer that has hung in the auditorium of her high school, Cranston West, since 1963. The prayer is benign enough, "Our Heavenly Father, grant us each day the desire to do our best, to grow in mental and moral as well as physically, to be kind and helpful…Amen." It is eight feet high and papered to the wall. To her the prayer was an offense. She said nothing about it, though, until an anonymous parent filed a complaint with the American Civil Liberties Union. Jessica took it upon herself to speak at all the hearings the school board held in its wake. Almost a year ago, the school board voted to keep the prayer, after which Rhode Island chapter ACLU asked Jessica to serve as plaintiff in a lawsuit.

In January, a federal judge ruled that the prayer’s presence in the school was unconstitutional. In February, the school board decided against appealing the decision.

Jessica Ahlquist has more fortitude than most 16-year-olds I know. She has withstood withering criticism in her deeply Catholic city. She has been harangued, insulted, reamed out online, cursed, reviled, you name it. The rhetoric has been hostile and inflammatory, the situation divisive.

Nonetheless, Jessica has stood her ground. And I admire her. Maybe Jessica shouldn’t have made such a fuss about a prayer that had been present for 49 years, something, clearly, the majority would prefer to leave in place. But it’s the Jessica Ahlquists of America — sometimes Jewish, sometimes Muslim, Buddhist or atheist — who test the limits of what the Constitution allows. By challenging the majority, by excluding religion from the public sphere (or preventing its establishment), she enables the rest of us to worship freely. America, with no state religion, has allowed us as Jews to flourish in an unprecedented way.

Contrast this to the case of Hamsa Kashgari, the 23-year-old Saudi Arabian blogger and columnist who tweeted his complex feelings about Allah and Islam, only to be greeted with calls for his death.

Kashgari, who blogged an imaginary conversation between himself and the prophet, fled Saudi Arabia for Malaysia en route to New Zealand, fearing for his life. More than 30,000 hate comments, including death threats, accumulated on Twitter within 24 hours. Kashgari has apologized for his comments, but nonetheless was arrested in the Kuala Lampur airport, held by Malaysian officials and prevented from speaking with his attorneys, then extradited back to Saudi Arabia.

There the charge of blasphemy is punishable by death. Kashgari will likely face trial, and though Reuters reported it is unlikely he’ll be executed if found guilty, especially if he repents, he will “almost certainly” face harsh punishment. Already the Saudi Information Minister Abdul-Aziz Khoja has instructed to ban him from writing for any Saudi newspaper or magazine.

The cases of Jessica Ahlquist and Hamza Kashgari are not so different. They both offended a majority position with their views on religion and God. Kashgari has the misfortune to live in a country where the state would not only throw him to the mob, but would punish any voices in support along with him.

Jessica Ahlquist, however, has the good fortune to be American, where the state, in fact, defends her right to criticize a school prayer, against the tyranny of "the mob." Ahlquist can be threatened, badgered and maligned on Facebook, but it was the judicial system, backed by more than 200 years of case law, that protects her, protects you and protects me.

It never ceases to amaze me how wondrous a gift this is. In Kashgari’s world, I’d still be in trouble for not bowing my head for a prayer at a public sports event. In Jessica Ahlquist’s world, where I also reside, I hold my head up — free to remember that my prayers can be different.

Marla Cohen is editor of The Rockland Jewish Federation Report. Reach her at mcohen@jewishrockland.org.

LETTERS

Beauty in Orthodoxy

Having been brought up in a Conservative congregation, I was sensitive to your lament on the plight of the closing of Reuben Gittelman Hebrew Day School (“Canary in the Coalmine,” February 2012). Having made the decision some 30 years ago to upgrade my Jewish practice to what I believed was more in consonance with the Torah author’s original intent, however, I cannot but see what occurred at Gittelman to be inevitable and expected at more sites around the country.

A paragraph in your diatribe against the demographic trend in Rockland County and the country in general was particularly troubling to me. For some reason, your view of the Orthodox is blurred by a focus on issues of microbes in water and separate seating on buses. I do admit that we “shoot ourselves in the foot” a bit too often when issues like these become public, but if you could only learn the beauty and majesty (can you describe Conservative Judaism in that way?), of a life imbued with Torah and mitzvot, where the Giants take a backseat to the meaning of life and where parades celebrating Super Bowl heroes are not acknowledged by those attempting to connect with their kids at suppertime, microbes would not be on your mind. They are not on mine, but the question of what God wants me to do to connect with Him/Her always is. I hope you will be able to let down your defenses and open up to the amazing heritage your ancestors bequeathed you.

AHARON SUBAR
Spring Valley

Fresh help for the hungry

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to the Jewish Federation’s Community Supported Agriculture program, for the donations of produce made to the Martin Luther King MPC’s Community Food Pantry. Your group donated an estimated 1,000 pounds of produce which was then distributed to community members in need of food. Your contribution was used to provide approximately 400 people with fresh produce, which is often not available at food pantries. Fresh produce is important, as it is a key element in fighting many diet-related health issues.

The center gives away over 110,000 pounds of food annually, serving about 1,500 people monthly. Children and seniors comprise the majority of those benefiting from this service. The center is only able to make this happen through generous donations from caring groups like yours.

NATHAN MUNGIN
Executive Director
Martin Luther King MPC

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E-mail: dls@editor@Jewishrocksland.org