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Congregation Etz Chaim

Navigating the Maze of Talmud

By Beth Strassler

Have you ever looked at a page of Talmud? It is amazing!!

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Many of you know that I have been taking classes at Hebrew College in Newton. In fact, I have been doing it for a few years. But I began in the “Certificate of Jewish Music” program, taking a course a semester in music or Hebrew or, sometimes, both.

I completed the certificate in May 2011 and was then encouraged to officially call myself a “cantorial soloist”. But once I reached this point, I said to myself: “Well, that isn’t enough...”

So, I continued taking classes the following year. In February 2012, I applied, and was accepted, into the Cantorial Ordination program. When all of the requirements are completed, I will be ordained as a Cantor. Did you know that cantors could be ordained just as rabbis or ministers or priests are?

I should also tell you that I am still taking classes part time (just for clarification, that is much more than half time, but still not considered full time), so I cannot tell you when I will complete the otherwise full time, five year program.

Before I decided to formally join the cantorial ordination program, the department changed the course requirements - Big Time! All of the “first

year” ordination students are required to join the first year Rabbinical School in their courses on Mishnah, Talmud, Bible and Hebrew 5 & 6.

Now that I am facing my first exam of the semester in Talmud, I started to look more seriously at the materials in my notebook. Yes, exams still have that effect on even adult students.

Have you ever looked at a page of Talmud? It is amazing!! In fact, David found a set of Talmud books (Vilna edition) on a shelf in the back room of the synagogue a few years ago. The pages are in good shape, but the covers are not. He has been working with Anastasia, who used to run the book store in downtown Biddeford, to re-bind them (her specialty). Eight of them have been re-bound and there are twelve more to go. But, I digress.....

Each page looks like a maze of Hebrew. The Hebrew is written in both the print that you and I are used to *and* in Rashi script. For some reason, someone decided to develop a second script that is just enough similar to, and just enough different from, the printed Hebrew that looks familiar to us, to drive us crazy. (Even though the script bears his name and he used it in his commentaries, I believe it was not developed by Rashi himself, so we cannot blame him.)

Navigating the Maze of Talmud, cont.

By Beth Strassler

And, of course, the numbers are not to be written just as numerals; they are all written in the Hebrew system of numbers (.(1=א & 2=ב

Once I studied what all the pieces were, then stood back and looked at the page as a whole; I was amazed. The text in the center column is surrounded by a rich history of Jewish text study. There are systems of commentary, clarifications, alternate interpretations, “suggested” corrections, “emphatic” corrections, references to specific places in the Torah, where exactly the same words are used, references to other places in the Talmud where the same words are used, and...well, you get the idea.

AND each one of these systems was written by a different scholar in a different time period: 1000, 1200, 1500, 1700, 1800....SO, when you stand back and take a look, you can see how rich each page is. It also clarifies why it takes so long to study just one page of Talmud.

Why all the commentaries/clarifications/corrections? Because once you translate the Hebrew, it is still not clear what is being said. At least in Mishnah last semester, once we translated the text, we knew what it was talking about.

Talmud incorporates the culture of the rabbis and their study of Torah into its writing. For example, a reference in Torah may be to Genesis chapter 1. But they never give you the verse number. It is expected that once you have the words and the chapter number, you will just know the verse number, because they knew Torah that well.

We use a combination of studying with partners (called chavrutah) and with the teacher in class to gain some understanding of Talmud. This semester is heavy with learning how to navigate the page and glean meaning from putting together the various pieces. I have to admit it is exciting when it feels like we have “cracked the nut” of understanding a sentence (probably because it felt so hopeless beforehand...)

Meanwhile, it has been exciting to master professional vocal techniques that turn my voice into something I have never dreamed it could be, and to write a story in Hebrew. My Hebrew conversation is still dismal, but that is why I will be returning to Middlebury College Hebrew Summer Language Program with David this July. Wish me luck!!!



Sunday School 2012-13

Time: 10:00 a.m.

*The last Sunday School of the
year:*

TBA



Opportunity for Memorial Donation

By Alan Fink on behalf of the Etz Chaim Ritual Committee

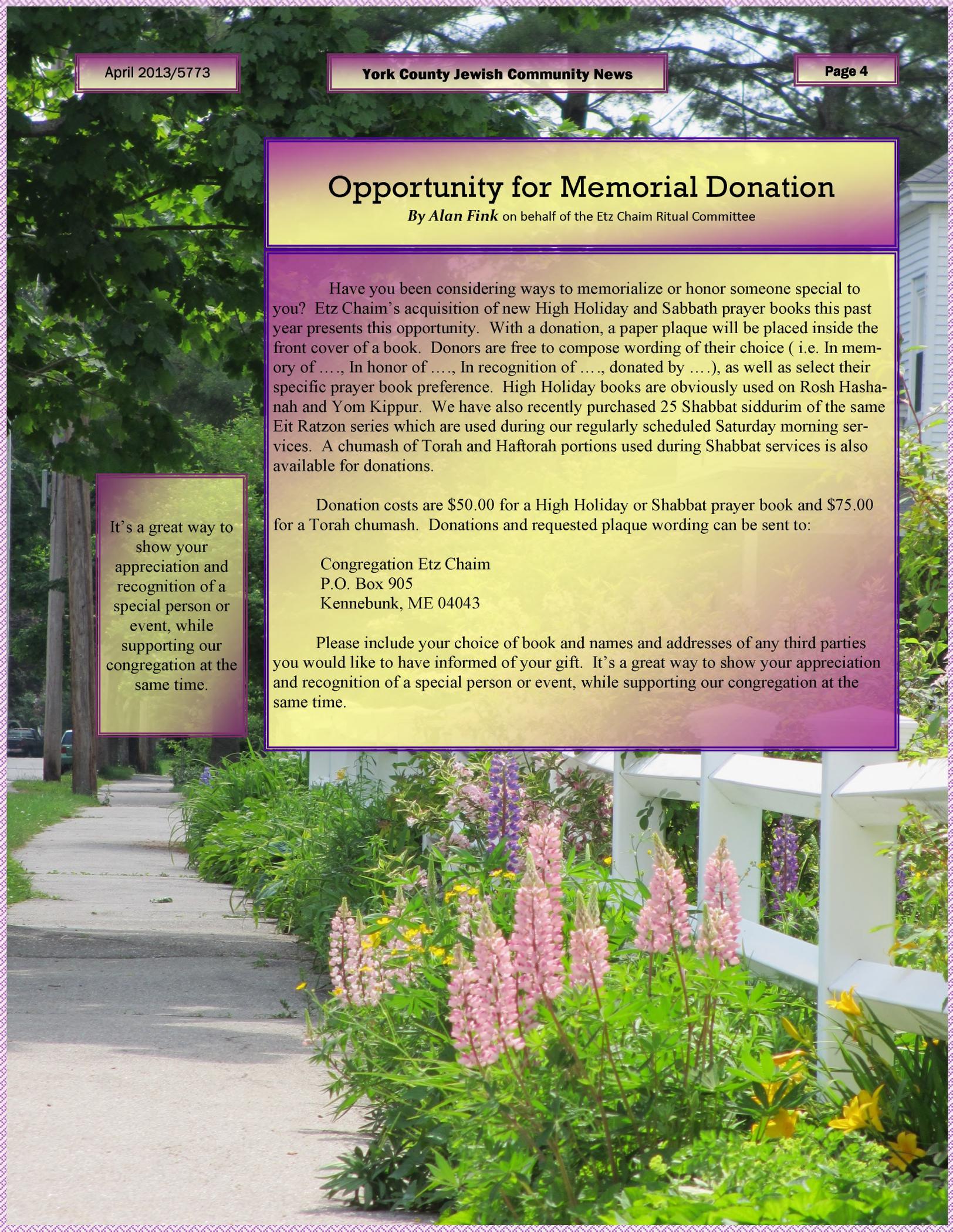
Have you been considering ways to memorialize or honor someone special to you? Etz Chaim's acquisition of new High Holiday and Sabbath prayer books this past year presents this opportunity. With a donation, a paper plaque will be placed inside the front cover of a book. Donors are free to compose wording of their choice (i.e. In memory of ..., In honor of ..., In recognition of ..., donated by ...), as well as select their specific prayer book preference. High Holiday books are obviously used on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. We have also recently purchased 25 Shabbat siddurim of the same Eit Ratzon series which are used during our regularly scheduled Saturday morning services. A chumash of Torah and Haftorah portions used during Shabbat services is also available for donations.

Donation costs are \$50.00 for a High Holiday or Shabbat prayer book and \$75.00 for a Torah chumash. Donations and requested plaque wording can be sent to:

Congregation Etz Chaim
P.O. Box 905
Kennebunk, ME 04043

Please include your choice of book and names and addresses of any third parties you would like to have informed of your gift. It's a great way to show your appreciation and recognition of a special person or event, while supporting our congregation at the same time.

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Sunday School Fun This Year!

By Denise Hammond

sufganiyot:
(סופגניות is a ball-shaped doughnut that is first deep-fried, then pierced and injected with jelly or custard, and then topped with powdered sugar.



In November, we learned about the Sabbath, as well as the meaning of thankfulness, by creating thank you cards to give to our family and friends..

It's been a great year for Congregation Etz Chaim's Sunday School program! We changed up the leadership, by having a different family each month host the group. Overall, this Sunday School year has been a success, because of the diversity of all the families contributing something different to each month's events.

We started the year off in October, celebrating Sukkot with the Davis family. They had us making our own etrogs and lulavs out of duct tape and strips of paper. Snack was a delicious assortment of all the different fruits and nuts harvested in Israel during that time, and it was educational as well as yummy for the kids to try!

In November, we learned about the Sabbath, as well as the meaning of thankfulness, by creating thank you cards to give to our family and friends. The kids also created a mosaic of paper to hang from the wall, in the symbolic shape of the star of David.

December was, of course, Hanukah! The Macomers helped all the children create their own aprons to wear. The kids were then able to wear these works of art while making their own Sufganiyot! Everyone was very happy, to say the least!!

January brought Tu Bishvat, with the Davis family again! The children all created trees by using paint on their arms and fingers! It was messy, fun and came out beautifully!! We were able to plant our own parsley to use at our Seders, and learned lots about Israel and the beautiful celebration of the trees.

With February came Purim, and of course we had to have some noise! We read the Purim story and used groggers the kids made, and enjoyed being loud when we heard that **Name....**

Passover took center stage in March, with the Macomber family, and we all enjoyed the story telling, gaining an understanding of where, what and how this story came to be. We played games with almost all of the different plagues as our theme, and the kids made their own matzoh pizza!

We don't know what April will bring yet, but we do know it'll be a great time, and hope others may join us in the future to share the fun! If you have any questions, or want to join us, please give Denise Hammond a call. All are welcome!

The Father of the Talmud, Abba Arikka (175 CE–247 CE)

By Jack Schraeter

Born: Abba bar Aybo, the leading Talmudist who lived in Sassanid Babylonia in the 3rd century CE, and who established, at Sura, the systematic study of the rabbinic traditions, which, using the Mishnah as the leading text, led to the compilation of the Talmud. With him began the long period of ascendancy of the great academies of Babylonia around the year 220 CE. He is commonly known simply as Rav.

His surname, Arika (in English, "Tall") he owed to his height, which, according to a reliable record, exceeded that of his contemporaries. In traditional literature, he is referred to, almost exclusively, as Rav, "the Master". He is called Rabbi Abba only in the tannaitic literature, where a number of his sayings are preserved.

Rav was a descendant of a distinguished Babylonian family, which claimed to trace its origin to Shimei, brother of King David. His father, Aibo, was a brother of Chiyya, who lived in Palestine, and was a highly esteemed scholar. From his associations in the house of his uncle, and later as his uncle's disciple and as a member of the academy at Sephoris, Rav acquired such an extraordinary knowledge of traditional lore as to make him its foremost expert in his native land.

Rashi tells us that he was the son of great men. That he was highly respected by the Gentiles, as well as by the Jews of Babylonia, is proven by the friendship that existed between him and the last Parthian king, Artaban. He was deeply affected by the death of Artaban in 226 CE, and the downfall of the Arsacid dynasty. Rav became closely related, through the marriage of one of his daughters, to the family of the exilarch. Her sons, Mar Ukba and Nehemiah, were considered types of the highest aristocracy.

In the annals of the Babylonian schools, the year of his arrival is recorded as the starting-point in the chronology of the Talmudic age. It was the 530th year of the Seleucid and the 219th year of the common era. As the scene of his activity, Rav first chose to live in Nehardea, where the exilarch appointed him agoranomos, or market-master, and Rabbi Shela made him lecturer. Then he removed to Sura, on the Euphrates, where he established a school of his own, which soon became the intellectual center of the Babylonian Jews. As a renowned teacher of the Law and with hosts of disciples, who came from all sections of the Jewish world, Rav lived and worked in Sura until his death. It was at the school of Rav that Jewish learning in Babylonia found its perma-

nent home and center. Rav's activity made Babylonia independent of Palestine, and gave it that predominant position which it was destined to occupy for several centuries.

The method of treatment of the traditional material to which the Talmud owes its origin was established in Babylonia by Rav. That method takes the Mishnah of Judah ha-Nasi as a text or foundation, adding to it the other tannaitic traditions, and deriving from all of them the theoretical explanations and practical applications of the religious Law. The legal and ritual opinions recorded in Rav's name and his disputes constitute the main body of the Babylonian Talmud. His numerous disciples—some of whom were very influential, and amplified in their capacity as instructors and by their discussions, continued the work of Rav. In the Babylonian schools, Rav was referred to as "the great master." Rav also exercised a great influence on the moral and religious conditions of his native land, not only indirectly through his disciples, but directly by reason of the strictness with which he repressed abuses in matters of marriage and divorce, and denounced ignorance and negligence in matters of ritual observance.

Special attention was given by him to the liturgy of the synagogue. He is reputed to be the author of one of the finest compositions in the Jewish prayerbook, the Mussaf service of the New Year. The Aleinu prayer first appeared in the manuscript of the Rosh Hashana liturgy by Rav. He included it in the Rosh Hashana Mussaf service as a prologue to the Kingship portion of the Amidah. For that reason some attribute to Rav the authorship, or at least the revising, of Aleinu. The many homiletic and ethical sayings recorded of him show similar ability. Some of his best and well known sayings are:

- "The commandments of the Torah were only given to purify men's morals".
- "Whatever may not properly be done in public is forbidden even in the most secret chamber".
- "It is well that people busy themselves with the study of the Law and the performance of charitable deeds, even when not entirely disinterested; for the habit of right-doing will finally make the intention pure".
- "Man will be called to account for having deprived himself of the good things which the world offered".
- "Whosoever hath not pity upon his fellow man is no child of Abraham".

The Father of the Talmud, Abba Arikka (175 CE–247 CE), cont.

By Jack Schraeter

- "It is better to cast oneself into a fiery furnace than publicly to put to shame one's fellow creature".
- "One should never betroth himself to a woman without having seen her; one might subsequently discover in her a blemish because of which one might loathe her and thus transgress the commandment: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself".
- "A father should never prefer one child above another; the example of Joseph shows what evil results may follow therefrom".

Rav reproves extreme asceticism. Rav loved the Book of Ecclesiasticus (Sirach), and warned his disciples against unjustifiable asceticism by quoting advice contained therein—that, considering the transitoriness of human life, one should not despise the good things of this world.

Rav had many sons, several of whom are mentioned in the Talmud, the most distinguished being the eldest, Chiyya. The latter did not, however, succeed his father as head of the academy: this post fell to Rav's disciple, Rav Huna.

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<http://etzchaimme.org>

Shabbat Services

*Join us for Shabbat Services every 1st and 3rd
Saturday of the month,
beginning at 9:30 am*

York County (YC) Jewish Community

This newsletter is published four or five times each year. It is intended to announce and report on Jewish community events in York County, and especially at Congregation Etz Chaim in Biddeford. It offers local perspectives on historical and contemporary aspects of Jewish life.

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If we have your email address, you have been removed from the snail mailing list.
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Our Synagogue

Our community programs are available to all members of the York County Jewish Community and are driven by the following mission statement:

“We promote Jewish cultural, social, educational and religious activities in southern Maine. Our primary goal is to make available a range of activities that facilitate the expression of what each individual finds valuable in the Jewish experience.

We attempt to accommodate individuals along the entire spectrum of Jewish practice and theology. We value and support the existence of a local formal congregation, but view our community programs as open to all interested people, regardless of whether or to what congregation they may be formally affiliated.”



Etz Chaim photo 2012

“We promote Jewish cultural, social, educational and religious activities in southern Maine.”

Synagogue Contacts

Please mail Membership dues to:

*PO Box 905,
Kennebunk, ME 04043*

Memorial Plaques, Prayer books, Etz Chaim books of Torah:

David Strassler: 967-5833

Hebrew School/Services: *Beth & David Strassler: 967-5833*

Sunday School: *Denise Hammond: dghammond@roadrunner.com*

Shabbat Potlucks: *Linda: 967-4047*

York County Jewish Community News



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