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NEWS: 'Conservateens'

New Conservative Jewish learning program unites high schoolers in one location.

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Benjamin Malkin, 14, and Jacob Malkin, 15, both of Oak Park, and Julie Goldfaden, 14, of West Bloomfield have fun at a March 3 ATID program at Hillel Day School in Farmington Hills.

Photography, Rabbi Jason Miller Page design, Deborah Schultz

If "teens bring more teens," as promoters of an innovative community-wide program expect, then the newly formed Alliance for Teens in Detroit (ATID) should tally a phenomenal number of participants, with more than 200 in the bag even before sign-up begins on April 7.

ATID (pronounced ah-TEED) will bring students in grades 8-12 from three of five area Conservative synagogues to a Monday night program they will attend together. Though the program is still in formation, the synagogues committed to ATID are Adat Shalom Synagogue in Farmington Hills and Congregations Beth Ahm in West Bloomfield and Shaarey Zedek in Oakland County.

Congregations Beth Shalom in Oak Park and B'nai Moshe in West Bloomfield may still sign on. If they don't participate this year, they are welcome to join later. In addition, even if their synagogues do not become part of ATID, students from those congregations may still participate. So may teens not affiliated with any congregation as well as those who belong to a synagogue that is not Conservative. Some members of area Orthodox and Reform synagogues have expressed interest for their children.

"This is not just 'bigger is better,'" said Rabbi Jason Miller, ATID's interim director. "Detroit's Conservative movement is unique in that colleagues all come together on a regular basis for any major effort. All of our synagogues get along great. This is an opportunity to put all of our teens in one great location, with a great faculty - combining staff from several synagogues - with great programs and resources and an amazing curriculum."

ATID will combine formal education, such as Jewish text study and tradition, along with informal Jewish education like social action, all with the camaraderie of these "Conservateens" - as Alan Yost, executive director of Adat Shalom calls them - coming together in the same place.

The program will be based at Hillel Day School of Metropolitan Detroit in Farmington Hills, deemed by ATID planners as the "physical and metaphorical center of our Conservative Jewish community."

"We like it because it is a neutral site, rather than holding classes at any of the synagogues; and recent renovations offer so much," Miller said.

To promote ATID and to get teens together in advance of the official launch of the



Adat Shalom members Mikole Levran, 16, of Farmington Hills and Rebecca Abrin, 17, of Oak Park at a March 3 program for potential ATID teens. Photo by Rabbi Jason Miller
Elissa Berg, Amy Appelman, Rabbi Jason Miller, Rabbi Eric Yanoff, Daniella HarPaz Mechnikov
Michael HarPaz

program this coming September, a mega-kickoff event is planned Monday, April 7, at Hillel. Israeli singer-songwriter and recording artist Michael HarPaz, who grew up in Metro Detroit, will perform live with his band at his old alma mater. The event also will include enrollment, refreshments, iPod giveaways, prizes and games. (See accompanying story on HarPaz.)

Why Now?

"Everyone says the Conservative world is hurting," Miller said. "How can we reverse the trend? We start with the youth."

He noted Jewish Theological Seminary of America Chancellor Arnold Eisen's vision to re-energize Conservative synagogues and inspire Jewish leadership. "He is pumping energy into the movement on a national level; we can do it on a local level," Miller said. "Each of our local synagogues already has a great program. We are stronger together, so combining them can only make it that much better. This is not competitive. There is a vested interest in Conservative Judaism in Detroit. This is synergy at its best."

Miller says most parents of potential students are excited about ATID.

"My grandsons are former Hillel students who are not in a Hebrew school program right now," said Maxine Gutfreund of Oak Park, who read about an ATID informational program in the Jewish News. She shared the information with her daughter, Lynn Malkin of Oak Park, and Lynn's sons, Jacob, 15, a student at Berkley High School, and Benjamin, 14, who attends Eton Academy in Birmingham.

"I was worried about them being in a secular community in their schools," Gutfreund said. "I want them to have friends of all backgrounds but it is also important to have a place where they can socialize with Jewish kids, especially a place where they can meet a lot more Jewish kids."

Both teens attend Beth Ahm, where they became b'nai mitzvah, and the Conservative Isaac Agree Downtown Synagogue in Detroit, neither of which has a religious high school program. Both boys will attend ATID this coming school year, even after Jacob begins classes at the Frankel Jewish Academy in the fall.

Outside of Michigan, enthusiasm grows for ATID. Rabbi Robert Abramson and Jules Gutin of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ) in New York made a trip to Detroit to meet with local leadership about the new program.

Now director of the USCJ's department of education, Abramson is a former head of school at Hillel Day School.

Gutin, USCJ's director of the department of youth activities, said, "We came to consult with ATID planners about what we could do to help and how to use the program as a model for other communities. We have a number of communities where the Conservative synagogues work together, but what is being planned in Detroit is clearly a unique effort. There aren't many communities that have what the Detroit area has to offer in terms of a cluster of synagogues whose kids can interact in this framework."

Their trip was just a first visit by USCJ members, with future ones planned. "We want to be involved to the extent we can to develop and strengthen the concept," Gutin said.

Offers of assistance include providing rabbinical students or informal Jewish educators and help planning Shabbatonim for ATID students.

Abramson offered to assist with curriculum development and Gutin with informal educational development, which may include connecting Detroit teens with those in other communities.

"This is a wonderful opportunity," Gutin said. "The potential for success here is enormous."

What To Expect

The curriculum for the 6-8:30 p.m. weekly program was planned by Miller, Shaarey Zedek's Rabbi Eric Yanoff and education directors from all five suburban Conservative synagogues. The group met weekly to glean the best from each of their programs and combine it into ATID's class choices.

Bosmat Dovas, Beth Shalom's director of education, attended the meetings regularly, though she said the synagogue's high school, with its 26 students, is still undecided about being part of ATID.

Others directors are Amy Appelman, Beth Ahm's director of education; Elissa Berg, Adat Shalom's director of education and youth; Hilary Greenberg, Shaarey Zedek's education director; Jodi Gross, Adat Shalom's assistant director of education and youth; and Daniella HarPaz Mechnikov, B'nai Moshe's director of education.

At ATID, each Monday evening will begin with a shared dinner, followed by a core class, then an elective. Classes change each trimester, allowing for three core classes and three electives to be taken each school year.

Some electives may seem secular or artsy, but "everything is Jewish-based," Miller said. "Classes will include yoga and spirituality, Jewish cooking, Jewish theater and Jewish journalism."

A survey of teens and parents provided direction. "We want to be able to do our best through the input of a triangle of groups: parents, students and the congregation," said Gross, who oversaw the creation of the survey.

Parents and teens were asked questions including why it is important to attend Monday night school; why they attend after their b'nai mitzvah; what they like most about what they've heard about ATID and what is their ideal learning environment.

So Much To Learn

ATID will offer something for everyone. Juniors and seniors looking for college credit can take courses from Gratz College, a Jewish college in Philadelphia. Advanced Jewish text classes are available to students currently enrolled at the Frankel Jewish Academy in West Bloomfield. FJA students who want to socialize with other Jewish teens, but not take classes, may come to dinner, use a Hillel classroom as a study hall and meet with an ATID staff member as a tutor. For graduates of Hillel now in public or non-Jewish private schools, a special study track will be implemented.

A travel component includes Shabbat-experience visits to New York City and Chicago, social action and civic-based trips as well as a tour of the Paper Clips project in Whitwell, Tenn. "Adat Shalom and Shaarey Zedek have been doing these types of trips, but for the others this will be a new opportunity," Miller said.

Leadership training programs will be led by directors of Camp Ramah in Canada, Tamarack Camps and B'nai B'rith Youth Organization.

The larger number of students will allow for more specific courses to be offered. "We may not have enough students at each individual synagogue for classes to be run at various levels," Berg said. "But with hundred of teens, we can run a course like conversational Hebrew with beginner, intermediate and advanced classes."

"Students who want to major in a specific subject can take an elective related to that interest - like social action, Jewish text or art - during each of their five years in ATID," she said.

The school's faculty will have widespread expertise. "There is so much potential for passionate teachers when staff members from several congregations are involved," Yanoff said.

As Hillel becomes the gathering place for Jewish education on Monday nights, an adult component also will be offered, featuring guest speakers, a weekly Torah portion class led by Shaarey Zedek's Rabbi Joseph Krakoff and a Hebrew literacy course hosted by area Conservative men's clubs, with more programming in the works.

New Faces, Old Faces

"There is a lot of ruach (spirit) and excitement in being part of a large group," said Yanoff, whose religious school is the largest Conservative synagogue high school in the area, with 120 students. Adat Shalom's enrollment is next with 85.

Leadership at the 380-family B'nai Moshe - where 24 students attend program for grades 8-12 - is undecided about joining ATID, but excited about the possibilities.

"We have an excellent teaching staff, low attrition and our kids have bonded through the years; but I see a huge potential bonus to join in with ATID," said education director Mechnikov.

"Kids who are part of ATID will have so many new connections," she said. "They may even notice someone from their public high school they didn't know and realize they have something in common. It also gives them the chance to see friends they don't see as often because they aren't in school together. And later on, when they go to college, they will already know so many more kids.

"Some of the parents are nervous about how their quieter kids who've been part of a smaller synagogue program could be lost in a big crowd," she said. "A task force at B'nai Moshe has been meeting weekly to discuss this kind of issue and others. We want to make sure we bring the right approach to the program before we decide to bring all the kids into the fold."

Miller said, "For some, there is a comfort level in staying where they are, with what they're used to. ATID will have small classes, small social groups and a lot of opportunity to bond with the students' own congregation's clergy."

For Beth Ahm, ATID means providing a high school program where there have not been the resources to have one for the past few years. A couple of Beth Ahm's high schoolers attend a congregational religious school at another synagogue. "We have at least 60 members who are the right age," said education director Appelman, "but we are a big day-school synagogue," with many students at FJA.

"We definitely fit the bill for ATID because it is open to day-school kids as well. We are very excited to be part of the momentum that will be created by all the other synagogues."

Appelman understands the probability of ATID's success. "I am a graduate of a community supplementary high school in Cincinnati, where the students of four Reform synagogue schools were together in classes," she said. "We weren't in neutral space like ATID will be; each semester, we jumped from synagogue to synagogue. I had a very positive experience."

In addition to synagogue teens, ATID expects to attract students from unaffiliated families, too.

What About Fun?

Organizers hope ATID, with its mass of students, will lead to a revival of the Conservative movement's United Synagogue Youth (USY), which in the past several years has dwindled locally.

"USY is a place that encourages teenagers to live Conservative Jewish lives," Berg said. "Even if teens didn't live observant lives, when they were with USY they were in a model that showed them how; and they observed while participating." Some area Conservative congregations have no USY chapters; the 1,050-family Adat Shalom has only 20 active members.

To help spur participation, USCJ's Gutin has pledged free two-year memberships to USY for ATID students.

"We are not giving up on the next generation," Yanoff said. "ATID is an investment in our future." And "future" is the definition of the Hebrew word atid.

Together But Separate

"ATID is not a merging of identities or of congregations," Miller said. "Each congregation will maintain its separate identity, mission and vision."

In addition to an ATID graduation, individual synagogues also will hold separate graduations and confirmations. Special programming may be held at individual synagogues or at Tamarack's Camp Maas in Ortonville for the entire ATID group during the school year.

Having all those teens in one place makes it advantageous to promote community-wide programs, such as Federation's Teen Mission '08. "When I make announcements during services about teen-related programs, the kids look at me and then they look at each other and say, 'Are you going to that?'" Yanoff said. "Imagine if there were 200 of them asking each other. Teens go where teens are."

The ATID steering committee is headed by Rabbis Miller and Yanoff, Adat Shalom President David Schostak, Shaarey Zedek President David Wallace and Adat Shalom's Executive Director Alan Yost. Other members include educational directors from all area Conservative synagogues and parent representatives. An advisory committee includes clergy from all area Conservative synagogues as well as community leaders, additional parents and a contingent of teens.

The initial idea for ATID came 3½ years ago during a monthly Conservative leadership gathering to discuss issues impacting the local community.

The concept of ATID is new, but other communal programs have existed before. United Hebrew Schools, which dissolved in 1988 with the formation of Federation's Agency for Jewish Education, once was the largest communal-based Hebrew school system in the country with its own buildings as well as partner-run branches and a summer camp. Last year, a combined program of some Detroit-area Conservative and Reform synagogue schools was attempted but did not succeed.

The cost of ATID is \$700, which is comparable to current tuition at the participating congregations.

"Adat Shalom and Shaarey Zedek have been responsible for the initial start-up costs of ATID," Yost said. "The rent for Hillel Day School is built into the operational budget for the school. It is anticipated that the expenditure for teachers' salaries will be reduced by the commitment of time, energy and active presence of the clergy and educational directors who will be active faculty members."

In addition, Yost said, "Parents will be able to apply for scholarships from Federation's Alliance for Jewish Education in the same format as prior years when synagogues operated their own independent high school programs."

Miller added, "No Jewish student will be denied an ATID education because of financial difficulties."

And the hope is that many students will join in. "There is a tremendous power in being part of something bigger than ourselves," Yanoff said. "We are putting a fresh face on the next generation of Conservative schools. We are going to take the core enrollment to provide enthusiasm - and then invite the world."

For information on ATID, contact individual Conservative synagogues, access the ATID Web site at www.atidhs.org, or contact Rabbi Jason Miller: atid.hs@gmail.com or (248) 535-7090.

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