

Or Ami ^{congregation} NESHAMA ^[soul] INITIATIVE

you're home

ESTABLISHED BY THE JUDOVITS FAMILY

WHERE TEEN SOULS SHINE BRIGHTLY



Or Ami Neshama [Soul] Initiative

The *Or Ami Neshama [Soul] Initiative* is a multifaceted initiative, spanning 7th-12th grades, designed to build a safe space and caring community for Jewish teens and pre-teens of Congregation Or Ami and the surrounding communities. Participants learn about and experiment with *Neshama tools*, strategies for dealing with the challenging stresses and pressures that teens face in the world. The initiative fosters safe and trusting relationships among peers and adult mentors, including youth advisors and rabbis.

Or Ami Neshama [Soul] Initiative



6 Year GOALS

Over six years, Congregation Or Ami's *Neshama* team (rabbis, educators, interns, therapists and youth advisors) will develop, test, evaluate, and update an integrated 7th-12th grade *Neshama* curriculum, offering multiple forums for conversation and support activities, each introducing tools that can help teens develop strategies for self-care. The curriculum includes intentional adult components to guide parents on how to listen to, evaluate, and support their teens and their soulful journeys.

Covid Pandemic Reality

The onset and morphing of the Covid-19 pandemic tested every institution, including Congregation Or Ami. Experts who work with teens describe the unprecedented challenges to teen mental health and wellness. Our teens and pre-teens have been and are struggling. Bonds between individuals and adult leaders, and within communities, frayed. We were motivated by the understanding that providing a safe way to connect and have real conversations is an effective safeguard against addiction, anxiety, and depression.

Congregation Or Ami's *Neshama* team pivoted, experimented with multiple new modes of communication and connection, trained and retrained, consulted with experts locally and nationally, and developed unique modalities to reach our youth. Some succeeded for a time; others failed. Our team continued to retool, reach out, and connect. The *Neshama* Initiative provided the focus, direction, and support for these endeavors.



Neshama Initiative Successes

■ Significant impact through the pandemic:

- Supported 85 youth (7th-12th grades) and 68 parents
- Re-trained 17 faculty and clergy
- Advised 15 synagogues and communities
- Increased financial support for Or Ami's mental health and wellness projects

MAKING MENSCHES

It's What We Do

OUR VISION	OUR MISSION	OUR METHODS	OUR CORE VALUES
 <p>We imagine a world where mensches are found around every corner, in every family, in every business, impacting governments, serving as the primary influence in the world.</p> <p>We endeavor for an existence filled with kindness, compassion, and active caring.</p> <p>We pursue this vision within Or Ami, "a sanctuary of kindness, a safe Jewish community for today, [people's] second home."</p>	 <p>Congregation Or Ami's learning programs strive to make mensches (<i>kind, compassionate, actively caring Jewishly connected people</i>).</p> <p>We proactively create a loving, inclusive, intentional community, existing in a safe, brave space, where adults (staff, parents, clergy) challenge learners and themselves to become mensches.</p>	 <p>Partnering with parents (and guardians and grandparents) to guide students and families to actively pursue this mission as their life-purpose.</p> <p>Applying the four B's of <i>How to "B" Jewish</i> – Being, Becoming, Belonging and Behaving – as intentional strategies through which we teach <i>menschlichkeit</i>.</p> <p>Embracing core values that serve as the umbrella for the community, give birth to four focal middot which change each year and are interwoven throughout the entire community.</p>	 <p><i>B'tzelem Elohim</i>: Every human being is of infinite value therefore is to be treated with dignity and kindness. Every child is endowed with unique gifts.</p> <p><i>Henaynu</i>: We are responsible for being there for one another in good times and bad.</p> <p><i>Shmirat Haguf v' Hanefesh</i>: Self-care and self-compassion require us to attend to the health and care for our bodies, minds, and souls.</p> <p><i>Chesed</i>: The world was created and is sustained with kindness and <i>tikkun olam</i> (repairing brokenness).</p> <p><i>Achdoot</i>: We feel an integrated connection to the past/present/future.</p> <p><i>Mosaic</i>: We are a mosaic of Moses' people, embracing and including all people.</p>



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MENSCH: *Mensches are kind, compassionate, actively caring Jewishly connected people.*



Or Ami NESHAMA INITIATIVE

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WHERE TEEN SOULS SHINE BRIGHTLY

■ Program Vision

Wrote *Making Mensches: That's What We Do*, a new multipronged vision and mission statement to guide our teen/pre-teen mental health and wellness work. Presented to Or Ami Board, Parent Groups, and Other Communities.



■ **Neshama Mental Health Moments**

Teen and pre-teen gatherings included mental health moments designed to practice wellness techniques and to fill a toolbox with tools to manage anxiety, face stress, and deal with pressure. Led by Rabbinic/Education Resident Shirah Kraus.



■ **Teen Leadership Development**

Neshama team created a pop up day retreat (February 2022) for 4th-6th graders, led by our teens and pre-teens (with adult supervision), and developed our Madrichim Leadership Institute. The teen leadership components – led by Teen Engagement Coordinator Andrew Fromer and Senior Educator Rachel Altfeld – provided pandemic-era teens a place to feel important, needed, competent, creative, and successful.



■ **Confirmation Rap Sessions**

Rabbi Paul Kipnes and Rabbinic Intern Mira Weller led sessions with 11th-12th grade students on gender identity, abuse and harassment, healthy decision-making, and creating safety.

■ **Wellness Position on LoMPTY Board**

Created a teen youth group board position in charge of wellness to ensure that teen mental health and wellness is addressed at each gathering.



■ **Teen JQSA Day of Learning**

Partnered with Teen JQSA to bring LGBTQ+ and ally Jewish teens together for an incredible day of learning and exploring Los Angeles from an LGBTQ+ lens. *Neshama* leadership identified appropriate youth, consulted with parents, and invited youth to attend.

■ **1-to-1 Outreach**

Clergy, faculty, and staff partnered to support pre-teens and teens struggling with debilitating anxiety, social anxiety, addictive behaviors, and/or depression. Responses included helping youth speak with their parents, integrating them as leaders in the 4th-6th grade retreat, and referring to therapists.



■ **Parent Workshops**

Gender, Sexuality, and Suicide Prevention

Partnered with Los Angeles Jewish Teen Initiative and JQInternational for a Gender, Sexuality, and Suicide Prevention parent workshop. This training aimed to educate, raise awareness, reduce stigma, and promote help-seeking behaviors.

Joy Amidst Unhappiness

Held a Parent Session with Mensch-ify, led by Dr. Betsy Stone, exploring the impossibility of making our children happy without allowing them to build strengths by surviving unhappiness.

Parenting Through the Pandemic

Presented many late evening parenting sessions through a Jewish lens with Rabbi Kipnes on burning topics raised by parents.





■ Curriculum Development and Facilitation

Integrated K-12 Curriculum

Neshama team integrated the curriculum for K-12, creating value-based themes to run throughout youth and family education.

Parental involvement: Recognizing that pandemic-era parents had unique concerns about their children's interactions with others and the world, we partnered with parents to uncover their priorities and interests related to raising children with resiliency and mensch-y Jewish values.

Makom 9-12: Inspired by motivational speakers, time management experts, Jewish thinkers, and soul supporters, 9th-12th graders develop life skills and social-emotional balancing tools while deepening their Jewish knowledge, leadership skills, and spirituality. Options include our Madrichim Leadership Institute (volunteer to help younger students while earning community service hours) and Confirmation (hang monthly with rabbis to explore value-based topics).

Makom 7&8: Engaging in self-discovery and connection-building and developing skills of resilience and wellness, 7th and 8th graders develop a toolkit of values for building Jewish community anywhere and balance within.

Consultation with Dr. Betsy Stone

Clergy consulted with Dr. Betsy Stone, a Yale-educated Psychologist, about post-traumatic growth in the Covid era.

Staff, faculty, and clergy participated in multiple workshops with Dr. Stone

Key learnings: Youth need to learn to play again. Synagogues should prioritize getting youth to be newly or again comfortable within the temple doors.

Focus must be primarily on having fun (as an antidote to trauma, siloing, anxiety, and depression).

Consultation with April Powers & Kiyomi Kowalski (*JewbianPrincess.com*)

Clergy Consulted with Inclusion/Diversity/Gender/Belonging Faculty training by JewbianPrincess.com teaching on inclusivity, unconscious bias, making it a safe space for all people to learn

Re-tooling with National Organizations

Rabbi Julia Weisz and Rabbi Paul Kipnes participated in sessions led at the Association of Reform Jewish Educators, Central Conference of American Rabbis, Union for Reform Judaism, Schools of Education at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, and elsewhere.

Neshama Leadership National Presence

Rabbi Julia Weisz was chosen to present at the Association of Reform Jewish Educators as a prominent thought-leader and practitioner on crafting a pandemic-era, trauma-informed program for teens and pre-teens.



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