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COMMUNITY

Nachshon Reaches Out to Unaffiliated

by RACHEL HELLER, *Contributing Writer*

In an airy Encino dining room, Cantor Judy Greenfeld instructs 12 women gathered around a lace-covered table on how to relax. Eyes closed, she tells the women to lean back in their chairs, abandon stressful thoughts and picture themselves on a pristine white beach.

“We are at a moment before the New Year where we are shedding our old skin, shedding the things that don’t work for us,” Greenfeld intones calmly. “Sitting before a vast ocean of potential, we can visualize anything. We can prepare ourselves to be the best we can be, even better than last year.”

The class is offered through the Nachshon Minyan, an alternative religious community Greenfeld founded three years ago to make Torah more vivid and accessible to a wider audience. And like everything the Nachshon Minyan comprises — monthly Shabbat services and holiday celebrations, a women’s Torah-study course and Torah school for kids — this morning’s High Holy Days class is imbued with a spiritual inclusiveness that has drawn a devoted and burgeoning membership of about 50 people, despite the group’s lack of a permanent building. Greenfeld says the minyan has inspired many participants to embrace Judaism for the first time in their lives.

“My goal is to reach out to people who have been disillusioned — the unaffiliated, and the unaffiliated,” Greenfeld said. “I want to find those people on the fringe and give them something that is educational, personal and beautiful.”

In practice, that has meant shaking up the Shabbat service a little. Greenfeld, a former professional dancer, makes music a cornerstone of her monthly Saturday morning services, which are held at the Baha’i Cultural Center in Encino and fall somewhere between Reform and Conservative ideology. She also shortens the service by forgoing the haftarah, and provides English translation and transliteration to all the

prayers in an alternative prayer book she compiled herself.

One more thing — there’s no rabbi.

Cantors are fully qualified to lead services, said Greenfeld, who was ordained at the Academy for Jewish Religion, California. And instead of having one religious figure give the sermon each month, Greenfeld invites activists and community leaders to

service about how people find their personal focus in the effort to better the world.

Past speakers have included educator Sandra Roberts of the Paper Clips Holocaust memorial project, publicized by the eponymous 2004 documentary; Rabbi Capers Funnye, an African American rabbi and first cousin of First Lady Michelle Obama; and Holocaust survivor Eva Moses Kor,

burden,” she said.

Student Amy Somers calls the Nachshon Minyan “Judaism from the heart.”

During the High Holy Days workshop, Greenfeld had her class read and discuss a packet she created called “The Holiday GPS System,” encouraging participants to reflect on ways they could reach a place of forgiveness and balance before the New Year. Most of the students were from the Women’s Torah Study Journey, a weekly group Greenfeld created to make the study of Torah — whose dense text and religious heft often intimidate new learners — more approachable. So many women wanted to join that Greenfeld had to create a second class last year.

Greenfeld also runs a Nachshon Minyan Torah School for grade-school children. Meeting weekly at the cantor’s home, students learn Torah, prayer and Hebrew, and after graduation move on to the Nachshon Minyan’s program for b’nai mitzvah. Pre-teens meet with Greenfeld individually, and she says she tries to inspire a love of Judaism. “I tell them, ‘You’re the next generation — if you don’t love it, it’s not going to continue,’” she said.

This year, Greenfeld hopes to have members plan the monthly Shabbat services. Friday night and Saturday morning services will be held on alternating months, with the children from Greenfeld’s Torah school planning all of the Friday night gatherings. Set to be held at the nearby Los Encinos School, Friday services will feature themes such as Western Jewish heritage or a chocolate Shabbat.

Keeping services fresh and interesting is key to getting hard-to-reach unaffiliated Jews in the door, Greenfeld believes. And once they’re in, she said, “I try to meet them where they are — wherever they are in their spiritual journey.”

For more information and High Holy Days tickets, call (818) 789-7314 or visit this article online at jewishjournal.com. ●



Cantor Judy Greenfeld with Nachshon Minyan Torah School students. Photo courtesy Judy Greenfeld

speak at Nachshon Minyan gatherings about faith and tikkun olam.

On Rosh Hashanah this year, Greenfeld and her featured speaker, artist Benny Ferman, will hand out white flags to members of the congregation — symbolizing surrender to God — which also will serve as blank canvases on which participants can list their commitments for the New Year.

For Yom Kippur, the congregation will host teacher Erin Gruwell, leader of the Freedom Writers high school diary project, dramatized in the 2007 film of the same name. Gruwell will speak at the Kol Nidre

subject of the 2005 documentary, “Forgiving Dr. Mengele.”

It’s this kind of programming, coupled with an air of friendly informality, that Greenfeld says appeals to unaffiliated Jews who had either left the fold or never felt like they were part of it. “I know that feeling of sitting in those giant rooms on the holidays and desperately looking in the prayer book for something to catch onto,” said Greenfeld, who grew up “bored” by Conservative services in suburban Ohio. “When you don’t feel like you matter, the service just leaves you cold and feels like a