# KEREN MACH"AR- The Fund for Tomorrow by: Jonathan Spira-Savett

The summer before last, I was looking at the plans I had made for the upcoming year's community service program at the day school where I was working. And I thought: This just isn't good enough. So I started to think about things from scratch. What emerged is KEREN MACH'AR — The Fund for Tomorrow. MACH'AR is a Hebrew acronym that captures three dimensions of chesed education. Musari means ethical — the sense of obligation that animates service to others. Chevrati means social — an awareness of the broader context around needs. Ruchani means spiritual — the experience of changing the world as an act of holiness.

KEREN MACH"AR is a set of programs that involves Jewish teens in study and work about poverty in America. Today, the program is being piloted at the Solomon Schechter High School of Long Island, and next year it will expand to several sites, including supplementary programs.

What follows here is a "report" on the project – from the KEREN MACH" AR newsletter, Spring 2006.

KEREN MACH" AR new sletter, Spring 2006

Hello, Mrs. Gordon? I'm Sara Kingman — I run the Hebrew high school that Josh Meyer goes to after school. I understand you're Josh's American history teacher, and there's a big research paper coming up. I wonder if I could talk you into something. . ."

And Sara starts to describe the paper she hopes Mrs. Gordon will let Josh write. It's about the "digital divide" between rich and poor youth — how young people in low-income communities often have no access to computers in the home or the ability to develop a real familiarity with technology. Sara gives the project a historical twist — Josh will research the issue of education generally, beginning with the first free schools in nineteenth century America. He'll weave in a discussion of American values relating to progress, innovation, education, and work.

"It sounds big," says Mrs. Gordon. "I wouldn't have it any other way," Sara replies, and the deal is sealed.

"This way Josh can write part of our annual report without having to spend too much extra time," explains Sara. "He'll get some 'real' credit for the work he does for KEREN MACH" AR."

It's the kind of conversation Sara has had twenty times with teachers, and it's all part of her mission to make KEREN MACH'AR a centerpiece of Tichon, the community Hebrew high school she took over five years ago. KEREN MACH'AR teaches Jewish teens about poverty in the United States by engaging them in projects that embody Maimonides' highest level of tzedakah, helping someone lift himself or herself out of poverty. MACH'ARniks come to know people who break stereotypes about "the poor" — individuals starting home-based businesses in order to get off public assistance or leaders of community-based organizations working to improve their own neighborhoods through education, advocacy, and economic development. Through their relationships, students develop a more sophisticated understanding not only of poverty, but also of the various public and private actors involved in combating it. And the experiences are framed by a curriculum that weaves together Jewish texts, foundations of American thought, and personal

reflection on politics and money.

Three years ago, Sara Kingman was tired of the word "supplementary." She was also tired of low and irregular attendance, and the almost complete absence of boys among the regulars at TICHON. That's when she talked her board president into coming with her to CAJE in search of new ideas, and that's when she first heard about KEREN MACH" AR. Today, attendance is up over 90% on a weekly basis, and boys like Josh Meyer are coming out of the woodwork.

Sara's job is part teacher, part volunteer coordinator, and a big part negotiator. She's become an expert at "double duty" — convincing teachers to let students use their KEREN MACH"AR research and reflections as material for papers and talking up their unique community service experiences to college guidance counselors. She's part of a growing network of day and supplementary high school educators implementing KEREN MACH"AR around the country, who meet annually in person and partner up in sister cities.

#### Students

"Josh Meyer is amazing," says Sara. "Of course, they're all amazing, but at the time of his Bar Mitzvah, you would never have expected to see Josh still here in eleventh grade. He wasn't a disruptive kid, but he was master of the one-word answer. We couldn't seem to connect with him."

Today Josh is a regular volunteer at Dot.Kids, an after-school tutoring center downtown that specializes in computer classes for children under ten in low-income families. When Josh walks in the door, five first-graders run up to him. Schlepped out in his Packers T-shirt and frayed jeans, Josh is a sight as the children, of all different colors, surround him.

"I let them kid around with me for a few minutes, but we have some business to do and only a couple hours," says Josh. "I'm trying not to sound too important, but I know some of these kids don't have fathers at home very much, because they work two or three jobs. The attention is part of what I do. But that's not all. I look at it this way — we're all in this together. In fifteen years, we'll all be out there in the community, working and keeping this city going. Or maybe another city, if any of us move. I want them to be happy because they have skills, and I want those skills to be natural for them. I think about all the time I used to spend on-line just horsing around. But the payoff is, it means I can walk into almost any job and know how to get started. The students here don't have that luxury. They're too young to understand this, but that's why I'm here."

We're all in this together — that's one of the phrases Sara Kingman's students drop in their conversations all the time, without realizing it.

"Early in the year, we had two discussions that really woke me up," says Rachel Berman, another eleventh-grader. "In October, Sara asked what we knew about the Puritans from U.S. history class. We all grumbled, but she wanted to put everything up on the board. So we did it — religious freedom, city on a hill. Textbook stuff.

"It's funny, but in school we didn't pay much attention until Sara handed out John Winthrop's sermon, the one about the city on a hill. One line in the middle stuck with me. Winthrop talked about the people on that ship sailing over, people who didn't know each other at all in England but who had come to set up a new

experiment, a model for community. The first time I went to Dot. Kids, I thought back to that.

"Then there was Buber. He's so demanding. I mean, I used to think of myself as a good friend, but did I really listen to people? It's so hard. I walk in there and see these kids, and mostly I see their needs. Also their possibilities. It feels good to help them, but Buber's all about more. Do I let them see me? Do I really think they have something for me too?"

### Yom Iyun

Mid-October; Chol Hamoed Sukkot. Each year, Sara pulls it off—she convinces the students to take one day off from school for a field trip. They start off with shacharit in the sukkah, and talk about vulnerability, protection, material things: the desert here in suburbia. Then she hands out the program. Next to every session—at City Hall, the local community foundation, a bus tour of poorer and wealthier neighborhoods, a visit to the community development bank—there's a comment about another stage in Y'tziat Mitzrayim. Sara calls the fall trip Yetziah, "going out."

She wants to get them thinking beyond "us and them," wealth and poverty, to liberation and covenant. Her favorite part of the day is after lunch, when the group sits down to study Exodus 2.

"It's the story of Moses as he first goes out of Pharaoh's palace, his home, and sees what is happening in society. Before I started doing KEREN MACH"AR, I never noticed, but that part of the narrative begins Vayetze Moshe — it's like he has to go through his own personal version of what he's going to lead the people through. He sees injustice, he tries to stop it, but no one pats him on the back. He has to run away and try to figure out who he is. The Midianite girls call him Egyptian, and he gives his son that great ambiguous name Gershom—'stranger there'."

The group studies the text as they sit at the office of La Raza, the local Latino advocacy organization. It's a tradition now, and each fall the staff of La Raza joins them. The students debate whether Moses was acting out of fellow-feeling or out of a universal sense of justice — did he know he was an Israelite? The staff chimes in with their response to the second incident, when the two Hebrew slaves say, "Who made you ruler and judge over us?" "We face the same thing when we work in our own community. We hold meetings, we organize, we challenge, and people say 'Who are you to tell us what to do?" That gets students asking questions about the work of La Raza, and Sara keeps tying it back to Moses.

"Now, our hosts only have it in English, but the Hebrew's ambiguous," Sara tells their hosts. "Moses explains his son's name this way: 'I have been a stranger in a foreign land.' Does he mean now, in Midian, or before, in Egypt?"

There is quiet, and then Rachel Berman says, "I always thought I lived in Highland Park. Now today, as I go around, I'm wondering if that's the only place I really live."

#### **Projects**

KEREN MACH"AR focuses on three projects. One group of students works with a local micro lending program. They pair up and offer their labor and their time to individuals, mostly women, who are starting small businesses with loans of \$1000 or less. Students raise money for the loan fund, and they train to be "business www.caje.org/learn/a\_spria\_savett.htm" 3/5

businesses with loans of \$1000 or less. Students raise money for the loan fund, and they train to be "business plan sounding boards." To play this role, the students undergo training in empathic listening and learn what the elements of a business plan are. They then help the entrepreneurs articulate their own plans, listening carefully and following up and writing it down. Each month they attend a "lending circle," where borrowers share their progress and experiences.

A second group, Josh's and Rachel's group, engage in a combination of volunteer service and youth philanthropy. Sara works with a community advisory group to identify a local need where the students can have an impact through their time and the raising of a few thousand dollars. Each week, MACH"ARniks put in a couple of dollars into the tzedakah collective, and each of them raises another \$100 in the community. A donor in the community and the local Federation each contribute another dollar for every dollar the students raise.

While they volunteer, the students research the issue they are working on — the current state of matters locally and nationally; the role of governments, foundations, and other groups in addressing it; major thinkers and model initiatives. They present a report before Pesach to the advisors and in an open forum to the Jewish community, and they decide whether to send some of the money they raise to support programs outside the community that they've learned about in their research.

The third group helps to manage a savings pool that invests in community development. These students work with a national program called TZEDEC—Tzedek/Justice Economic Development Campaign, initiated in 1996 by The Shefa Fund. TZEDEC organizes investments by Jewish institutions in community development financial institutions. CDFIs lend their deposits for low-income community development, and they pay competitive rates of interest. MACH'ARniks learn about local CDFIs and run an ongoing program to get local Bar and Bat Mitzvah students and families to deposit \$500 of their gift money in a special account, to be repaid with interest at high school graduation. The student leaders teach the younger students and their parents, and they take depositors around during the year to some of the local projects financed by the savings pool.

## Study

"Once the students are out there, in the community, the learning is electric. The experiences generate the motivation and the questions, and it almost doesn't matter which things I might choose to teach in the classroom," says Sara. The national KEREN MACH"AR standards call for a blend of Torah study, focus on key American themes such as work and the role of government, personal reflection, and general historical background on American social welfare policy and Jewish involvement in social justice movements.

"When I go out recruiting for Tichon each spring, we do an activity called 'Possessions List.' I ask everyone to come with an inventory of everything they own. Not to show anyone, but to think about. Then we talk about what material things have to do with who you are. It's an easy way to start talking about money, materialism, and class. Kids love it and they take it seriously. And it establishes that Tichon is the place to come to talk about what everyone wants to talk about, but nobody let's them — well, maybe one of the things everyone wants to talk about."

In addition to the Puritanism exercise Rachel Berman mentioned, Sara draws on the KEREN MACH"AR core curriculum that has been in use now in day schools and Hebrew highs around the country. Learning about www.caje.org/learn/a\_spria\_savett.htm 4/5

work, students look at Benjamin Franklin and Heschel's The Sabbath. On mutual responsibility, they study Buber and Maimonides, biblical texts on covenant, Dr. King's 'Letter from Birmingham Jail," and political philosophers such as John Locke and John Rawls. There are also sessions on need and suffering, drawing on the work of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik.

"It's a fine line we're walking between real practical stuff— what is tzedakah, what is the Great Society— and the spiritual dimension. I want students to look inward at themselves and also to connect with the Rabbis' notion that some of the truest encounters with the Shechinah happen when we are engaged in chesed, tzedek, and tikkun olam. I can't say we've found the mix, but it's encouraging to hear students like Josh and Rachel asking the right questions.

"What we did on Sukkot gave me the courage to try some more storytelling, not only to tell but to evoke some of the broader spiritual ideas I've been wrestling with. So from time to time before we daven ma'ariv at Tichon, I'll just try to set the scene of Adam and Eve, people who were whole with each other and God, never in need. And then, because of how we are, it came apart — we're separated from each other, and from God, and from the easy satisfaction of our needs. Each time we pray, we acknowledge that all of us are in need — it's not just those people we go to help. That's the richest way I can think of to put it — not just communal responsibility, but everyone's absolute dependence on chesed, no matter where we are in life."

In the words of the Naomi Shemer song: "None of this is a fairy tale or dream. . . All of this will come, tomorrow if not today, and if not tomorrow then the next day."

Jonathan Spira-Savett, a Conservative rabbi, is the founder of KEREN MACH"AR, a project of The Shefa Fund and a resident at Bikkurim: An Incubator for New Jewish Ideas at JESNA and UJC. If you would like this article to be about your school, in one year or in five, contact him at the KEREN MACH"AR office — (212) 284-6770 or tomorrow@bikkurim.org.