



HIGH HOLIDAYS / ALTERNATIVES TO TRADITIONAL SERVICES ABOUND

# Widening the High Holiday gates

home page

“I think there’s a market for Jews and non-Jews and those with blended families to have a sort of ‘greatest hits’ experience.”

By **DAVID RULLO**

September 5, 2023, 1:39 pm | 0



Repair the World will welcome people to their Sheridan Avenue Orchard for a pre-Rosh Hashanah celebration. Photo courtesy of Repair the World Pittsburgh

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If you have been seeking ways to observe the High Holidays beyond traditional services, you're in luck.

This year, familiar faces are trying new experiments, volunteer opportunities are plentiful and the prospects for reflection outdoors or with a song are bountiful.

Rabbi Aaron Bisno spent much of the last year establishing the Center for Interfaith Collaboration, focusing on the wisdom traditions that cross religions and cultures. He wants to extend the High Holiday experience to those without a congregation and to anyone interested in interfaith collaboration.

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“Two Sacred

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Evenings” will take place on Erev Rosh Hashanah and Kol Nidre, Sept. 15 and 24 respectively, at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Bisno has created a 90-minute service for each evening.

“I want to provide something for the larger community,” the former senior rabbi at Rodef Shalom Congregation noted. “I think there’s a market for Jews and non-Jews and those with blended families to have a sort of ‘greatest hits’ experience.”

He likens “Two Sacred Evenings” to a report in The New York Times about

longtime theatergoers opting not to purchase tickets to an entire season of Broadway shows but instead attending only the productions that speak to them.

The rabbi thinks the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh's 2017 Community Study points to a future that looks different than today.

There are 47,000 Jewish community members in the region, Bisno noted, but according to the study, only 19% are members of brick-and-mortar congregations. He thinks non-affiliated community members might be looking for an opportunity to experience the Jewish New Year.

“For people who want to have the High Holiday experience, it will be the best music we have in liturgy and a really high-quality sermon,” he said. “It’s for people who want the experience of the High Holidays but simply aren’t able or willing or interested to sit through multiple days of services.”

The services will be both familiar and new to those who attend, Bisno said, explaining that there are no prayer books; instead, there will be a program he has created as a guide.

There is a \$100 fee to attend both nights. Those interested in registering can do so at [c4ic.org](https://c4ic.org).

Kohenet Keshira haLev Fife said that Keshet Pittsburgh will have several opportunities for people to connect with the High Holidays and one another.

Rosh Hashanah day services will be held outdoors and include a lot of music.

“There’s latitude in the service to consider what tunes we are using, how much are we singing, how are we engaging with the Torah portion,” Fife noted.

On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, there will be an opportunity to experience tashlich in kayaks on the water and participate in an embodied movement practice focusing on the theme of release and letting go.

Kol Nidre will include an immersive musical experience that includes a chanting segment.

Yom Kippur will begin with a second embodied movement practice before a Shacharit service, followed by meditations and chanting. There will then be an opportunity to join the Center for Loving Kindness' High Holidays of Hope before a healing Mincha service preceding Neilah and Havdalah.

This is the eighth year of programming at Kesher Pittsburgh, and each year the number of participants grows, she said.

“I think people not only want to mark the holidays in ways that feel significant and important but also ways that are relevant and resonant and connective,” Fife said. “They give folks a sense of being part of something.”

More information on Kesher Pittsburgh's High Holiday events can be found on its [website](#).

For the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh's Center for Loving Kindness, the High Holidays start with a mitzvah.

“Jewish wisdom teaches us that on Rosh Hashanah, if you want to impact your fate in the Book of Life, there are three things you can do,” said Rabbi Ron Symons, senior director of Jewish life at the JCC and founding director of the Center for Loving Kindness. “One is you can pray. You can repent. And the third is, you can do acts of justice.”

Symons said this year the center will focus on that last opportunity with its High Holidays of Hope.

On Saturday, Sept. 16 at the Squirrel Hill JCC, and Sunday, Sept. 17 at the South Hills JCC, volunteers can package care kits for those struggling with housing and food insecurity, and then deliver those packages to community partners. Each kit will also contain words of kindness from the people packing them.

People can also donate gift cards from Giant Eagle, Target or Aldi in any amount, or shop in person or online from the center's [Amazon wish list](#).

The Center for Loving Kindness is partnering with several other Jewish community organizations as well as the Squirrel Hill Urban Coalition and the

Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.

“The bottom line,” Symons said, “is we want people to come and do something on Rosh Hashanah that’s going to make a difference in people’s lives.”

On Yom Kippur, a time when folks are focused on reflection and aspirations, Symons said, the center will be joined by Pittsburgh community leader Leon Ford and former Pittsburgh Police Chief Scott Schubert for a conversation about moving beyond past offenses and building relationships. Eleven years ago, Ford was shot five times by the Pittsburgh police in a case of mistaken identity. He was paralyzed from the waist down. He and Schubert have since nurtured a relationship.

More information about the High Holidays of Hope can be found at [jccpgh.org/event/high-holidays](http://jccpgh.org/event/high-holidays).

For those looking to connect with the fruits associated with the holiday, Repair the World has an opportunity on Tuesday, Sept. 12, at 5:30 p.m. at its [Sheridan Avenue Orchard and Garden](#).

“We’re going to harvest apples that are grown on-site and enjoy them with some local honey and cider,” said Repair the World Program Manager Annie Dunn. “Our senior fellow Em [Duhamel] is bringing their shofar to play and will be leading the group in a conversation around the Jewish New Year and rituals.”

Whether it’s an outdoor service, volunteer opportunity or new worship experience, Symons said that he thinks it is important to offer alternative High Holiday programs.

“We know that not everyone goes to synagogue on the High Holidays,” he said. “We also know that for some going to synagogue, they have a yearning for something else as well. The work we do has the possibility of being the primary experience, for some a supplemental experience, to how it is that they celebrate the High Holidays.” **PJC**

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COMMENTS



TRANSITIONS / JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER OF GREATER PITTSBURGH

# JCC annual meeting features leadership transition and vast Jewish wisdom

home page

Before stepping aside, longtime leader Brian Schreiber says thank you and touts new CEO Jason Kunzman

By [ADAM REINHERZ](#)

September 1, 2023, 11:22 am | 0





Attendees join hands while saying the Shehecheyanu blessing. Photo by Adam Reinherz

As it moves into the future, the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh is looking back for guidance — not just to the 128 years that preceded its Aug. 31 annual meeting but to three millennia of Jewish teachings.

After installing its board and recognizing 11 individuals for their guidance, kindness and volunteering, JCC leaders cited biblical verses, Talmudic insights and familiar liturgy when describing the organization, its communal presence and the transition between CEOs Brian Schreiber and Jason Kunzman.

The JCC, said Kunzman, its CEO as of Sept. 1, can be understood via the words of



Parshat Mishpatim and the statement of the Israelites: “*naaseh v’nishma* (we will do and we will listen).”

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Talmudic debate elucidates the biblical passage: Whereas Rabbi Tarfon maintained that action is greater than study, Rabbi Akiva differed. The [Talmud teaches](#), Kunzman said, that study is superior because “study brings one to action.”

“This balancing act, between thinking and doing, is exactly what makes the JCC of Greater Pittsburgh so unique,” he continued. “There are times when we run the data and build consensus to lead us to action. Then there are other times when we leap into action and see perspective at a later point.”

Schreiber, who headed the organization for nearly 25 years and is now its chief external affairs officer, said the JCC’s “secret sauce” can be discerned from its initials.

“‘J’ is our first name,” he said. “We’re an identified Jewish institution...Our heritage, peoplehood, faith, tradition and enduring values guide where we have come from and where we are going.”

These ideas are driven by the words of Hillel, who when asked to recite the entire Torah while standing on one foot, answered, “That which is hateful to you, do not do to another. The rest is commentary. [Go learn](#),” Schreiber said. “To the same end, we are a community institution and we are centered.”



Brian Schreiber and Jason Kunzman on Aug. 31. Photo courtesy of Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh

The initials provide an understanding of “today’s JCC,” which is evident not only in the entity’s history and current services but in its future, he said.

There’s a remark from Rabbi Tarfon in [Pirkei Avot](#): “It is not your duty to finish the work. Neither are you at liberty to neglect it,” Schreiber said. Less known is the end of Rabbi Tarfon’s maxim, which reads, “The reward is in the age to come.”

Overseeing the JCC for 25 years is “long by Jewish communal and JCC standards,” Schreiber said. “But our JCC was up and running for 103 years before I accepted the job. Our job now is to continue to build for the next 103.”

That future, Kunzman said, is driven by a deep understanding of self.

“There’s a reason why the word ‘Jewish’ is the first word in our name,” he said, adding that it’s “not just about what the organization has done, but perhaps even

more importantly, what the organization can do.”

Board Chair Scott Seewald alluded to the future when telling nearly 200 attendees that the organization has both registered “record numbers of campers for the 2024 summer” and maxed out its Squirrel Hill and South Hills early childhood development centers for the coming school year.

In March 2020, the JCC had 4,150 member units. By February 2021, [a year into the pandemic](#), the number dipped to 2,005. Last month, the number of member units rose to 3,834, according to JCC officials.

Although the JCC can pride itself on returning to solid footing, the desire is to grow, develop and pioneer ways of community engagement, Seewald explained.

“We continued efforts to become a regional leader in out-of-school inclusion services,” he said.

“Last summer, one in four of our campers, who came from 30 Allegheny County municipalities, were identified as neurodiverse. We’re using innovative programming and partnerships to meet the needs of this important population.”

Likewise, the JCC is committed to initiatives and collaborations promoting public health and wellness, including [community support groups](#), blood drives, volunteering and “combating isolation among older adults through congregant meals and a rich compendium of in-person and [virtual learning opportunities](#),” he said.

Seewald pointed to the JCC’s symbiotic relationship between past and present, explaining that the organization not only adheres to a generational model of serving others, but its leaders follow suit.

“While Jason has learned much from Brian over the past few years, Brian has also learned from Jason,” he said.

To honor Schreiber as he begins a new organizational role, the JCC is creating a multi-year campaign for a JCC Scholarship Endowment Fund totaling \$50 million, according to Fara Marcus, the JCC’s chief development and marketing officer.

That sum will enable the JCC to “fully fund 100% of financial assistance” — more than \$2.3 million each year. A percentage of the money raised during the JCC’s Big Night, [scheduled for March 9, 2024](#), will seed the new endowment.

For Schreiber, the surprise announcement and sentiments expressed by JCC leaders stem from “the deep Jewish roots of this agency,” he said. “Those teachings inspire us to return and create action.”



Brian Schreiber receives a standing ovation during the 128th annual meeting. Photo courtesy of Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh

The past five years have also proven instructive, he continued.

“We feel emboldened and feel more inspired to lean into who we are at the JCC so that we can define ourselves before others define us,” he said. “Leaning into Jewish wisdom and Jewish teaching actually allowed us to deepen who we are as a Jewish institution, but at the same time recognize that many of the same values that allow us to be a light among the nations allow us to be a beacon in this community. These are not mutually exclusive; they’re not binary choices and you could actually be intentional about it.”

Before stepping aside as CEO, Schreiber took one more opportunity to kvell and give thanks.

“This is a joyous moment for me to know that the agency is in such amazing professional hands,” he said. “It’s something that we really aspire to as leaders.”

Looking out across Levinson Hall — a room filled with family, colleagues, [staff](#) and community members — Schreiber asked attendees to clutch their neighbor’s hand.

Four weeks ago, “[in this very room](#),” the Shehecheyanu blessing was recited by the family members and survivors of the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting, he said.

“We say the Shehecheyanu whenever we realize the miracle of the present moment. It honors and expresses the wonder and gratitude of having arrived at this special day.”

After reciting the blessing in Hebrew, 200 people answered “Amen.” **PJC**

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## COMMENTS



SUCCESSION / JCC'S CHIEF PROGRAMING OFFICER ASSUMES THE ROLE OF CEO

# Jason Kunzman takes the helm of the JCC

home page

"It's our obligation to the staff, and the community to make sure that we've got the right people in the right places."

By **DAVID RULLO**

September 15, 2023, 11:05 am | 0



Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh

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The power of the Pittsburgh Jewish community was illustrated for Jason Kunzman and his wife, Dana, when the pair moved to the city in 2001.

“We didn’t know anyone, we didn’t have jobs and we pretty quickly landed on our feet,” he said.

The community, he said, wrapped his family “in a cocoon of care.”

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Kunzman accepted the responsibility to help lead that community when he was named president and CEO of the [Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh](#) at the organization’s annual meeting earlier this month. He had served as the JCC’s chief programming officer since 2017.

Kunzman succeeds Brian Schreiber, who served as the JCC’s president and CEO for almost 25 years and is now the organization’s chief external affairs officer and special adviser to the CEO.

Kunzman’s career in Jewish communal life began in 2003 as the chief financial officer of the [Jewish Healthcare Foundation](#). He worked at the JHF during its establishment of the [Squirrel Hill Health Center](#).

“Working with the Jewish Healthcare Foundation on such an effort that was rooted in bringing back the values of Montefiore Hospital — which was sold and [whose proceeds] created the Jewish Healthcare Foundation — I really started to better connect with how I might be able to professionally contribute to the Jewish community,” Kunzman said.

Before the JHF, he worked at the accounting firm Schneider Downs in Pittsburgh, but his resume is diverse. He graduated with an MBA from the University of Baltimore and, before moving to Pittsburgh, served as a police officer. He then worked as a forensic accountant at Ernst Young.

By 2011, he had left Pittsburgh for Washington, D.C., where he worked in the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology. He left government work and in 2017 applied for the chief programming officer position at Pittsburgh’s JCC.

“[I] decided to throw my hat in the ring, having very little faith or confidence that I really had much to offer,” he said. “I had this stereotype that those within the Jewish communal professional network grew up through the network. Here I was, an outside candidate. I’m so blessed that things worked out the way that they did.”

Kunzman and his staff are hyper-focused on what community means, he said. For the JCC, that community stretches from Squirrel Hill to the South Hills, from Monroeville to Morgantown, West Virginia (where the Emma Kaufmann overnight camp is located), and all points in between.





New JCC President and CEO Jason Kunzman volunteers at an AgeWell J Cafe lunch. Photo provided by Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh

“Our sense of community and obligation really follows where we’re located,” he said. “That speaks to our openness, our sense of inclusivity. Our organization brings a willingness to be there for whomever in whichever way we can possibly be.”

That willingness to be there for the community was illustrated on Oct. 27, 2018, when the Squirrel Hill JCC operated as a central gathering point and a place where leaders from various Jewish organizations could meet following the massacre at the Tree of Life building.

During the Pittsburgh synagogue shooter trial, it was revealed that the murderer considered both the Squirrel Hill and South Hills branches of the JCC as targets. Kunzman wasn’t surprised. He said it’s important to remain focused on the safety of the JCC’s members and staff.

“It’s an obligation that we have to one another to keep one another safe,” he said. “Whether it’s members, guests in our facilities, staff, security — we’re all in this together. And I think that that really helps me feel as though we’ve got eyes and ears all over the place.”

The JCC also played a critical role during the pandemic, providing vaccines as soon as they became available to the public.

Like all community organizations, the virus was a challenge to the JCC, but Kunzman said the organization has mostly recovered. That doesn't mean, though, that the new CEO is resting on its laurels.

"The trajectory is positive," he said, "but there's still work to be done. Inflation, rising costs — everything seems to be more complicated than it was pre-COVID."

Keeping an eye on the JCC's bottom line is Kunzman's first priority because, he said, an organization can have the best vision, mission and aspirations but without a solid bottom line none of that matters.

The No. 2 priority, he said, is the JCC's staff — and he is proud of his team.

"It's our obligation to the staff, and the community to make sure that we've got the right people in the right places to make the trains run on time and that we're always striving to be providing the best possible service we can," he said.

The third challenge is to ensure that the organization is constantly in pursuit of excellence in everything it does.

"And we do a lot," Kunzman said, "serving folks from 0 to 100. The intentionality, the rigor that is required to be excellent in everything we do — that's hard."

Kunzman will be at the JCC's helm during some significant changes.

Next year, Rabbi Ron Symons, the JCC's director of Jewish life and founder of the [Center for Loving Kindness](#), will leave the organization. And, the [10.27 Healing Partnership](#), founded after the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting, is scheduled to wrap up operations in 2028.

The new CEO prefers to think of the transitions as opportunities.

"I have a hard time thinking about anybody that could have been a better founder of the Center for Loving Kindness," he said. "We were blessed to have [Symons] at the time."

Kunzman said the world has changed since the Center for Loving Kindness'

founding, though, and he expects its next evolution to mirror those changes. Symons, he said, is involved in talks about how the next chapter for the center will look.

The 10.27 Healing Partnership, Kunzman said, is focused on the five-year commemoration of the attack.

“Following the event, there’s still a lot of work to be done,” he said. “As those needs continue to ebb and flow, so will the 10.27 Healing Partnership.”

Kunzman knows he has big shoes to fill. He described Schreiber as forward-thinking and rooted in the importance of community.

“Brian has often said that growth is the only way forward, whether it’s the number of programs or experiences, the bottom line or partnerships,” Kunzman said.

“What he meant by that is that growth in impact is most important. That is what I will take away as my primary learning from Brian.”

Kunzman said he is humbled to follow Schreiber.

“I look forward to the challenge of honoring his legacy, not only at the JCC but within the community as well,” he said.

Schreiber’s impact on the organization will be celebrated at the JCC’s [Big Night](#) on March 9, 2024.

One thing Kunzman won’t do in a hurry is fill his previous role. He said he’ll first take time to grow into his new position.

In the meantime, the husband of Dana, whom he calls his Jewish compass, and father of two — Seth, 19, a sophomore at Indiana University in Bloomington, and Gabby, 15, a sophomore at Pittsburgh Allderdice — will stay focused on fulfilling the JCC’s mission.

Those interested in following Kunzman’s tenure at the JCC can read his weekly blog, [JCC State of Mind](#), on the organization’s website. **PJC**

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## COMMENTS



SUKKOT / MESSAGES FROM THE BOOTH

# Lessons of Sukkot shared by Pittsburgh's clergy and educators

home page

How a hut can offer insights this season

By **ADAM REINHERZ**

September 26, 2023, 12:13 pm | 0





Sukkah at night. Photo via iStock-471207521

The confounding crash of emotions experienced each Tishrei will continue as Jews quickly move from Yom Kippur to Sukkot.

Five days after [seeking forgiveness](#) and entreating divine mercy, celebrants will transport to festively decorated temporary dwellings, joyously shake palm branches and enjoy the aromatic pleasure of etrogs.

Rabbi Amy Bardack of Congregation Dor Hadash has long appreciated the shifting spaces and mindsets.

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“What always strikes me is the

contrast,” she said.

Yom Kippur is an “inward-focused holiday,” where the day is dedicated to “thinking, repenting and asking for forgiveness.” Those actions occur almost entirely indoors, unlike Sukkot, she said, “where you’re supposed to move your dwelling place outdoors and focus on the harvest.”

Exodus 23:16 describes Sukkot as *chag ha’asif* (the festival of ingathering), a holiday marking farmers’ final harvesting of their fields.

Cantor David Reinwald of Temple Sinai said he’s drawn to Sukkot’s seasonal nature.

“Especially when I think about my memories of growing up in the Chicago area, Sukkot is very much the kickoff to the fall,” he said. “Being together out in the sukkah” was dependent on unpredictable weather patterns, in contrast to the 12 years he worked in southern California.

Last year marked Reinwald’s first Sukkot in Pittsburgh.

He said he happily welcomed the crisp air, loved having a Shabbat service in the sukkah and enjoyed eating soup in the hut.

“Sukkot is called *z’man simchateinu* (time of our joy). We need to embrace that element for the period of the week,” he said.



Students enjoy a joint Sukkah party between Chabad on Campus and Hillel JUC. Photo courtesy of Hillel JUC

There's another aspect to the holiday, Rabbi Meir Tabak said: "The sukkah is a physical representation of the time when we were in the desert and surrounded by clouds, which was Hashem's way of telling us, 'I got you. You are safe and secure.'"

In [Leviticus 23](#), God tells Moses that the Children of Israel should live in booths for seven days "in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt."

The verse is mentioned in a [Talmudic dispute between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva](#) regarding the construction of the dwellings. According to Rabbi Eliezer, the booths were literally booths; however, according to Rabbi Akiva, the booths were "clouds of glory."

Tabak, the chapter director for Pittsburgh NCSY, said there's a lesson to be learned when entering modern holiday structures.

"Even though we don't see these clouds today, we are still surrounded — every moment — by Hashem's goodness," he said.

Sukkot has wonderful



messages, but for many people, those lessons are enshrouded in practical concerns, explained Maria Carson, director of Jewish education and arts at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh.

For starters, “it’s expensive,” she said.

A 4-foot-by-6-foot sukkah with interlocking frame, a schach mat to place on top and shipping costs total more than \$700 on [sukkahoutlet.com](http://sukkahoutlet.com).



Sukkah building. Photo by Norton Gusky via Flickr at [shorturl.at/hmFHK](https://shorturl.at/hmFHK)

Another possible detriment to the holiday is that it’s difficult to celebrate “if you live in an apartment,” Carson noted.

The lack of space to easily build the structure requires celebrants to visit other people’s dwellings for an entire week.

Finally, Carson said, there’s the whole harvesting concept: “I don’t feel super connected to the Israeli agricultural season. I’m not a farmer — I like to be inside.”

After a conversation with another Jewish educator, Carson began warming to the often cool holiday.

“She told me that God is always with us no matter where we are dwelling, whether it’s in small or even temporary structures,” the JCC staffer said.

From that conversation, Carson began thinking about Sukkot as a time of

“showing empathy to people who are unhoused or have temporary housing.”

Reframing her understanding of the holiday enabled her to realize that “we are celebrating that God can be with us during dark times,” she said.

The message echoes a question about [what to do](#) if it rains during the [first night of Sukkot](#).

In his gloss on the Shulchan Aruch, a 16th-century code of Jewish Law, Rabbi Moses Isserles described the scenario and noted that, before retreating indoors, one “[must eat an olive’s worth](#)” and recite [Kiddush in the sukkah](#).

Near the end of that holiday prayer is the [Shehecheyanu blessing](#): “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has granted us life, sustained us and enabled us to reach this occasion.” **PJC**

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## COMMENTS



BAT-AMI / ISRAEL AND U.S.

# Israeli teens arrive in Pittsburgh to strengthen Diaspora relations

home page

With Squirrel Hill their new home, Tair Gelerenter and Ayelet Setbon begin a year of service to Israel

By [ADAM REINHERZ](#)

September 22, 2023, 10:41 am | 0





Ayelet Setbon and Tair Gelerenter. Photo by Adam Reinherz

When Israeli teen Tair Gelerenter told her friends that she was moving to Pittsburgh, they asked why she wasn't going to America.

"They said, 'How come you're going to Germany?'" Gelerenter, 19, told the Chronicle.

Although the Petach Tikvah resident corrected her friends as to Pittsburgh's whereabouts, they still wondered, "Why not Miami?" she said with a laugh.

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ago,

Gelerenter and fellow Israeli teen Ayelet Setbon arrived in Squirrel Hill for a year of volunteering. They set up their apartment, shopped and quickly adapted to a lifestyle that requires both avoiding potholes while driving and carefully ambling over cobblestones en route to teaching at Hillel Academy of Pittsburgh.

Before last month, neither Gelerenter nor Setbon had been to Pittsburgh; even so, both wanted to spend a year here instead of compulsory military service.

The teens, according to the Israeli government, are among approximately 2,100 religious women, aged 17-24, who annually complete [Bat-Ami through National Volunteer Service](#).

Called “Bnot Sherut,” participants spend between one and two years in “educational, health, social services, security, community services, and environmental preservation frameworks that meet a wide swath of social needs in Israel and the diaspora.”

Last year, Setbon, 19, volunteered in Sha’alvim, a religious kibbutz in central Israel. Gelerenter volunteered in nearby Modi’in, a city populated by many American expats.

“I heard stories about past Bnot Sherut, and the influence they had, and I was touched by it,” Gelerenter said.

There were other (warmer) locations available, but after Pittsburgh was proposed, Setbon knew it was “perfect,” she said. “It’s a small community where we can have a lot of influence.”

In recent weeks, the teens have met people at Shabbat services, while exercising at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh and simply by [walking through Squirrel Hill](#). Most of their interactions, however, have occurred inside classrooms at Hillel Academy. Through regular involvement with students, the teens add texture to discussions about Israel and its culture.

Rabbi Sam Weinberg, Hillel Academy's principal, said the Bnot Sherut serve a critical function within the [Jewish day school](#).

"Israel gets a lot of negativity in the news," he said. "Our students hear this. They also hear reports about terror attacks and calls to pray for Israeli soldiers. What the Bnot Sherut do is allow our students to see Israel through a more positive outlook."

The engagements foster "real relationships," he continued. "After graduating, many of our seniors spend a year in Israel, so having an entire group of past Bnot Sherut gives our kids an extended family — people to go to for holidays, to visit or hang out with."

Creating this network requires time and money.

Weinberg said that Hillel Academy provides the Bnot Sherut with an apartment, car and stipend for living expenses.

"We incorporated the costs into our budget, and it's something that we have no thoughts of discontinuing," he said. "We view this program as an important part of our mission and our identity."

Gelerenter and Setbon appreciate the community's support and are eager to strengthen Jewish peoplehood, they said.

Still, the teens' arrival comes at a precarious moment in U.S.-Israeli relations.

During a meeting this week between President Joseph Biden and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Biden reaffirmed the "unbreakable bond between the two countries" but expressed concern regarding "fundamental changes to Israel's democratic system, absent the broadest possible consensus," [according to the White House](#).

For 37 weeks, hundreds of thousands of protestors have demonstrated in Tel Aviv, and across Israel, against the judicial overhaul proposed by Netanyahu's government.

Following the Knesset's July approval of an initial bill aimed at curbing Israeli Supreme Court powers, the Biden administration called the decision "[unfortunate](#)."

Since arriving in the States, Gelerenter and Setbon have been asked about Israel's government.

The teens said they've also been told about a growing detachment within their demographic.

Fifty-six percent of Americans aged 18-29 hold an unfavorable view of Israel, according to a [2022 Pew Research report](#).

"Things are going on in Israel, and I come from there, but I don't feel the separation that everyone is talking about," Setbon said.

Her comments align with a Pew finding that [89% of Israeli adults](#) said relations between the U.S. and Israel are "good."

Setbon said she and Gelerenter are not in Pittsburgh to explain diplomatic relations or government policies; instead, they're here to create connections and strengthen bonds between Jews.

Progress has already been made, Gelerenter explained.

"We were greeted so nicely when we arrived, and that's not a small thing," she said.

"People keep inviting us for Shabbat meals, which is very kind. It's actually unbelievable,"

Setbon said. "Sometimes I feel like I'm in a kibbutz, or a yishuv, where everyone is taking care of me and making sure I'm OK."

The teens reiterated their gratitude to their new community.

"What I was told about Pittsburgh is that the people are special — that there's everything ... and not just one type of Jewish person," Gelerenter said. "That's

what brought me to Pittsburgh, and Pittsburgh is the best.” **PJC**

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