

Jewish Discovery Lab

New Beth Am program offers hands-on, experiential learning to its students

By Maayan Jaffe
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Rabbi Kelley Gludt is heading up Beth Am's new Jewish Discovery Lab.

No longer will late hours in a classroom setting with Hebrew flashcards and crayons to color a Purim mask define the Beth Am religious school. In fact, the word *school* will not be fitting at all. Thanks to the efforts of the synagogue's new director of congregational learning, Rabbi Kelley Gludt, Beth Am will be opening the first-ever Jewish Discovery Lab at its downtown congregation.

The lab, according to Rabbi Gludt, will serve as a portal for interactive, individualized learning for students in grades 2-6. On Wednesday evenings, the students will focus on *Shabbat*, Biblical history and understanding Jewish life cycle events through non-traditional means. The details are still being worked out, but Rabbi Gludt says students may study through journal writing, storytelling, cooking, quilting and perhaps even Lego building.

"If you know how to make a quilt, you could do an amazing Shabbat project," she says. "I want the students to feel empowered and a part of the process and excited. I want Jewish Discovery Lab to look different than the hours they spent at school."

Rabbi Gludt, who was hired six months ago and whose role also includes general congregational learning, says it's harder to be a kid today than when she was growing up. In her early 40s with a small child, Rabbi Gludt says she worries about mounting pressures to succeed, get into college, and the like. She wants the children's time at the lab to "feel good" and have some relevance to their daily lives.

She also wants to see the children make choices and learn to work together. For example, kids in grades 2-6 will be meshed together in small classrooms and will have the ability to determine by which medium they will learn best.

"I don't care how the kids are learning [the materials] as long as they are learning it," she says.

On Sundays, students will be broken into Hebrew learning groups based on ability. Three to five students will have hands-on Hebrew lessons, focusing on areas in which they need to work. For some, that might be reading. For others, writing or speaking. Rabbi Gludt is currently

getting certified in teaching Hebrew through movement.

The second half of Sunday will cater to one of Beth Am's key focuses: *tikkun olam*.

"It is social action, social justice, being a part of the neighborhood," says Rabbi Gludt.

Beth Am recently received a grant to carry out a *tikkun olam* initiative at the synagogue focused on food, sustenance and sustainability. Working by grade and with Kayam Farm, Whitelock Community Farm and Johns Hopkins University, the students will learn to take the values and lessons they've received in the classroom and apply them in their own community.

For his part, Rabbi Daniel Burg, the synagogue's rabbi, says the congregation has reacted positively to the proposed changes. Beth Am received more than 40 applicants for Rabbi Gludt's position, but, says Rabbi Burg, "Rabbi Gludt was the most qualified and exciting candidate."

Says Rabbi Burg: "We wanted someone with a good amount of experience, but also a real vision and

desire to work collaboratively and to carry out a visioning process with the congregation — to think about education for our members from cradle to grave."

Rabbi Gludt came to Beth Am after spending six years as education director and assistant rabbi at a *shul* in Tucson, Ariz. She was taking some time off when she was approached by Beth Am. She says she has a five-year plan, and Jewish Discovery Lab is just one of the first steps.

"I could count on many hands the number of horror stories I hear about people's Hebrew school experiences," says Rabbi Burg. "For many decades, we have missed the opportunity to instill a love of Judaism and a sense of inspiration about our tradition and Jewish learning [in our youth]."

Says Rabbi Gludt: "Educating our congregation should be the joy and responsibility of every member of the congregation. We need to take care of each other. It is all of our responsibilities to make sure the educational and spiritual needs of our children are being met." JT