

JEWISH EDMONTON STORIES ONLINE

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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The Temple Beth Ora had a Sunday school for many years before I became involved with it. Because my kids were at Talmud Torah Hebrew day school, they didn't need to attend the Sunday school until just before their Bar or Bat Mitzvahs. It wasn't until much later, when my kids were grown and gone... There was an evolution of rabbis at Temple Beth Ora. So I don't know if you knew Rabbi Lindsay Bat Joseph, but she was with us for, I think, almost 14 years. And when she left, we had some temporary rabbis who we would fly in for a period of time. Then we had a rabbi named Rabbi Carmit Harari. I think she may have started in around 2008. Over that period of time, Beth Shalom had a rabbi, Rabbi David Kunin, and the two of them worked really well together. At one point, and I'm not positive about the dates, but I think it was around 2012-ish that Rabbi Carmit Harari and Rabbi David Kunin decided that their two little Sunday schools were quite small. To be more viable, they joined the two schools together. Thus, *Or* from Temple Beth Ora and *Shalom* from Beth Shalom -- so *Or Shalom*. The two rabbis and Cantor David Mannes worked to make this Sunday school happen.

I don't know much about that history or where it was held or who the teachers were, but I came on the scene after, I think, both Rabbi Harari and Rabbi Kunin had left. I believe that Cantor Mannes was the "school principal". So we decided that this was good and they needed somebody from Beth Ora, I think at the time, to sort of help out. There was a lot of evolution. I'm friendly with Robin Marcus, who's a teacher at Talmud Torah, and Gaylene Soifer, who is also a teacher there. So the three of us spent a couple of summers pulling together a curriculum for the school. I worked quite hard to try and find teachers and teachers assistants, and over a few years, we evolved. We grew from, I believe we had about, a dozen kids when we started. That was from both shuls, because most of the families who went to Beth Shalom, their kids were going to a Hebrew day school. So I think we started at about a dozen and just before COVID hit in

March of 2020, we had 30 kids registered. So we've grown it quite a bit. We had four classrooms, teachers, and teachers assistants. By this time, we had Rabbi Gila Caine who had come on the scene. It was wonderful to have her as our rabbi and sort of support from that perspective.

There were a couple of years in between, I think Rabbi Klief Rose was the rabbi at Beth Shalom after David Kunin left. There was a crossover where he was a little bit involved in the school for a bit. And then I believe it was a couple years ago, maybe it was 2018 when Rabbi Schwartzman [arrived]. He's really lovely, but he had just started in the job and he just wanted a little time to acclimatize. So Beth Shalom decided not to be part of the Or Shalom school. The reality was that most of the kids were either from families who were at Temple Beth Ora or they were from families who didn't belong to any synagogue. I think Beth Shalom's board probably helped to tip the balance and decided that they couldn't afford to be putting money into it -- the shuls were supporting us a little bit. So Beth Shalom pulled back and we moved forward. When COVID hit, it was in the spring of that year, we finished up the year mostly remote. Then the teachers, the TAs, the parents, the kids, everybody decided that it wasn't feasible to have parents deal with their kids going to regular school online and also come to a Sunday school that was online. I'm sure from all that you've read it was a challenging year education-wise. So right now there isn't a running Or Shalom and perhaps it'll have a rebirth. As I mentioned, I really hope that this rebirth will be motivated and spearheaded by parents who have young kids who really want to see them have a sense of community. I think that was the biggest thing that the Sunday school offered was a sense of community. As well as the fact that the actual curriculum brought in *Torah*, brought in the holidays, brought in a lot of a heavy emphasis on values. Raising questions like how do we live a good Jewish life, and how do we live that ethically and make the world better, and tikkun olam. So there was a heavy emphasis on that. I think there's still people for whom that's really important, and so hopefully that will happen again.

When we were partnering with Beth Shalom what we used to do, and we still did even when we weren't, was something called "family education days". So we would get whole

families to come in and they would rotate through various activities with their kids. I just remember this one in Beth Shalom's kitchen. I don't know if you've been in there, it's like an industrial kitchen (it's not as big as Beth Israel's, but a decent size). I think we must have packed in maybe eight or ten families there. Everybody was baking challah. They had counters in the middle, and you had these kids, ranging in age from maybe two or three up till teenagers. They were all sitting there focused on creating and braiding their challah, decorating it with their chocolate or whatever. But each family you saw the parents interacting with their own kids and the kids making new friends, building a community. That image really sticks with me -- I have the image of the place, but more strongly I have the image of these families that had never met, but now they had something in common and they were building something together.