

Introducing the Open Beit Midrash September 2012

One of the many things that I love about my job is my office. It is comfortable and spacious. From above, I enjoy the soft illumination of a skylight, and from the window, a charming view of brownstone gardens. I can hear the eager and delightful voices of preschool children to the right, and look at our magnificent Sanctuary from the balcony on my left.

Most of all, though, I love the way that my office is crammed with Jewish books. These remind me that I am a rich man. With you, I enjoy an infinitely valuable y'rusha, or inheritance. As Jews, we are custodians of a great treasure: the wisdom and power of the Torah, the Talmud, and their ongoing commentaries, from Sinai to the present. These teachings have kept Jewish communities strong and caring, and inspired millions of acts of personal kindness. Grand schemes of social liberation, from the prophets of ancient Israel to the America civil rights movement, have found their animating vision in Torah and Jewish teachings.

This year at Kane Street, we have recommitted ourselves to sharing this inheritance. We are very excited to be starting, right after the Holidays, a program which will bring the insight and compassion of Jewish texts to all, regardless of religious background or prior Hebrew or Jewish study. We call it the "Open Beit Midrash" (literally, House of Study). Every Tuesday evening, beginning October 16, from 6:45-9:45 P.M., we will offer several simultaneous 75-minute learning modules from which students may choose. We have already engaged some of Brooklyn's most inspiring teachers. Subjects will be varied and include Torah and Talmud texts, prayer, Jewish ethics, history and philosophy, ritual observance, Jewish parenting, modern social issues, and contemporary Jewish art and literature.

How will the Beit Midrash be different from standard Jewish adult educational programs? While students will certainly gain intellectual mastery, our goal is not just the accumulation of information but a personal encounter with the text. The learning will be focused, with room to question, "What can I learn from these words to help me become a more wise and compassionate person?"

We will follow the "Beit Midrash/Yeshiva" model, where much of the study is around tables, with provocative texts and helpful resources arrayed before the students, as they look at each other as well as at the teacher. We will learn from the teacher but also share our own convictions and intellectual and spiritual search. There will be moments for reflection, but the general atmosphere will be one of energetic discussion. As we recognize daily in our prayers, Jews have a love affair with the Torah texts, and love relationships are fostered not by calm and predictability but by passion and surprise.

There is no word for "classroom" in the Beit Midrash/Yeshiva lexicon. Yeshiva leaders created not so much discrete curricula and separate sessions as environments of passion and sympathy. Students and teachers cared for one another and created personal bonds. We will re-create this atmosphere by beginning each Beit Midrash evening with a light dinner, and we will conclude each session with a coffeehouse, with Jewish spiritual music performed by Music Director Joey Weisenberg and his band.

We are deeply committed to making the Beit Midrash experience one of growth for all regardless of one's religious or educational background. At each Beit Midrash, we will have one "Madri'ach Limudi," a learning guide who will welcome students, help them if they need to find appropriate study, and be on hand to answer questions or guide advancement to the next step of learning.

Joey is now working full time at Kane Street, and in addition to his musical responsibilities, he has taken on the role of community educator. Joey will be coordinating the Beit Midash, bringing his rich pedagogic skills and religious vision to the project. For more information or to volunteer to help set-up/clean, please contact him at joeyweisenberg@gmail.com.

I wholeheartedly thank Joey and all Kane Street members who have already come forward to support and plan the Beit Midrash. We invite all of you to join in this wonderful initiative to learn and grow together as a knowledgeable and caring community.

Brochures will be available at High Holy Day services. Beit Midrash will be held every Tuesday from October 16 through May 7, 2013.

B'Shalom
Rabbi Weintraub