A group of teens transform an old chapel at the Baker Street Jewish Cemeteries

New 'genizah' and educational center soon to open doors

By Alexandra Lapkin
Advocate staff

Renovating an old cemetery chapel may seem like an odd activity for high school students, but that is indeed what Brandeis Design Lab kids chose to do over the course of eight Sundays this spring. “Our goal was to change the way people think about cemeteries,” said Joshua Winograd, a sophomore at Roxbury Latin School.

Part of the Brandeis High School Programs, the Design Lab Teen Fellowship is a new program for high school students that provides them with an opportunity to engage in a construction project aimed at solving a building problem in the Jewish community. A group of thirteen teens from eleven high schools, representing six different communities across greater Boston, make up the spring 2015 cohort of Design Lab Teen Fellows. Senior Jewish Educator, Rabbi Charlie Schwartz, heads the program. One of the goals of this project is to teach the teens “listening and empathy toward other people, organizations, and each other,” he said, “to hear their needs and stories.”

When presented with four possible construction projects from various Jewish organizations, the teens went through each proposal, deciding on the achievability of the project, the impact it would have on the community and its awesomeness factor. They chose the Jewish Cemetery Association of Massachusetts’s (JCAM) proposal to refurbish the Sons of Abraham Chapel at the Baker Street Jewish Cemeteries in West Roxbury and turn it into a genizah, a repository for storing sacred materials, and an education center.

“I think why most teens were interested in applying to this program is the building aspect, building a physical solution,” said Katelynn Plotnick, project coordinator for the Design Lab.

Alex Spielman, a junior at Wellesley High School, agreed. Unlike other volunteer projects he had done in the past, "This one is more hands-on," he said. "It was a great experience to work together as a team and it gave me a sense of fulfillment to help the Jewish community."

The genizah was originally at the Pultusker Cemetery chapel, which is a part of the Baker Street Jewish Cemeteries. "It was a dark and dingy place," said Lisa Berenson, director of Educational Programming and Development at JCAM. "There were no windows, no electricity, and it was piled high with boxes of [religious texts]." The genizah is also used to store tefillin, tallitot, and Torah scrolls that are buried at JCAM's annual book burial. JCAM staff came up with the idea to move the genizah into the Sons of Abraham Chapel, which was a more inviting space with big windows, but also in a state of disrepair and used mainly for storage. However it was redeemable, Berenson said. "The doors are weather-proof, it is light and airy."

Over the course of two months, the teens have refinished existing pews, stained and sanded window sills, installed a new floor, and built and re-stained existing bookshelves. They divided the space into two sides: one part is the genizah for the community, while

Candle Lighting Times
PARSHAT SHEMINI
BOSTON 7:10
FALL RIVER 7:09
LOWELL 7:11
SPRINGFIELD 7:16
WORCESTER 7:13
PORTLAND, MAINE 7:09
MANCHESTER, N.H. 7:12
PROVIDENCE, R.I. 7:11
ERUV STATUS:
sacred materials will be stored prior to burial and the other side is the education center, where Berenson will give presentations and lead cemetery education tours for synagogue youth and groups of adults.

“There is an educational aspect of going through this process, so people learn which items are considered sacred and appropriate to be buried and which can be discarded. This is a resource that is offered to the entire Jewish community by JCAM,” said Cantor Alan Kritz, Assistant Director of Field Supervision at JCAM.

“Recently there was a burial nearby and there were teens in the area, working on the chapel. When people asked about the teens, they were overjoyed to hear that teens were voluntarily at a cemetery, contributing back to the community,” Kritz added.

“We’re so grateful to Brandeis for this program, we would never have been able to do this on our own. They really transformed the space.” Berenson said. She always ends her educational tours of Baker Street Cemeteries at the genizah, explaining that sacred books also receive a special burial. “This new genizah is going to be a perfect ending to the tour.”

“The teens are connected to JCAM on such a level because they’ve been so involved in learning about the organization and how this education center and genizah work. Because of their investment in it, they’ve learned so much about the community and it’s really made an impression on them,” Plotnick said.

The rededication of the Sons of Abraham chapel will take place on April 26 at 2 p.m., at 766 Baker Street in West Roxbury. To apply to the Design Lab Teen Fellowship, visit www.brandeis.edu/highschool/designlab.

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