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Heart & soul

*New Hebrew school
in Northern Westchester
aimed at young
children with
learning difficulties*

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Photo by Susan Wong Wagner

Eliza Altabeff, 5, is one of five children enrolled in the LEV: Learning from the Heart program, to begin this fall at the Mount Kisco Hebrew Congregation. LEV was created by Eliza's parents and will combine traditional Jewish learning with a program tailored to the needs of young learning disabled students.

Heart and soul

New Hebrew school program in Northern Westchester aimed at young children with learning disabilities

By HILARY J. LARSON

Deciding to raise their son Jewish was the easy part for Amy Spadafino of Armonk, who is Jewish, and her husband, Frank, who is Catholic.

But finding a Jewish education for Peter, now 5, posed a much larger challenge.

Peter has apraxia, a neurological motor disorder that prevents him from speaking and makes understanding spoken language difficult.

"Clearly, regular Hebrew school was not going to work," recalled Amy. "I was concerned about how Peter could be exposed to his Jewish heritage in a warm and nurturing environment."

The answer, at least for now, is the LEV: Learning from the Heart program. Created by Linda Lief Altabef, an art teacher whose

daughter is developmentally disabled, LEV is a newly formed Sunday school program that combines traditional Jewish learning with multi-sensory enrichment tailored to the needs of learning disabled students.

The once-a-week classes will begin in September, with three teachers providing individualized attention to eight students in kindergarten through second grade.

"I was so relieved," Spadafino said of her discovery of LEV. "This program is perfect for him. Peter will be able to learn about his heritage from people who understand and are willing to adapt to his way of learning."

Parents of developmentally disabled children have complained for years that Jewish institutions lack programs that cater to special needs, with the result that many Jewish youngsters with speech, lan-



Photo by Susan Woog Wagner

Linda Lief Altabef of Mount Kisco, founder of LEV: Learning from the Heart, studies with her 5-year-old daughter, Eliza, one of five students already signed up for the program.

guage and motor delays have been denied a Jewish education.

While that situation is changing, and several temples and JCCs in Westchester now offer special needs programs for children, Altabef said she could find nothing appropriate for her 5-year-old daughter, Eliza.

"There's nothing for children in this age group, and my feeling is that you need to have this kind of education early on," said Altabef, a Mount Kisco resident who has exhibited her own art widely and has taught in several local private schools. "I got so frustrated. I knew I wanted my daughter to

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have a Jewish education, and in terms of friends, I wanted her to have that, too.

"I said, 'I can't find what I want, so I'm going to make what I want.' And I realized that a lot of the stuff I'd been doing with art in the regular classroom is therapeutic for kids with these issues."

With guidance from UJA-Federation, Altabel and her husband, Douglas, put up the initial funding for LEV, although they are currently searching for a sponsor; tuition is \$1,000 for the academic year, and classes will be held at Mount Kisco Hebrew Congregation.

In addition to Altabel, the teaching staff will include Leah Portnoy Worenklein, a special education teacher with a Hebrew school background, and Rachel Singer, a specialist in deaf education and speech.

Five students have signed up so far for the program, which Altabel advertised through flyers at Jewish community centers and therapist offices.

"Parents have said, 'Thank God someone's doing this,'" Altabel recalled. "One mother said, 'I never thought my son would be bar mitzvahed.' There's a tremendous need for this."

Portnoy Worenklein, a rabbi's daughter with a master's degree in psychology from Yeshiva University, agrees.

"For many many years there was nothing available for these kids that allowed them to feel good about themselves and not completely isolated from 'normal' kids," she said. "The need is much greater than what is available."

One major reason, Portnoy Worenklein noted, is the difficulty of finding teachers who are trained in both special education and Jewish education. Most Hebrew school teachers are not equipped to handle children of varying abilities, and although there is a trend toward mainstreaming youngsters with disabilities in regular classroom, some children simply cannot learn that way.

According to Altabel, LEV will differ from the mainstream classroom in several key ways.

Classes will last an hour and a half, rather than the two hours typical of regular Sunday schools. Rather than sitting in one place, the children will move around the room as they are exposed to music, drawing and other forms of multi-sensory stimulation.

"There's going to be movement all the time, because sitting won't work for these kids," said Altabel. "And the teaching is very physical. With kids who have language difficulties, it's even more difficult to learn Hebrew. So instead of learning a letter, they might make a letter out of Play-Doh."

Singer, a speech therapist who is the parent of a special needs child herself, will use sign language to communicate with some of the children.

"I believe that by using various methods of teaching — music, visual clues, sign language — the information will be accessible to the children," she said. "I really feel this opens up an entirely uncharted area of need in the Jewish education system."

Portnoy Worenklein added that LEV is also unique in including children with a range of ages and disabilities. The ratio of three teachers to eight children is also unusual, she said.

"It's the perfect size for everyone to get the attention he or she deserves, and for teachers to be able to individualize the experience for each child as well as let them gel as a group," she said.

As for teaching methods, Portnoy Worenklein believes in using whatever works for a particular child, allowing the child to experience the same concept in multiple ways. A student might see a word, draw it in sand or in the air; make a cookie out of the letters and eat it, or create the word in sandpaper and feel it, she explained.

While the methods may differ from standard synagogue programs, the content will not, according to Altabel. Holidays, prayers, Bible stories, basic Hebrew, and traditional Jewish songs and dances will constitute the curriculum. LEV also does not cater to any particular Jewish denomination; so far, students from unaffiliated, Reform and Orthodox families have signed up.

"When it comes down to it, it's a Jewish education, period," Altabel said. "Everyone learns Hebrew, everyone learns prayers, everyone learns about the holidays. That's what parents want."

For information, call Altabel at (914) 666-2292 or e-mail her at lieflady24011@aol.com. Altabel will host an informational picnic for students, prospective students and their families on Monday, Aug. 23, at 11 a.m., at her home.

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