

Ellen Glassman

BROOMALL RESIDENT BUILDS A POST-COVID RELIGIOUS SCHOOL

Jarrad Saffren | Senior Editor

In 2022, Ellen Glassman, 65, returned to lead the religious school at Congregation Beth El-Ner Tamid. Glassman had served in the same role before leaving in 2018 for another job, and synagogue leaders asked her to come back.

The Broomall school was down to 13 students after COVID-era closures; it needed to be built back up.

Four years into Glassman's second tenure, it's up to 75 students. That's a pre-COVID number.

"I said I'd come back if we could reimagine what the school could be. Your grandfather's Hebrew school doesn't work anymore," Glassman recalled. "That's how the Mensch Making Academy was born."

The new name — CBENT's school for younger kids is called the Mini Mensch Academy — is a reflection of its aspiration: to build mensches. Glassman doesn't believe that strict text study is the best way to do that anymore.

Since returning, she has implemented service activities, a more visual Hebrew language program, a program to incentivize students to attend services on Jewish holidays, and a more creative approach to Torah study and biblical stories. She has also hired two more teachers to reduce class sizes — from 15-20 kids per class to about 12 — and expanded the role of a learning support teacher to work with students of all skill sets, not just kids who need help.

"On Wednesdays, kids are tired after school, so you want them to have a wonderful experience," Glassman said.

A lifetime ago, Glassman worked as a recreation therapist at hospitals, but she left that career after her three children were born.



"I decided I didn't want to miss any of their lives," she said.

The mother went back to school to earn her master's in education. A friend told her that she could work full-time again as an education director at a synagogue.

Glassman started at Beth El-Ner Tamid as a teacher in 1993, worked her way up to more curriculum-based roles and eventually became the education director. She left in 2018 to take a job at Jewish Learning Venture.

But she remained a member at CBENT, and with time to look around, she noticed a couple of emerging trends: "I felt like some of our families, they left our congregation after their kids had their bar or bat mitzvah. And with interfaith families, not everybody felt that learning Hebrew and prayer was the most important thing about being part of a synagogue."

Interfaith families were also becoming

a bigger cohort in the congregation.

"One year, we had 16 new families, and all of them were interfaith. Families were not coming in with rich Judaic backgrounds or who had been bar and bat mitzvahed. We had to look at what their needs were," Glassman said.

The summer after she returned, Glassman set up ice cream dates with 50 different congregational families.

"What I heard was they wanted a community; they wanted to belong; they wanted to do something other than reading out of prayer books," she said. "They wanted to use their Jewish lens to do something meaningful."

After those talks, Glassman started contacting social service agencies, like the Jewish Relief Agency, the Mitzvah Food Pantry and others. She began making service activities, like packing meals for those in need, part of the curriculum.

"It becomes like a community hub, our

synagogue, to do good things. We're going to help if there's a need," she said.

But the basic Hebrew school subjects are still essential, according to Glassman.

For the Hebrew language, she uses a program out of California called Yofi Tofi, which implements visual learning techniques, like flash cards.

With the Torah, kids dress up, act and rap to retell stories.

"The kids have fun with it," Glassman said.

For Jewish rituals, the director has implemented a program in which students get a fun trip if they attend services on seven Jewish holidays that aren't as prominent, Shabbat included. Trips have included Dave & Buster's and Thrillz High Flying Adventure Park in King of Prussia.

Change has also come in the form of more individualized attention for students. Smaller class sizes have allowed teachers to focus on individuals. A team of five *madrichim*, or teacher aides, now complements the seven teachers. The learning support teacher has also allowed the religious school to implement a sort of IEP program [Individualized Education Program].

"It's not just kids who might have IEPs in their school," Glassman said. "We identify kids who would do really good working one-on-one or in small groups."

Glassman actually recently hired a new director for the Mensch Making Academy, as it's now too much work for one person. But the 65-year-old is not slowing down.

"I'm still growing this. I have this big vision that every child should have a Jewish education in the way that they need it," she said. ■

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