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# JEWISH COMMUNITY VOICE

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## ENRICHING SENIOR LIVES

### Seniors and faith: Finding deeper meaning and connection as you age

Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the leading Jewish theologians and Jewish philosophers of the 20th century, once said, “Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement...Get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.”

What an inspiring way to look at religion—to open our hearts and minds to amazement and wonder. Heschel’s theological works argued that religious experience is a fundamentally human impulse. With that thoughtful perspective, it got me to thinking about how an individual’s relationship with religion inevitably changes over time, mirroring how the “human impulse” evolves as we age. There’s no denying that as we age our perspective on life and religion changes.

As I embark on a conversation about seniors and faith, I wanted to take this opportunity to introduce Lions Gate’s new director of Religious Services to the greater South Jersey region. Our new cantor, Jana Schachter, grew up and currently lives in Washington Township. She is a long-time member of Congregation B’nai Tikvah-Beth Israel in Sewell, where she herself became a bat mitzvah and where she has taught Hebrew school and tutored bar and bat mitzvah students for many years. Cantor Jana is a Stockton University graduate who majored in biology and minored in Jewish studies. She went on to study Torah in Israel at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, a Jewish learning community based in Jerusalem with programs worldwide. She later returned to the United States to attend Hebrew College in Boston, where she earned a master’s

degree in Jewish Studies as well as received cantorial ordination.

Cantor Jana joined Lions Gate on August 2. Her responsibilities at Lions Gate are many. She teaches a Jewish Wisdom class three times a week to our Independent Living residents, our Assisted Living/Memory Care



**DAVE THOMPSON**  
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residents, and to our Skilled Nursing residents. Her classes touch on varied topics like “Preparing for the High Holidays” and “Constructive Disagreement Through a Jewish Lens.” She conducts a Morning Minyan prayer service on Thursdays, where she covers the timely Torah portions for that week. Shabbat services are held weekly on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings for all residents. Cantor Jana provides pastoral care, meeting one-on-one with residents to talk, share memories, and provide companionship to those looking to spend time with a friendly face. Providing comfort to residents and families who are on hospice care is a special part of her role. This year, Cantor Jana led our High Holiday services all in-person, and of course they were streamed for those who wished to celebrate in their homes. We are so lucky to have Cantor Jana join the Lions Gate community and wish her a long and happy tenure here.

I sat down to speak with Cantor Jana about her role.

**DT:** Welcome Cantor Jana. I join all of our many residents in saying we are so happy to have you as part of our community.

**CJ:** Thank you so much. I have received such a warm welcome from everyone. It’s been so touching. I was really struck by how diverse yet supportive our community is of each other. Not everyone who lives at Lions Gate is Jewish, and not everyone who is Jewish holds the same viewpoints. But being a faith-based community means that we have conversations about faith here every day, and that’s what I find so inspiring. We have classes on a variety of Jewish topics. We have weekly Shabbat services. And we have so many traditions that touch on the cultural experiences of being Jewish, such as the Yiddish Club. I love that faith and Jewish culture are so relevant here.

**DT:** As a cantor, do you find that sharing music deepens your connection with your faith?

**CJ:** Absolutely. Much of our services are liturgy-based, but I like to incorporate all different kinds of music like folk songs and Yiddish songs into my services. For residents on the healthcare side of our community, I find that it’s not just songs from the traditional liturgy but folk songs from childhood that are likely to trigger a memory or a connection to the service. When I sing a simple familiar song and see a resident’s eyes light up and they start clapping along, that is so rewarding. Music is a powerful way to make services more meaningful for everyone.

**DT:** In your experience, do you find faith deepens for people as they age?

**CJ:** As years pass, many seniors lean on faith as they reflect on the ups and downs they have experienced over the years. I

think it’s fair to say that many seniors reconnect with their faith as they age. It’s not that they didn’t have faith in their younger years, but faith for seniors is a way to renew their outlook on life, and feel more connected to others who share that faith. After people retire, they have more time to explore their faith and reflect on their beliefs. At Lions Gate, many of the residents choose to attend weekly services, and there are a number of classes offered that explore the Jewish faith, history, and experience. We make it easy for seniors to find a deeper connection to their faith if they so choose.

**DT:** What are the benefits to seniors in taking the time and effort to reflect on their faith?

**CJ:** It has been my experience



**CANTOR JANA SCHACHTER...**  
Lions Gate’s new director of  
Religious Services.

that seniors who reflect on and deepen their faith often have a more hopeful outlook and a higher sense of purpose and meaning. Not everyone finds comfort in faith, but even sharing the cultural aspects of Judaism with other Jews can be a very rewarding and bonding experience. For many residents, attending a class on Jewish history is just as inspiring as a Shabbat service can be. Others take great pride in brushing up on their Yiddish in Yiddish

Club because it reminds of them of their childhood when Yiddish was spoken in their home. G-d can be found anywhere you look.

**DT:** So, for those who might feel a disconnect to their faith over the years, what would you say to them?

**CJ:** When Abraham Joshua Heschel encourages us to live life in radical amazement, what he’s saying is to embrace the joy of faith by finding deeper meaning and connection in whatever is most meaningful to you. There is no one “right” way to infuse your life with faith. Some people find connection by going to services. Others take a more spiritual approach to faith and find peace in practicing meditation and gratitude. Still others find a renewed interest in faith when they take an intellectual approach to religion and study scripture. The common benefit that each of those approaches provides is that seniors who stay curious and engaged and connected with others will lead a life filled with joy. And joy is at the very heart of all faith. So while I have personally always connected with faith through prayer, others may connect with faith by baking challah or spending time enjoying nature. Whatever it is that brings you a sense of comfort, meaning, purpose, and connection is a wonderful way to build a bridge to a stronger sense of faith.

Want to learn more about Lions Gate? We’ll meet with you in whatever way you’re most comfortable—an in-person tour, a FaceTime call with a virtual tour, a one-on-one meeting at your home, or a Zoom chat.

Contact Angela Stevens at (856) 679-2357 or email [ASTevens@LionsGateccrc.org](mailto:ASTevens@LionsGateccrc.org) to set up an appointment. ▲  
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