

ToBE: Transforming Tikkun Olam at Beth El

BY SHERYL ROSENKY MILLER

We are delighted to announce the launch of an exciting and transformative new initiative at Beth El, “ToBE: Tikkun Olam at Beth El. What We Want the World to Be.” ToBE will be like having Mitzvah Day all year long, through an intentional model of social action across Beth El. ToBE will make “repairing the world” a high priority and core value of Beth El.

The purpose of ToBE is to markedly increase community engagement in tikkun olam throughout Beth El and to widely publicize outcomes of these projects. We will accomplish this by coordinating and publicizing all social action activities planned by the various groups at Beth El. Nearly every interest and auxiliary group at Beth El, from the Beth El Preschool (BEPS) to the Senior Caucus, engages in community service activities throughout the year. These meaningful programs include serving monthly meals at Shepherd’s Table, collecting winter coats for the homeless (BEPS), cooking for area shelters (Sisterhood), partnering with Jewish Foundation for Group Homes residents (Religious School and Day Schools Committee), and more.

Inviting All to Participate

These programs require publicity and coordination to ensure that every congregant, beyond the sponsoring group, is aware of the project and is invited to participate. By streamlining individual tikkun olam projects, ToBE intends to maximize the impact of the existing array of tikkun olam programs that occur all year and ultimately to build upon them with innovative new programs.

For example, Zhava members participate in the Hope Connections 5K. This walk benefits Hope Connections for Cancer Support, a local organization that enables those with cancer and their loved ones to deal with the disease’s emotional and physical impact. All Beth El members could be encouraged to participate in the walk or support a walker.

Another example: What if ToBE publicized the BEPS diaper drive for low-income families to the entire congregation? Together, we could have a greater impact on repairing the world by donating more

of these expensive items for those in need. Likewise, Sisterhood holds food and toiletry drives throughout the year. If our whole congregation were aware of these efforts and had the opportunity to participate, we could more than quadruple our results.

This is only the beginning. We could include a tikkun olam component to our shul-wide programming, such as holding a school supplies drive to benefit low-income kids in Montgomery County as part of the Back-to-Shul BBQ. We could donate much-needed items for Israeli soldiers as we enter the Beth El Gala. The ideas are limitless.

Tikkun Olam (ToBE) Task Force

The Tikkun Olam (ToBE) Task Force includes representatives from the many Beth El groups that engage in ongoing community service programming. As chair of the task force, I hope to draw from my experience as chair of Mitzvah Day for three years and from my 18 years as a legal aid attorney and manager for low-income seniors at AARP Legal Counsel for the Elderly.

The task force has developed a comprehensive inventory of social action programming that already occurs at Beth El. We will discuss how to create a centralized clearinghouse for publicizing projects through the Beth El website, the *Scroll*, and the weekly announcements. The task force will develop creative methods to promote the new brand, “ToBE,” to ensure that it becomes associated with Beth El. We will form three subcommittees: community engagement, marketing and communications, and metrics and outcome. Task Force members include the clergy and staff, Larry Sidman, Jerry Sorkin, Ivy Fields, Jana Singer, Peter Novick, Fran Rubin, Jonathan Epstein, Jack Ventura, Andrea Rifkind, Jennifer Odintz, Andrea Golden, Debbie Feinstein, Stacey Topol, Evelyn Karson, Doris Povich, Lisa Lerner, Jon Polon, Donna Shimshi, and Howie Stein.

Looking In, Out, and Up

In keeping with the framework of Rabbi Harris’s maxim, “looking in, looking out, and looking up,” the Tikkun Olam (ToBE) Task Force will devote its first year to “looking in” through coordinating, publicizing, and celebrating the results of current projects within the multitude of groups at Beth El.

Next, ToBE will “look out” by exploring partnerships with area nonprofit organizations through the Beth El Nonprofit Roundtable, comprised of congregants involved in philanthropies within Montgomery County. ToBE will “look up” by educating congregants about the central role of tikkun olam in Judaism.

Through ToBE, we intend to dramatically enhance Beth El’s impact on “repairing the world” by mobilizing our membership. Beth El will become known as a synagogue that places a high value on tikkun olam. From improving our environment, visiting the sick, supporting charitable causes in Israel, and cooking meals together for the homeless, ToBE will offer programs that meet the diverse interests of our congregation. Please join me on this incredible journey. To participate, contact me. ■