

Beth El's Soul Center Promises to be a Transformational Experience

by [Simone Ellin, Associate Editor](#) | [Baltimore](#), [Community](#), [Community Resources](#)



Rabbi Dana Saroken says she isn't discouraged by studies suggesting Jews are increasingly disenchanted with organized religion.

“When you look at all Judaism has to offer, it’s impossible to believe we can’t find ways to make our religion relevant in the 21st century,” says Beth El Congregation’s associate rabbi. “People are yearning for meaning and purpose, for something bigger than themselves, whether that

means authentic relationships, community, a higher power or God. And we want to grow. It's when we're growing that we feel truly alive."

The rabbi's solution? The creation of the Soul Center, a "spiritual startup that focuses on mindfulness, healing, rejuvenation and growth, within a Jewish context." The center will offer workshops, seminars, religious services and classes designed to address the spiritual health aspirations of members of Baltimore's Jewish community.

Open to all regardless of synagogue membership or Jewish affiliation, the Soul Center will offer a mix of free and fee-based programs. Thanks in large part to a lead gift from the Alvin and Lois Lapidus family and created from the repurposing and renovation of two former preschool classrooms in the synagogue's early childhood center, Rabbi Saroken's vision will soon become a reality.

Construction on the Alvin and Lois Lapidus Center for Healing and Spirituality (nicknamed the Soul Center) is expected to be completed in October. An official launch will take place sometime in November.

Caryn Corenblum, a daughter of the Lapiduses, is a big proponent of the project. "It is so inspiring to be connected to a resource like the Soul Center and driven by Rabbi Saroken," says Corenblum. "It's a win-win-win!"

For the past year, Rabbi Saroken, Rachel Siegal, who will be running the center's day to day operations, and a small team of advisers from Beth El have been meeting, planning and piloting Soul Center programs.

"It's been an experimental year, where we've tried out different ideas to see what people wanted and what worked best," says Rabbi Saroken.

In addition, the rabbi, Siegal and others have consulted with experts in the fields of group work and mindfulness practices.

"We've spent many months listening," says Rabbi Saroken. "With [project consultant] Maggi Gaines, we conducted 45 personal interviews and many more coffee dates. We asked people to share their spiritual yearnings and to enlighten us about where and why they went searching beyond Judaism to fulfill them. We asked how we could help them to live more soulfully."

Rabbi Saroken also met with interior designers to ensure that the Soul Center's ambience will be peaceful and welcoming.

Tastefully Done

Last year, the Soul Center offered a seminar in mindful eating with certified coach and wellness instructor Julie Reisler and classes in organic cooking with chef Sally Eisenberg. Susie Mann, an advisory team member, hosted pre-Thanksgiving organic cooking workshops at her home.

“Sally taught us to make quinoa four ways, while the rabbis interspersed Jewish wisdom,” says Mann. “Then, the 12 of us sat together and had a meal. We talked about abundance and asked ourselves, ‘What is enough?’ One woman said she was profoundly moved by the experience. ‘This is how I love Judaism,’ she said. ‘I don’t necessarily want to sit in a service that I don’t understand. I want to learn Jewishly and I want to know myself Jewishly.’

“That was how we knew we were on the right track.”

The center also offered *Mussar* yoga, seminars in compassion fatigue and de-cluttering, programs in mindfulness practice and more.

“The success of the programs was way beyond what we anticipated in terms of attendance and feedback,” says Rabbi Saroken, who also expressed great thanks to advisory committee members, Diana Terrill and Margie Daniels.

The Soul Center’s pre-Rosh Hashanah “Teshuva Walks” around Lake Roland were extremely popular and will be offered again this year. The walks promote self-transformation through reflection, and Rabbi Saroken will lead one on Sept. 25.

Advisory team member Kathy Shapiro says she was deeply moved by last year’s Teshuva Walk.

“When we prepare for the High Holidays, we think about clothes, shoes and cooking,” she says. “But how do we prepare to re-create ourselves for Rosh Hashanah? The walks were incredibly meaningful. We alternated between walking meditation, text study and sharing our reflections with others.”

Drums, A Nook and a Tish



Currently, the Soul Center hosts a weekly meditation class facilitated by trained teachers including Rachel Wohl, Susan Weis Bohlen and Aaron Schneider. Each facilitator finds ways to invoke Jewish connection through the meditations.

“Some people think you have to be experienced to meditate,” says Shapiro. “I had never done it before. I found the teachers were able to engage those who were experienced as well as newbies. We want this to be accessible to all without diminishing the depth.”

On Saturday, Sept. 24, at 11:30 p.m., the Soul Center will offer a late night Selichot drum circle featuring s’mores and apple cider, Jewish teachings by Rabbi Saroken and a drum circle by Jordan Goodman, a psychotherapist and therapeutic drumming practitioner.

“It will take place in the dark of night without inhibitions,” says Rabbi Saroken. “We will be asking the big existential questions — ‘Who are we? Who do we want to be? What’s standing in our way?’”

In October, Rabbi Steve Schwartz, Beth El’s senior spiritual leader, will be on hand for the Soul Center’s inaugural “mixology tish.”

“He’ll show us how to make his favorite scotch-and-bourbon drinks, and in between will offer some short yet meaningful Torah teachings,” says Rabbi Saroken.

Other upcoming events include programs for couples and parents, weekly healing services, sacred aging groups, classes in Zentangling, a kind of artistic doodling that promotes mindfulness and creative expression and even some getaways such as an upcoming mother/daughter soul spa weekend in St. Michaels.

When construction on the new building is complete, the Soul Center will include group spaces, a nook where people can observe intimate life cycle events, and the congregation’s adjoining mikvah, which can be used for conversions, healing and marking transformational occasions such as marriage, divorce and special birthdays.

“We want this to feel like a home away from home,” says Siegal, who notes that the center will be open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., and for Sunday programming.

To ensure visitors who aren’t Beth El congregants feel comfortable, the center will have an external door so people can enter the building without walking through the synagogue. “No one should feel like an outsider,” Rabbi Saroken says.

While the initial advisory team was made up of Beth El members, Siegal says she will be seeking participation from a cross-section of Jewish community members for a larger committee to be formed in the near future.

Rabbi Saroken says people should feel free to come to the Soul Center in casual attire.

Says Shapiro: “If you’re on your way back from a run and feel like stopping by to take part in a meditation session, feel free to stop by, sweaty or not.”

Siegal adds, “Come as you are. This is a non-judgment zone.”

Rabbi Saroken promises a transformational experience for all. “You can trust that every time you walk through that door,” she says, “you will be changed.”

For information and a full listing of Soul Center programs, visit
<http://bethelsoulcenter.squarespace.com/past-events/>