

# KOSHER MUSIC TO BRICKS-AND-CLICKS

new religious initiatives

>> raeefa shams and laura a. baum



Photo by Carmi Wisemon. Jerusalem fifth graders participating in Sviva Israel's Eco Connection.

## 1 ATARA

“If every Jew realized that what they have inside them has the potential to be more valuable than what they see around them, our world and community would be the richer for the unique and profound contributions that each person will offer.”

– Miriam Droz, Founder of ATARA

As an organization that supports Torah-observant creative and performing artists, ATARA, the Arts and Torah Association, offers settings in which artists can express themselves and still preserve a halakhic context. Such milieus might include a *shomer* Shabbat or women-only venue, exemplified by the second annual women-only conference ATARA will be holding for the creative and performing arts throughout Manhattan and Brooklyn November 7-10, 2008. The conference will include workshops on various art mediums, visual art displays and film screenings, music and dance performances, and a keynote address by Hollywood film director Robin Garbose.

“The arts are ways to communicate, so there is nothing wrong with them—only what is being communicated,” explains Miriam Droz, the founder of ATARA. “What would the world look like if we truly harnessed our creative potential into beautifying, uplifting,

and educating the world, a Jewish imperative to begin with?”

ATARA has responded to a need to be able to create art within an observant religious framework. Participant Leah Sigal from Monsey, NY, knows firsthand how imperative it is: “As a singer/composer, I view my role as an instrument in God’s hand ... Composing allows me the freedom to express my innermost sentiments via lyrics or music, in a way that is uplifting and conducive to feeling closeness to God and to my people.”

Participants and ATARA developers include Garbose, who also runs Kol Neshama, a musical theatre camp for girls in Los Angeles; dance instructors Yocheved Polonsky from Cleveland, Ohio and Kari Isaacson and Rivka Lomiansky from Toronto; and former Broadway actress Judy Winegard from Los Angeles. These women will be coming together to build a social community based on the shared values of Torah observance and professional artistic expression.

Further information about ATARA can be found at [www.artsandtorah.org](http://www.artsandtorah.org) and conference registration is now open at <http://atara2008.eventbrite.com>.

## 2 Sviva Israel

“From Jerusalem needs to come forth the message of Judaism and the environment. The world is waiting to hear what Judaism’s approach is to today’s environmental concerns... What Carmi Wisemon started as a neighborhood project has quickly become an international project with participants not only from Israel, but also the US and England, and I congratulate him on this achievement.”

– Uri Lupolianski, Mayor of Jerusalem

Yedidei Sviva—Sviva Israel is an organization promoting environmental and civic responsibility in Israeli society through the education and training of today’s Jewish youth.

Through combining the study of traditional Jewish texts with hands-on service learning, Sviva Israel's educational and community programs explore the connection between Judaism and the environment in order to facilitate understanding among Israel's fragmented society. This is demonstrated in Sviva Israel's annual conference on "The Environment in Jewish Thought and Law." The 2008 conference, held on July 9, brought together such diverse participants as the Israeli Minister of the Environment, Gidon Ezra; Israel Chief Rabbi, Yona Metzger; Mayor of Jerusalem, Uri Lupolianski; as well as Haredi rabbis and environmental academics and activists.

Sviva Israel's international and web-based projects connect young Israelis with each other and with their global peers through programming that contributes to their dedication to environmental protection, to their Jewish identities, and to their pride in Israel. It nurtures connections that will ensure Israel's future as an environmentally sustainable home for the Jewish people. This was further emphasized by Minister Gidon Ezra in his address to the conference: "It is thanks to this kind of programming that the religious public has become a full partner in the efforts to bring environmental protection to Israel."

Carmi Wisemon, the executive director of Sviva Israel, proclaimed at the conference: "We are delighted that we have been able to bring together in a public forum the highest levels of rabbinical leaders in Israel with environmental professionals, activists, academics, and educators—religious and non-religious. In understanding Judaism's approach to the environment, it is incumbent upon us to first learn about the environmental issues that we face today."

**More information on Sviva Israel can be found at <http://www.svivaisrael.org/>**

## **3 OurJewishCommunity.org**

**"The online congregation will provide many of the same services of a brick-and-mortar congregation, such as access to rabbis, sermons, educational materials, social networking, discussions, and more. The benefits of the online congregation are many: It is not restricted to geographic boundaries. It provides a place for people who may not have a progressive synagogue in their local community to which they feel connected."**

**- OurJewishCommunity.org**

When a recent newcomer discovered OurJewishCommunity.org, an online synagogue, she was puzzled by the concept. "I understand the words 'online' and 'congregation,'" she remarked, "but I have no idea what the phrase 'online congregation' means."

With only 44 percent of American Jews claiming synagogue affiliation and with most Jewish websites functioning only as resources and discussion boards, Our Jewish Community Online ([www.OurJewishCommunity.org](http://www.OurJewishCommunity.org)) seeks to surpass the existing models of Internet and of congregation, and create a hybrid "bricks-and-clicks" synagogue online. The model enjoys great appeal with young Jews who are increasingly mobile and searching for a strong

congregation and rabbinical leadership regardless of location. Amidst the larger phenomenon of social networking sites, the time for an online synagogue is ripe.

OurJewishCommunity.org was started by Congregation Beth Adam in Cincinnati, Ohio ([www.bethadam.org](http://www.bethadam.org)). Beth Adam has drawn on Reform, Reconstructionist and Humanist intellectuals to create a model for progressive Judaism. The Internet allows the congregation to share its passion for

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intellectual inquiry, religious diversity, and spiritual discovery outside of Cincinnati. Indeed, OurJewishCommunity.org has begun providing educational materials for adults and children, podcasts, modern *midrashim*, and innovative discussion forums encouraging community connection.

One feature that makes OurJewishCommunity.org unique is that members have access to Beth Adam's rabbis. While the rabbis may not be present for lifecycle events of their online congregants, they offer liturgy, support, and planning. Beth Adam's rabbinical staff is particularly concerned with ensuring that intermarried Jews—an ever-increasing phenomenon—have access to Jewish resources for their life cycle services, from weddings to births. OurJewishCommunity.org will soon feature live webcast services and educational programs, ensuring that the website becomes a true community and not simply a resource.

OurJewishCommunity.org is an evolving process that will be influenced by congregants' feedback. Healthy congregations are built over time by meeting the needs of an involved membership. We have survived as Jews largely because of our willingness to evolve. Our world is changing constantly, and innovative ways must be imagined to make Judaism compelling to modern Jews.

**Access resources at [www.OurJewishCommunity.org](http://www.OurJewishCommunity.org) and via the toll free number 866-918-2326, or read more at [www.presentense.org/magazine](http://www.presentense.org/magazine). **PT****

**Raeefa Shams** is a recent graduate of Wellesley College. Currently doing an ulpan at Hebrew University, she will sadly be returning to the US to find gainful employment and fill out graduate school applications.

**Laura A. Baum** was ordained by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 2008. She is the Director of Online Congregation at Congregation Beth Adam in Loveland, Ohio, working along with Rabbi Robert B. Barr, the congregation's founding rabbi.