

Sweet Passover treat offered for special-needs Jewish congregants



Chocolate pretzels evocative of roasted shankbones were included at the HUGS Passover Dessert Chocolate Seder. (Karie Angell Luc / Pioneer Press)

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Some people have seders on the first night of Passover, some have them the second. And some, like those at Congregation Beth Shalom on Sunday, have chocolate seders.

About 50 people attended the event in which chocolate in various forms was substituted for the stations of the seder plate. The seder, staged annually in recent years at Congregation Beth Shalom, 3433 Walters Ave., is intended to give people with special needs a sweet taste of being Jewish on the holiday.

That has not always been easy, said Beth Shalom Cantor Steven Stoehr. About six years ago, he said, he asked a member to think about doing something for people who had various kinds of disabilities, mostly developmental,

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"The doors of the synagogue were not always wide enough for wheelchairs," Stoehr said, referring not to literal barriers, but more attitudinal: Are synagogues doing enough to welcome people, for worship and for holiday celebrations, with disabilities or developmental challenges?

He felt that they didn't, at least locally, so he founded HUGS – Healthy Understanding, Growing Spaces – to give special services to those who wanted or needed them. He said he didn't want to make it an organization just to grow membership at his temple. Instead, he said he sought to open the area's worship community to people who had a hard time clearing hurdles, to "get us out of our own silos."

North Suburban Synagogue Beth El in Highland Park joined in, sending congregants' family members, and hosting HUGS events. Glencoe's Am Shalom, Wilmette's Beth Hill el Congregation B'nai Emunah, Congregation Beth Am of Buffalo Grove, Beth Judea of Long Grove and Deerfield's B'nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim (BJBE), Moriah and B'nai Tikvah congregations later became participants.

"I think the message is not that it's this congregation or that congregation, but that it's the entire Jewish community, moving the needle forward," said Ali Drumm, Beth El's director of informal education.

Her temple has hosted some holiday HUGS events, she said, but it has not always been easy.

"Some of the HUGS events had really low attendance, or, at least, less than expected attendance," she said. But the parent of a special needs congregant asked her to understand that sometimes it can be difficult to work out the logistics necessary to attend such events. "'Please don't give up on us,' he said. 'The special needs community has felt alienated, ignored.'"

Sunday's HUGS event was its most well-attended chocolate seder, Stoehr said. It found Max Muslin, 13, a seventh-grader from Glenview's Attea Middle School, spending what appeared to be a happy 90 minutes with his grandmother, Linda Muslin, also of Glenview.

"This is a highlight," she said, becoming tearful. "This is one of the best days of my life, really."

Mikayla Needlman, 11, came to her first HUGS event Sunday, said her father, Marc Needlman. She has Cornelia de Lange Syndrome, which for Mikayla means developmental delays, said her father.

"In her case, we're very blessed, it's mild," Marc Needlman said.

Coming to the chocolate seder was a way to prepare for Mikayla's bat mitzvah, he said.

"Now that Mikayla's old enough to understand, we wanted to start exposing her to temple," Marc Needlman said. "So we brought her to this, which is really, really fun."

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"We understand that adults with disabilities are yearning for connections to community," BJBE Cantor Rayna Green said. "They really want their own events within the synagogues."

Many of the HUGS events are held on different days than regular holiday observances. In the case of a chocolate seder, Stoehr said, it's much better before the start of the holiday – April 10 – when dietary restrictions kick in.

"Passover chocolate is a little questionable," he said.

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