

Ottawa Community to Learn the Big Ten

By Zev Singer

A recent survey in the U.S. found that more people could name the seven ingredients of a McDonald's Big Mac hamburger than could list the ten commandments.

People were also quicker to name the members of television's Brady Bunch family than the heavenly top ten.

It doesn't really take a zealot to see that this might not serve Americans well – although it may serve them “fries with that.” The Torah and its values have always been, and will always be, at the centre of civilized life. Neither the “two all beef patties” nor any of the fictitious Brady kids, even the “youngest one in curls,” will be more than a most obscure footnote to history.

This is where JET (Jewish Education through Torah) comes in. While the Ottawa organization might not be able to single-handedly re-orient the western world around Torah values, over the next five months it will be doing a lot to help Ottawa's Jewish community gain a deeper understanding of the ten commandments.

This year, for the third year running, JET will be organizing a city-wide learning program leading up to the annual Jewish Unity Live event in April. This year's theme is the ten commandments.

Through individual and group learning, Jews of all backgrounds and affiliations will take a close look at the world's most famous top ten list.

Mind you, not even the description of the list as a “top ten” is uncontroversial. Judaism has never privileged these ten commandments over any of the other 603 in the Torah, in terms of the responsibility to follow them. Yet, clearly this round-numbered list seems to have a special place. What is their unique significance?

That, of course, is just one of thousands of questions that can and will be asked in the coming months, since everybody comes to the text with their own perspective.

And that's what makes this learning project go. The reason Jewish Unity Live focuses on learning is that the one thing that Jews of all backgrounds can always agree on is the importance of learning, asking and growing. The groups that have been

formed the last two years to study as part of Jewish Unity Live (be it Lunch and Learns at Gowlings, or small groups hosted in people's homes) have been very diverse, says JET's Rochel Goldbaum, who is coordinating the event. Every group comes at the learning project with their own take.

“Everyone can do it in the way they want to,” Mrs. Goldbaum says.

Ottawa dentist John Kershman says he hosted a learning group in his home last year. He was surprised by how much discussion and interaction was sparked by even a small section of text during the sessions (last year Pirkei Avot, or Ethics of the Fathers, was the chosen text).

“They were stimulating, thought provoking,” Dr. Kershman says.

Aryeh Stegenga, who was part of a study group for young adults, says he'd never tried this type of study before and he was amazed by the different perspectives and approaches that some of his fellow group members took to the text.

"The motto of Jewish Unity Live is Building Jewish Unity through Learning" says Rabbi Zischa Shaps, Director of JET. "There is an extra special power to learning when the whole community is learning the same material."

Jewish Unity Live will take place on Tuesday, April 8, 2008, at Library and Archives Canada, 395 Wellington St. (And even if you don't take part in the learning program, you can still come to the big event).

Just for the record, here are those big ten.

1. I am Hashem
2. Do not worship idols
3. Do not take Hashem's name in vain
4. Keep Shabbat
5. Respect your parents
6. Do not kill.
7. Do not commit adultery
8. Do not steal (people, by kidnapping)
9. Do not bear false witness
10. Do not covet

P.S. If you want to know the hamburger ingredients — don't even think about it.