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May-June 2024 / 5784

Welcome  
to Kesher

*Connection is the force  
that binds members and  
clergy to Judaism and  
to The Village Temple.*

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## THE ANNUAL VILLAGE TEMPLE GALA Honoring Anita Hollander

Our tradition teaches that there is no greater honor than “the crown of a good name.” This year at our Annual Gala on May 15, we are honoring someone who has earned this designation—our beloved Choir Director, Anita Hollander, who is retiring after 38 years of service to our synagogue. Her dedication and commitment to The Village Temple have helped to raise a generation of Jewish children.

We are also thrilled to announce the establishment of the **Anita Hollander Legacy Fund**. This fund will support the very areas that Anita has given her heart and soul to—building a strong future for the Jewish people and a love of Jewish music. With your generosity, we will be able to offer a myriad of programs for young people to foster community, synagogue, and the joy of Jewish music. We urge you to attend and to give generously to help ensure the Fund lasts for many years to come, as we honor Anita with some special, personalized tributes that you won't want to miss.

**Wednesday, May 15 at 6:30 PM**

Georgia Room

The Freehand Hotel New York

23 Lexington Avenue (between 23rd/24th Streets)

2nd floor, New York, NY 10010

[Click here for Tickets](#)

[Click here to make a Donation](#)

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# KESHER

The Newsletter of  
The Village Temple

*Congregation B'nai Israel  
of New York*

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*We invite all who wish to join us to enter our doors: Jews by birth, Jews by choice, interfaith families. Inside you will find a community of people who are on a quest to reshape Shabbat and holiday worship, reinvigorate Jewish learning, and renew our commitment to tikkun olam through social action and justice.*



## FROM RABBI FERSKO



Dear Village Temple family,

This *Kesher* issue highlights two distinct and important events in the life of The Village Temple: our historic mission to Israel and our celebration of Anita Hollander's 38 years of service upon her retirement this spring.

In March, eight Village Temple members flew to Israel, where we volunteered, listened, learned, and bore witness to the unthinkable calamity of October 7, 2023. To those who came, I could not be more proud. And to those who wished they could come, we will travel again. There will be many more trips in happier times. I urge everyone to read the daily travel blogs—you'll find links in this issue—and to take time to look through the words and pictures.

The second important event highlighted in this *Kesher* is our Spring Benefit, where we will honor our beloved Choir Director, Anita Hollander. Anita has done much more than create a choir during her time at The Village Temple. She's created a culture. Through her commitment to Jewish music, she has helped raised a generation of Jewish children. So it is with bittersweet feelings that we say goodbye to our long-time choir director, and friend Anita Hollander, this year. We hope you will join us on May 15 at our annual benefit to celebrate Anita and to secure the future of The Village Temple.

*Warmly,*  
*Rabbi Diana Fersko*

## FROM THE CO-PRESIDENTS

### The VT Mission to Israel



What an honor it was to have travelled with our rabbi and fellow congregants, on a mission to Israel, to bear witness, learn, volunteer and connect with fellow Jews. Our hearts were broken as we met with families of hostages still being held in Gaza. We were in awe hearing from the heroes who saved hundreds of people at the *kibbutzim* and the site of the Nova festival, and we were inspired by stories of civilians coming together in countless ways to help each other pick up the pieces and keep moving forward.

We met with thought leaders, journalists, and military experts who shared their perspectives on how, given the long history of the Jews, we've gotten to where we are and thoughts on where we go from here in both Israel and the United States. We also had the opportunity to celebrate a *bat mitzvah* on the site where David conquered Goliath, to celebrate *Shabbat* with a

**"We met with thought leaders, journalists, and military experts who shared their perspectives on how, given the long history of the Jews, we've gotten to where we are and thoughts on where we go from here ..."**

congregation in Tel Aviv, *havdalah* and *Purim* with a congregation in Modi'in, and to help pick strawberries in the fields where the workers have all been called up to serve.

*Continued on page 4*

# A Spiritual Home and Legacy Created

by Anita Hollander



*“If they asked me I could write a book...”* That’s how I feel as I try to write about the decades I’ve spent serving The Village Temple. So many members and families have supported and nurtured me, and joy has been gifted me by the hundreds of children who’ve been in our children’s choir. So many clergy and staff members, too, have shaped my understanding of our work and have shared compassion

and encouragement as we navigated what it means to keep a spiritual home alive. Because that is what VT has been for me—A Spiritual Home. Sitting at the piano on Tuesdays, looking up at the eternal light, I’ve had quite a few conversations with God, as I struggled with writing a new song or to find a way to give children wings when they are depleted and exhausted by long days or world events. How to help a child feel that they matter, that they can make a difference, and leave feeling lighter and more joyful than when they arrived.

**“So many members and families have supported and nurtured me, and joy has been gifted me by the hundreds of children who’ve been in our children’s choir.”**

The first day I walked into The Village Temple in 1986, I was about to be married and promised our Cleveland Rabbi to be a *“card-carrying member of a NYC shul and raise my children to be educated Jews.”* I passed this cute little shul many times, assuming it was conservative or orthodox, just by its look. One day I read on the marquee outside that it was Reform, so in I went in and met Rabbi Math, told him I got paid next to nothing as an adjunct professor at NYU, but my father had been a cantor, and I could offer music services as my dues. And that was it. I started right away doing Sunday afternoon concerts with my sisters who did cabaret shows with me. Before long I was playing piano for services and singing harmony with Cantor Levine. When my daughter turned 5, she asked at a *Rosh Hashanah* service if she could join the children’s choir. We approached the wonderful director Joanne Loewy, who said *“Sure! Just come next week and sing with us on Yom Kippur!”* And she did, and not too much later, Joanne got work in Pennsylvania and asked me to take over the choir. At first I hesitated, but with the help of a wonderful songwriter/song leader,

Adam Feder, I took on the choir as a beautiful collaboration. Adam wrote one of the choir favorites, *Maccabee Funk*. For the next 38 years I would write 14 songs with the choir, 16 Purimspiels, and compose music for services, at which I was honored to play and sing with Lisa Loren and a band of young musicians Rabbi Koster and then President Julie Salamon encouraged me to form. Soon Broadway friends (André DeShields, Chuck Cooper, Rebecca Naomi Jones) sang for MLK *Shabbat*, and a composer friend brought his oratorio *Book of Job: 911*.

**“... I feel so overwhelmingly blessed that this congregation has given me the honor of leaving a legacy, that my granddaughter and her children to come can truly sing the end of that song we wrote: *“and we can teach the world it’s not too late.”*”**

Together, we also experienced some of the most cataclysmic times in NYC. After 911, the choir went to Ground Zero and sang at the one restaurant that stayed open 24/7 for essential workers. It was *Chanukah*, and the workers cried as the children sang. And I’ll never forget the rehearsal right after Hurricane Sandy when little Dakota Williams said with a sigh *“it’s been a rough week.”* During the covid pandemic, stalwart choir members stuck it out on Zoom, writing songs and even doing our *Wickedspiel* in the freezing cold on 12th Street against a backdrop of howling winds, blasting sirens, honking cars, barking dogs, screaming babies, and shouting traffic police. Only a year before that, they’d triumphed in *Esther of a Hamletown*. But having braved the worst, the next year they blasted back with *West Side Spiely*, followed by *Hamantasch Encanto* and this year’s *Little Purimaid*. Like our congregation, our choir has always been diverse, with children of all colors, ethnicities, and disabilities—Rebecca Dorzback being our Deaf ASL interpreter during her years, singing in the “key of Rebecca.” Susan Rosenberg Jones and Ron Weiss captured these marvelous children through such extraordinary times, with help from the Oppenheimer, Hodorov, Williams and Wilkinson dynasties!

Recently I received a Facebook message from two choir alumni. Julia Elmaleh-Sachs and Eli Seidman, now in their 30s, both effectively practicing *tikkun olam* in the world, sent me a video of themselves singing the choir’s first original song: *If We Sing Together*. And as they exclaimed at the end *“WE REMEMBER ALL THE WORDS!”* I realized that something amazing has occurred. Something my father actively pursued in his brief 48 years on earth. Something my mother continues at 91, supporting libraries, nature centers, and cancer research. A Legacy. As my daughter Holland

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# SOCIAL ACTION AT THE VILLAGE TEMPLE

## Meals + Miscellaneous for Migrants (M+M4M)

The Village Temple Social Action Committee (SAC) members have been spending afternoons volunteering in the kitchen at PS 11. On our first visit, on a drenching rainy spring day, we assisted lead chefs Jenny, Margarita, and Karina as they prepared Venezuelan chicken stew, potato beet and egg salad, rice, and a carrot and cabbage slaw. Jenny, who is from Venezuela, decided on the recipes, and Margarita, who is from Colombia, and Karina are chefs. Watching them cook was a treat. Many in PS 11's new immigrant community do not have regular access to cooking facilities, so this is a meaningful, enjoyable, and delicious activity.

**“The UJA wants to involve more congregants in welcoming migrants and asylum seekers in our communities, and Rachel developed a program to build upon shared experiences of congregants, deepen the relationship, and experiment with the goal of working together in the future.”**

This partnership between The Village Temple and PS 11 Programs, a 501C3 that runs after school and a camp program at PS11, was developed by SAC chairperson Rachel Glube and Debbie Osborne, Director of PS 11 Programs. The Village Temple and PS11 have many community members in common, and M+M4M was built on this foundation. During COVID, Rachel started donating toys, children's books, and warm clothing. The opportunity to do more

arose when UJA-New York developed a program offering grants to local synagogues and Jewish organizations in the New York metro area who were already engaged in the work of supporting families who had crossed the US/Mexico border. As Rachel started writing the grant proposal, she counted the number of congregants who have PS11 graduates in their families, and the number of PS11 parents who are currently members of The VT board of directors—33% of current VT board members were PS11 parents at one point in time.

The UJA wants to involve more congregants in welcoming migrants and asylum seekers in our communities, and Rachel developed a program to build upon shared experiences of congregants, deepen the relationship, and experiment with the goal of working together in the future. The Village Temple was awarded a grant, which is funding a social worker, after school care for the children of mothers in the program, and food for the sessions. The *“goal is to create an environment where each participant is treated with respect and dignity. The hope is that this program will yield deeper understanding among all participants and continued partnership between these two organizations in the future.”*

On April 17, Village Temple teens were in the kitchen!

*Melissa Hacker  
Social Action Committee*

## Co-Presidents, *Continued*

We even made it to The Shuk!

I will never in my life forget what we heard and saw from the events of that horrific day on October 7, 2023 and am incredibly grateful we could be there to learn and become even more connected than ever to the people of Israel. Every person we met with thanked us for being there, for hearing their stories, for listening, and most importantly for supporting them. One couldn't help but walk away with a deep sense of love and resilience among the Israeli people and their extraordinary appreciation for the soul of their country. Israel will forever be in my heart. [Please read our blogs of this amazing trip here.](#)

*Jill Wilkinson  
CoPresident*

## A Spiritual Home, *Continued*

now helps the Southern Poverty Law Center promote education and justice, as Gabby Smith sings her original songs all over the world, as Roxie transforms education and Eli soothes souls playing the *Kol Nidre* on cello, as William and Sebastian dance with Ailey and ABT, as Isaac becomes a neuroscientist, and as my music is sung in other synagogues, I feel so overwhelmingly blessed that this congregation has given me the honor of leaving a legacy, that my granddaughter and her children to come can truly sing the end of that song we wrote: *“and we can teach the world it's not too late.”*

## Village Temple Israel Mission, March 2024



### Meals + Miscellaneous for Migrants



### **Mazal Tov to Our B'nai Mitzvah:**

*Mazal Tov* to Gemma Steinberg, Zoe Isaacs, Dean Isaacs, and Samantha Cothran-Ma on becoming *B'nai Mitzvah*!

# RELIGIOUS SCHOOL NEWS

## Celebrating Freedom and Community with Young Families



At Passover time, The Village Temple was bustling with the excitement of children in Religious School as they engaged in creative learning about the story of *Pesach*, its symbols, customs, and its most important lessons. It is a time when the spirit of togetherness warms our hearts, and the laughter of children echoes through our entire building.

Sunday April 14, families with young children, aged 6 and younger, came together to celebrate Passover as a community. They gathered in the sanctuary for a sing-along that included our Passover favorites ranging from the Four Questions, Miriam's Song, *Dayenu* and

Facilitated by our talented Religious School teachers and TAs, parents had the opportunity to connect with one another, sharing stories of how their children love Religious School at The Village Temple, recalling their own Passover childhood memories, and making plans for the next school year. These moments of camaraderie strengthen the bonds of our community.

As we gather around the *Seder* table this Passover, we are reminded of the journey of our ancestors from slavery to freedom—a journey that continues to inspire and empower us today. And as we witness the excitement and wonder in the eyes of our youngest members, we are reminded that the traditions of Passover are not just about the past, but about passing down a legacy of our ancestors, resilience, and hope to future generations.

**“And as we witness the excitement and wonder in the eyes of our youngest members, we are reminded that the traditions of Passover are not just about the past, but about passing down a legacy of our ancestors, resilience, and hope to future generations.”**

*Avadim Hayinu* to parodies like Pharaoh to the tune of Louie, Louie. After, in the social hall, our little ones were busy crafting beautiful *Afikomen* bags, each one a testament to their creativity and enthusiasm for the traditions of Passover. These colorful bags, adorned with symbols of Passover, symbolize the anticipation of finding the hidden *Afikomen* during the *Seder*—an event eagerly awaited by children and adults alike.

But it's not just about crafts; it's about experiencing the joy of Passover through hands-on activities. Our young chefs have been busy creating delicious *matzah* pizzas—a modern twist on a traditional Passover symbol and food. Through this culinary adventure, they not only learned about the significance of *matzah*, but also had fun while doing so and were rewarded by a delicious snack in the end.



In the midst of our celebrations, let us remember the true essence of Passover: the celebration of freedom, the joy of community, and the blessings of family. May this Passover be a time of renewal and reflection for us all, as we come together to share in the richness of our heritage and the warmth of our community. *Hag Sameach!*

*Alex Tansky*  
Director of Education



**Young Families  
Passover**



# save the date

## MAY

FRIDAY MAY 3

6:00 PM: *Shabbat* in the home  
Enjoy dinner with fellow VT members in the home



MAY 3

TUESDAY MAY 7

6:00 PM: *Yom HaShoah*

Join us for a *Yom HaShoah* service followed by a film screening and discussion with Beth Lane, creator of the documentary *UnBroken*



MAY 7

WEDNESDAY MAY 8

6:00 PM: Madrich

Teen program with Liotte at VT!

FRIDAY MAY 10

5:00 PM: Celebrate *Shabbat!* Stories, songs, and fun at Bim Bam



MAY 10

WEDNESDAY MAY 15

6:30 PM: Annual Spring Gala, this year honoring Anita Hollander

WEDNESDAY MAY 29

6:30 PM: The Village Temple Annual Meeting

FRIDAY MAY 31

6:30 PM: *Shabbat* Services – Join us for a Special *Shabbat* as we say farewell to Cantor Maier



MAY 31

## JUNE

FRIDAY JUNE 7

6:00 PM: VT celebrates Pride *Shabbat* followed by dinner



TUESDAY JUNE 11

6:00 PM: *Shavu'ot* celebration and Gallery 613



JUNE 11