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Jewish group follows own path

Posted Jun 12, 2009 at 12:01 AM
Updated Jun 12, 2009 at 11:09 AM



When 6-year-old Kaleb White thinks about God, he sees an image of a man living in the clouds. When he told that to Jessica Shimberg Lind, the leader of his Jewish congregation, she said her vision was similar when she was younger.

When 6-year-old Kaleb White thinks about God, he sees an image of a man living in the clouds.

When he told that to Jessica Shimberg Lind, the leader of his Jewish congregation, she said her vision was similar when she was younger.

But, she said, "when I thought about God as a 'he' and someone up in the clouds, as you said, that was hard for me as I got older."

Now, "I think of God as just this thankfulness that we are together and we have the opportunity to love people and take care of the Earth."

Shimberg Lind's words weren't just a gentle explanation for little ears. Rather, they summarize the philosophy of the Little Minyan Jewish community, which she founded three years ago with Irene Donhowe.

The two women, both married mothers and lifelong Reform Jews, left Congregation Beth Tikvah in Worthington in search of a stronger sense of community. The Little Minyan, which has no rabbi and no building but now numbers about 70 members, bills itself as progressive, egalitarian and environmentally friendly.

Most of all, its members are focused on the experience of community and the sharing of their ideas of Judaism.

The name came from a joke. In Judaism, a minyan is a group of 10 people required to pray communally.

The earliest members of the group started calling it "the little minyan that could."

The group meets twice a month for Shabbat (Sabbath) services in the lounge of Covenant Presbyterian Church in Upper Arlington.

Today, the Shabbat services will mark the entrance of the Little Minyan into the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation. Reconstructionist Judaism is open to both traditional and untraditional observances and interpretations of the faith and does not see Jewish law as binding.

The Little Minyan is the only Reconstructionist congregation in central Ohio, said Shimberg Lind, 43, of Upper Arlington.

Without the structure of a synagogue, members decide how to observe holidays and rituals. One example is the question of when to break the fast for Yom Kippur.

Some Little Minyan members come from the Orthodox tradition, in which the fast is broken after sundown. Reform Jews tend to break the fast at a more convenient hour, such as 6 p.m., Shimberg Lind said.

In the end, the Little Minyan compromised to break the fast just before sunset.

Such a discussion "brings a community closer together as they travel the journey of making decisions," said Donhowe, a Dublin resident. "With the other denominations, the rules are handed down by the movements."

During Sabbath services, the appointed leader sits in a circle with members rather than standing separately at a lectern. Although members say they would eventually like to employ a rabbi, they are adamant that the person would see himself or herself as part of the community, not the defining element.

As a whole, the community doesn't observe the traditional laws of keeping kosher, Shimberg Lind said. At a Little Minyan potluck, keeping kosher means not using disposable plates, cups or utensils and labeling every dish so people with allergies can make informed choices. The group also prays before each meal.

Like any other congregation, Little Minyan members celebrate life-cycle events such as weddings and bat and bar mitzvahs. They have a *tikkun olam* -- a "repair the world" committee that plans community service.

Children's education is focused more on participation than rules, Shimberg Lind said. She and Donhowe each have two boys and want their children to be joyful and excited about Judaism.

A children's education program on Sunday was not held in a synagogue but at Whetstone Park of Roses. The older children learned the Hebrew names of the Seven Species of the Holy Land (olives, figs, pomegranates, wheat, barley, dates and grapes) while sitting atop a two-story metal tower over a field of roses with teacher Hillel Meyer.

He also taught the group of eight that the best charity is the kind that's done quietly, without credit or applause.

Shimberg Lind taught Caleb how to say a Hebrew blessing over wine, except that he drank juice.

Kaleb's mother, Emia Oppenheim, said the Little Minyan is like an extended family.

"That's where the emphasis is," she said. "It's not on an infrastructure but on building a community based on Jewish precepts."

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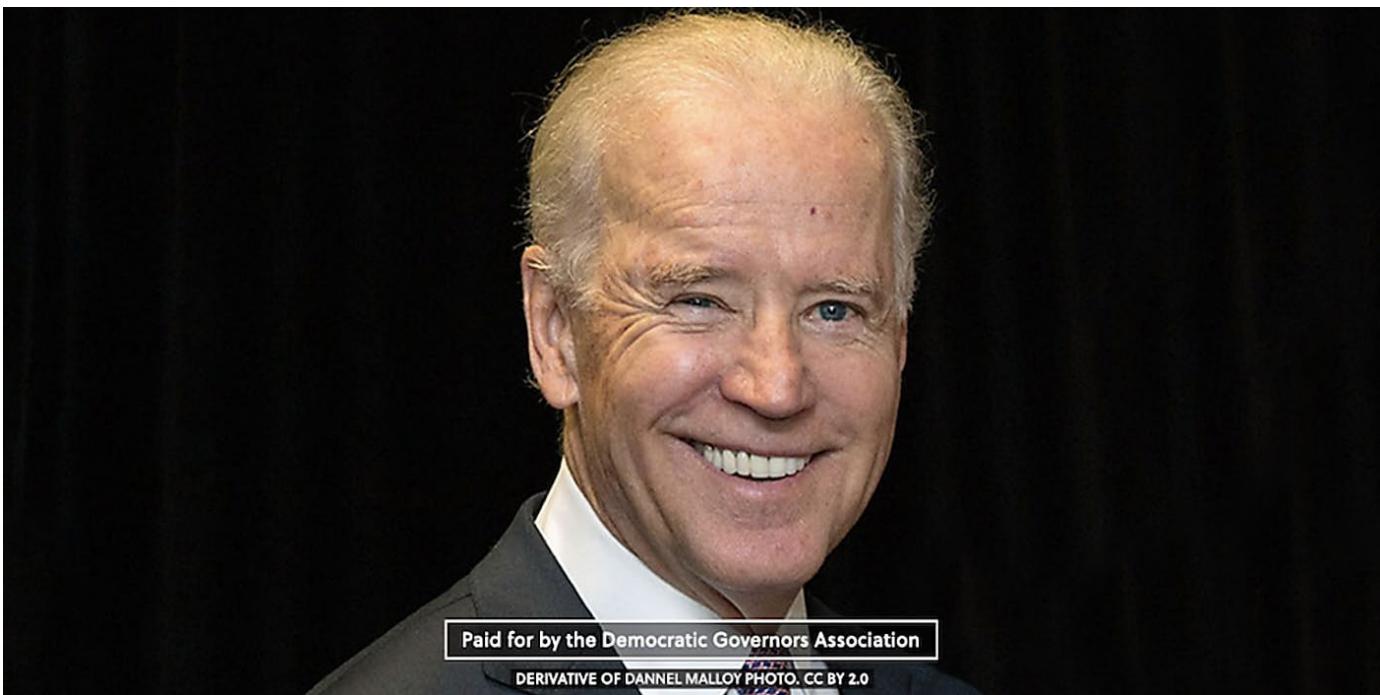
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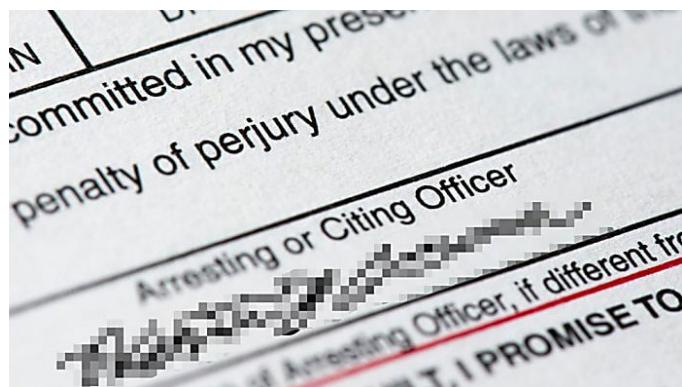
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