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Jewish meditation rediscovered through Squirrel Hill chanting group

by Toby Tabachnick

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Just five years ago, David Goldstein was facing his 40th birthday, and thinking it finally might be time to find a way to connect with his Jewish background.

Now, he can be found one Sunday a month, around Forbes and Shady, playing his shruti box, and leading

other Pittsburgh Jews in their path toward spirituality through the art of Hebrew chant.

“Hebrew chants have been part of our tradition for hundreds of years,” said Goldstein, who works at Pittsburgh Glass Works, and is also a composer of choral and piano music. “We have a tradition of focusing on a sacred phrase and singing it over and over again. It’s a way for Jews to enter deeply into prayer.”

Although chanting began long ago in Europe as part of Jewish ritual, said Goldstein, “a lot of that didn’t come to America after World War II. A lot of the deeply contemplative practices were put into the background after the Holocaust.”

Goldstein discovered the art of the chant while attending a Shabbat service at the Aleph Kallah, a bi-annual Jewish Renewal gathering attracting hundreds of participants from all over the world. It was there he met Rabbi Shefa Gold, who Goldstein says is a “pioneer” in bringing chanting back into mainstream Judaism.

“It was a very powerful thing for me,” said Goldstein. “I knew this was a very powerful way for me to connect with Judaism.”

Goldstein was so moved by his introduction to chanting, he enrolled in Kol Zimra, a two-year program run by Gold and designed to train individuals in chant leading to help bring this form of meditation and prayer to a wider audience.

“I graduated from the program last January, and decided it was such a powerful form of prayer, I wanted to bring it to Pittsburgh,” said Goldstein.

Goldstein’s chant group, The Tikkun Chant Circle, meets monthly on Sunday mornings at the Labor Zionist Center in Squirrel Hill. Each month, the group draws from 15 to 20 people, for a 90-minute session. The group will next meet Dec. 21 at 10 a.m.

“It’s an eclectic mix of people,” Goldstein said of his group. “It started off with some people that I knew back in February. Since then, it’s been word of mouth.”

The sessions consist of the participants chanting one Hebrew phrase repeatedly, followed by a period of silence.

The silence “is where it’s really powerful,” said Goldstein. “That’s where you feel the impact of the chant.”

About five different chants, connected by a common theme, are performed in each 90-minute session. The themes can range from the meaning of a particular holiday to the week’s Torah portion.

The phrases are usually chanted to music composed by Gold, Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, or by Goldstein himself. Goldstein accompanies the chanting with a drum, or with a shruti box, an East Indian instrument that makes a droning sound complementing the chant.

Goldstein soon start a second monthly chant circle at Rodef Shalom Congregation, which also will be open to the public.

Once people try chanting, Goldstein said, they’re hooked.

“It’s really intense,” he said. “Once people get plugged in, they stay for the whole thing. We create energy together that’s palpable.”

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