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The Senior Connection

Westchester synagogues offer an array of cultural, religious and social activities for retirees.

Merri Rosenberg - Special To The Jewish Week

On a particularly steamy summer morning in late July, about a dozen women chatted amiably here at the Hebrew Institute of White Plains, covering subjects from their grandchildren's religious practices to kashering dishes in the local mikveh. Lilly Singer, a certified social worker, gently steered the discussion to explore their feelings about some of their grandchildren's more rigorous religious observance.

Mid-morning, some of the participants shifted gears and rooms to attend Rabbi Chaim Marder's Bible class, which focused on the story of Noah. Some participants made the analogy between Noah's family locked away on the ark and people in Israel living in bomb shelters during the recent war.

While much synagogue programming targets the young, several Westchester congregations offer a variety of activities — ranging from the cultural, religious and intellectual to the purely social — as a means to engage older congregants and Jews in their communities.

At the Leisure Thursday program here at the Hebrew Institute, an Orthodox synagogue, seniors can take a class on computer skills, study the Bible, discuss aging issues or just relax with games and conversation after a kosher lunch.

“It’s given the seniors a place to go and things to do,” said Bernard Scheiman, a facilitator of Leisure Thursdays. “There’s a mix of activities.”

For Martha Lowell, a member of New Rochelle’s Young Israel, Leisure Thursdays is a gratifying experience. “I heard of the program here and it fills a need I have,” she said. “ I enjoy the ladies’ talk and the rabbi’s talk. I feel we’re getting a personal dvar Torah each time. The rabbi is knowledgeable, friendly, considerate and caring.”

The Hebrew Institute allocates about \$10,000 from its budget to support Leisure Thursdays, although UJA-Federation also provides some funding. Attendance ranges from about 30 to 50 people during the winter to about 60 to 70 during the summer. Some residents of the nearby Esplanade assisted-living facility join the group for lunch.

“We began offering it eight years ago because we wanted the older generation in the shul,” said Rabbi Marder. “This is a population that should be nurtured and cherished. They’re offered every opportunity to have their needs met in the synagogue. It’s desperately needed around the county. We see shul as a multi-generational place. It has to be. It can’t be just for the young or old.”

Other synagogues offer similar programs. White Plains’ Congregation Kol Ami, a Conservative synagogue, features a twice-monthly program called Tuesdays at Temple that features speakers, film screenings, discussions and refreshments.

“These are bright, creative, talented people who went to lectures in the city, ran companies and need something to stimulate their minds,” said Barbara Schwarz, the director/coordinator of the program at Kol Ami.

And while the programs are often based at synagogues, they are not always

designed for congregants exclusively. At the Sinai Free Synagogue in Mount Vernon, nearly all the participants in the daily club for seniors are Jewish, although very few are temple members. The program, which is run under the auspices of Westchester Jewish Community Services and is partly funded by UJA-Federation, provides a variety of trips, exercise classes, movies, a Yiddish club, card games, discussion groups and lunch to local elderly from Yonkers and Mt. Vernon. There's a similar group, the Beth El North End Seniors' Program that meets twice a week in New Rochelle.

The Renaissance Network, a program of the JCC on the Hudson, attracts "a lot of people who've recently retired," said Lois Green, program director at the JCC. "They're active, involved adults."

And the benefits of these programs extend beyond specific activities or skills.

"There are people who only go out once a week to come here," said Marilyn Berkowitz, a co-leader of Leisure Thursdays and one of its original organizers. "We talk about whatever we feel like. Some people come after lunch, to play bridge or mah jong. It's an all day program, and does something for everyone."