



The Republican.

Helping non-Jews raise Jewish children

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Her husband is Jewish, she's not. They've agreed to raise their children Jewish.

Oy vey! Where does a mother start?

Try a program called "Mothers Circle." It's designed by the Jewish Outreach Institute for non-Jewish mothers to meet in small, supportive groups led by a facilitator.

This spring cantor Elizabeth Berke of Longmeadow will be offering a Mothers' Circle at the Springfield Jewish Community Center on Dickinson Street. A meeting time is to be decided.

The eight-month, twice-a-week program has a curriculum that explores Jewish holidays, history, rituals and values. There is no fee. Interested people can leave a message for Berke at (413) 737-2601, or e-mail her at Lizberke@themotherscircle.org.

Founded in Atlanta, Ga., in 2002, Mothers Circle is now being offered in 25 cities around the country.

"It's unique to moms in an interfaith relationship," says Shoshana Zonderman, who teaches a Mothers Circle in Northampton. "In this group they can ask the questions they don't feel free asking anyplace else."

"I wanted to know how, beyond reading books, I would be able to instill in my son - or any child I have - a Jewish identity," says Marianne Kornblum of Westfield, a member of Zonderman's group.

Mothers Circle provided what she needed, says Kornblum. In fact, some women in the group have continued to meet with Zonderman after their course was officially over.

"We constantly tell her," says Kornblum, "that, really, what the Mothers Circle has allowed us to do is to take on the responsibility from our own point of view and at our own comfort level."

Some of the participants in these groups belong to congregations, some don't. Some attend services on the Sabbath, some not. Some have adopted home rituals, some haven't gotten around to it yet. Some plan to convert, some not.

But Mothers Circle affects their lives in small ways and large.

Kornblum, for example, hung a case containing a parchment, called the mezuzah, on her doors. She places her hand on the one outside her son's room whenever she wakes him up or tucks him in.

The act reminds her of what's important in life: "Being a good person, going out each day and being the person that God wants you to be." She compares it to a Catholic blessing herself with holy water.

The Mothers Circle course tackles such big questions as what it is to "live Jewishly." Sacred obligations are specified by the Torah, says Zonderman. They include treating people well, giving to the poor without expecting anything in return and working toward an equitable distribution of wealth in the world.

A basic belief is that "the world is flawed and human beings were put on Earth to repair it, to work with God to make it a better place," says Zonderman.

"You start by improving yourself and then you improve the world. That's why you find so many Jews in social movements. You don't go with the status quo - you try to make the world better."

Each session in the Mothers Circle is devoted to a theme, such as "The Sabbath," "The Holiday of Purim," "The Passover Seder: How to Make It Family Friendly," or "Jewish Values and Goals."

In addition, participants get reading assignments in two books by Anita Diamont, "How to be a Jewish Parent" and "Living a Jewish Life."

"I didn't really know much about Judaism," admits Shelley Bathe Lenn of Easthampton, who calls Mothers Circle a "safe place" to ask questions.

Bath Lenn says the experience inspired more conversations with her husband about values. "It brought us closer together as a couple," says Bath Lenn, who is raising their 3-year-old son Jewish.

"I feel connected to God, and I wanted my daughter to have a connection to God," says Cynthia Roberts of Northampton, who was raised Catholic and has a Jewish partner.

They are raising their 6-year-old daughter Jewish.

Roberts says the Mothers Circle has made it possible for her to contribute to her child's religious upbringing. "The pressure has been taken off my partner to take care of everything," she says.

Zonderman, a director at the Harold Grinspoon Foundation in West Springfield, is a licensed clinical social worker and family educator married to a rabbi.

She discovered Mothers Circle when she heard a panel of non-Jewish mothers talk about it three years ago at a conference of the Jewish Outreach Institute.

"I was blown away," says Zonderman. "I was so impressed by their sincerity and commitment and by their struggles to raise Jewish children. I thought, 'We gotta do this here!'"

Grinspoon immediately agreed to sponsor the program. The Springfield Mothers Circle is co-sponsored by Jewish Family Service of Western Massachusetts.