

Hebrew School kids help shelter

By Lillian Mongeau / *The Bulletin*

Published: June 23, 2010 4:00AM PST

"See these?" Jared Charney Cohen, 8, pointed to the bright Hebrew letters on the side of a paper-covered oatmeal container filled with money. "Do you think these are just meaningless lines?" he asked the adults and children outside the Bethlehem Inn, a Bend homeless shelter.

"No, I don't think so," responded Lynn Edwards, the shelter's outreach coordinator, "but I don't know what they mean."

"Each letter has a name," Jared explained, hoisting the container up for Edwards to see, "and together they spell tzedakah (sa-da-ka), which literally means 'justice' but can mean 'charity.' And apparently, we're giving all of this to you!"

Edwards thanked Jared and took the makeshift bank, heavy with coins collected from allowances, couch cushions and parents over the past year. Jared is one of seven students in Temple Beth Tikvah's first Hebrew School class, and last week he and his classmates took a tour of the place they had decided to make the recipient of their tzedakah.

Temple Beth Tikvah opened in 2008 as an option for Bend-area residents who practice reform Judaism, one of the more liberal branches of Judaism. Now it has more than 60 members, many of whom volunteer regularly at Bethlehem Inn, according to Edwards.

In total, the class raised close to \$50, but the amount wasn't the main point, according to Tully Ellsberg, 62, one of the class's Hebrew language instructors.

"It's the roots of Judaism," Ellsberg said. "To take care of the poor and bring justice, balance." A retired Christian minister who converted to Judaism four years ago, Ellsberg explained the concept of tzedakah by invoking



Photos by Pete Erickson / The Bulletin

The Bethlehem Inn's outreach coordinator, Lynn Edwards, far left, and Executive Director Gwenn Wysling welcome Temple Beth Tikvah's first Hebrew School class and thank the class for its charitable donation to the shelter. Amanda Uri, 3, right, whose older sisters are in the class, takes a break from the tour.



Photos by Pete Erickson / The Bulletin

The Bethlehem Inn's outreach coordinator, Lynn Edwards, far left, and Executive Director Gwenn Wysling welcome Temple Beth Tikvah's first Hebrew School class and thank the class for its charitable donation to the shelter. Amanda Uri, 3, right, whose older sisters are in the class, takes a break from the tour.

the image of Lady Justice with her blindfold and her scales. If the scales are out of balance, Ellsburg said, and you have too much, it's your responsibility to give back.

Camille and Corinne Smith, 6 and 9 respectively, stood in the parking lot outside the room full of bunk beds and the pantry full of canned goods they had just been shown by Edwards. The girls had peered at the high shelves filled with food while Edwards explained that the shelter took responsibility for providing three meals a day to its residents. Corinne said she was glad they had donated the money because now she knows "it helps people that are homeless and provides food for them."

Camille and Corinne said they had turned over their couch cushions regularly, looking for spare quarters to bring to Hebrew class and add to the tzedakah jar. It was best to donate the money rather than spending it on herself, Corinne said, because, "if we donated it to a good cause, it would help people."

The focus of Hebrew School is learning the Hebrew language, said David Uri, 41, the school's leader said. But cultural traditions are taught as well. Concepts like tzedakah and mitzvah — doing good deeds — are better taught as real-life experiences, Uri said. For example, teaching tzedakah by way of raising money for a local charity was better than learning about it from a book because it gave students a chance to be involved in their community, he said.

Rachel Uri, 9, David Uri's oldest daughter, said seeing the homeless shelter made her think about the extra things she was used to. "I realized I'm lucky, not only to have food and clothes, but to have extra things, like pets and my own room," she said.

"I think it was really thought-provoking for them," Edwards said of her young visitors. "You could tell they were really thinking about it." Edwards said she spoke with the kids about what they would bring in two small totes if they had to move to the shelter. One girl said she'd bring her stuffed animal, Edwards said, while another thought she'd bring her parents.

The Bethlehem Inn offers beds for up to 60 singles and five families. Residents are required to abide by strict rules while living at the shelter. No alcohol or drugs are permitted, and residents must be working, looking for work, getting an education or accessing services appropriate for their needs on a daily basis. Breakfast, lunch and dinner are provided, and residents are expected to help maintain the property. Though the shelter receives some governmental funding, without the help of local religious organizations, Edwards said, "We couldn't do what we do."



A Hebrew School student holds the container full of student-collected money that her class donated to the Bethlehem Inn, a homeless shelter in Bend, last week.



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Rachel Uri 9 blows into an alcohol testing machine during a tour of the Bethlehem Inn last week. After donating a year's worth of tzedakah — or charitable — savings Rachel and her Hebrew School classmates were learning what a homeless person must do to be granted shelter there. Rachel's dad David Uri 41 was glad his daughter's blood alcohol level reading came back 0.00.

“One of the great things” about the Hebrew School class's visit, Edwards said, “was that (the students) asked how they could help in the future. We talked about the redeemable cans and bottles we collect, and I think we'll see some of them come back in with cans and bottles.”

Jared said the visit had shown him that he was “a lucky kid. Some people are homeless and others are hated by their parents,” he said. “But I'm not. I'm appreciated in many ways.”

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Published Daily in Bend Oregon by Western Communications, Inc. © 2010

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