

August 25,
2005
20 Av, 5765

A reJewwinating retreat

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Special to The CJN

I've been seeking a spiritual home – a place of kindred spirits, shared meals, shared spiritual observance, and conscious commitment to respecting people and the earth. Recently, this search led me to Elat Chayyim, a Jewish Renewal retreat centre in the Catskills of New York State.

For years, friends have participated in retreats at the centre and described it as a place to renew their relationship to Judaism, community and the earth in a safe and supportive environment. The beginning of a new "eco-apprentice" program and the second year of a residential community (something the centre's director Bennett Neiman referred to lightly as a "Jewish ashram") at the centre were enough to have me New York bound.

The morning after I arrived, I took part in davening like none other – full-throated, full-hearted group prayer led by rabbi-in-residence David Ingber. At times, I found myself able to pour myself into the experience, to contribute my own whole heart, through my voice, into this new, joyful experience. Participants included about 30 people from the residential community, as well as summer interns and students in two week-long training programs (including one group learning to be community chant leaders).

Members of the residential community labour alongside paid staff in the day-to-day work of the centre, but I did manage to sneak in a woodland walk with Simon Abramson, a resident and one of the organizers of the eco-apprentice program. He's one of those rare people gifted with being both laid back and focused. He came to Elat Chayyim last fall through a confluence of personal clarity, timing and mazel. In its search for organizational renewal, Elat Chayyim is granting real responsibility and opportunity to several people in their early 20s to develop new programs. Along with an occasional lack of organization and a narrow focus (at present the residential community is only for people in their 20s and 30s), the young leadership gives a lovely, creative energy to the centre's undertakings.

Friday afternoon brought preparations for the mikvah. The learned woman leading the ritual explained the process for the experienced and uninitiated alike. She welcomed women of all ages and shapes to be comfortable, present and free.

But as the time to enter the pool drew nearer, my eyes darted again and again toward the gate to the pool – where were my people? Where were the beautiful, capable young women I'd been getting to know through the week? Had they gathered elsewhere? Were they somehow disassociating themselves from this gathering? Though long surrounded by, and exceedingly comfortable with, women 10, 20 and 30 years my senior, I craved the company and nearness of women my age, of like minds and hearts. Though dozens of women were present, the ritual felt incomplete without the young women who were coming to matter to me. I felt incomplete entering the mikvah without them. And as they began to appear (late – who knew how like me they were), I smiled at the inner learning that was taking place within me, of the realization of what constitutes "community" for me.

Shabbat was not my usual Ontario Saturday, trying to observe most of the day's prohibitions and feeling restless, dissatisfied and alone. Instead, it was a taste of what (my) Olam Haba would offer: a sumptuous lunch buffet, including dessert, as well as frisbee in the warm rain and being lifted in the air in an impromptu dance jam. Heaven on earth.

Did I find my spiritual home? Will I move to Elat Chayyim in the fall? No. My spiritual practice isn't as devoted to daily prayer and study as that of this community. My need for intergenerational community, for existing friends and family, is strong. I will, however, be more active in my growing local Jewish community. I will make an effort to gather with others and study issues of social justice and spiritual practice. I will certainly seek out lunch buffets with dessert, frisbee and improvisational dance, and will keep up on developments in the Neshamah Fellowship in Jewish Spiritual Community and upcoming programs, including a conference on Judaism and activism.

For more on Elat Chayyim, visit www.jewishretreatcenter.org.

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