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Jewish Unity Live event celebrates education, faith

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"We have one faith and one fate," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations. "What we have in common far overwhelms the differences."

Hoenlein was speaking to hundreds gathered at the second annual Jewish Unity Live, a nationwide celebration of Jewish learning organized locally by the Phoenix Community Kollel. His statement captured the essence of the event held March 28 at the Scottsdale Center for the Performing Arts.

In celebrating unity, the event offered something for everyone: rabbis dressed as Blues Brothers, stirring speeches evoking Jewish history and culture, remembering those who were not there by shining flashlight beams while singing the Shema together, and to cap off the night, a concert by Peter Himmelman, a gifted raconteur and cut-up as well as a singer-songwriter.



From left, Phoenix Community Kollel Rabbis Elimelech Adler, Raphael Landesman and Zvi Holland do a surprise "Blues Brothers" opening performance at Jewish Unity Live.
 Photo courtesy of Go Media

The event was to celebrate a siyum, which translates as "completion" and traditionally has meant a celebration to accompany the completion of a course of Torah learning. In this case, the definition was broadened so that the Abraham Samuel Friedman Jewish Unity Siyum included the study of any Jewish text. About 700 Valley residents, including about 200 children, completed individual studies of texts ranging from the Ten Commandments to "Bible for the Clueless but Curious."

The event was preceded by a VIP dinner of tribute to honor Mitzi Friedman, who received the National Medal of Jewish Unity. Also honored for their "exceptional contribution to Jewish unity in the Greater Phoenix area" with individual Am Echad awards were Irving Shuman, state chairman of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee; Becca Hornstein, founding director of the Council for Jews with Special Needs; Robin Meyerson, publisher of Jewish Spirit magazines; Michael Veitsman of Prescott, a Holocaust survivor who represents the Jewish community in the political arena; and Daniel Fuzaylov, a leader of the Valley's Bukharian community.

Friedman spoke during the Jewish Unity Live event after being presented with her award by Steven Kanner, kollel president.

"This award actually belongs to my husband (the late Abraham Samuel Friedman), may he rest in peace," she said. Her emotions clearly audible in the quaver of her voice, she articulated an inclusive vision of Jewish unity, saying, "Being united is not about being

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identical."

She said that the children's siyum held March 19 brought tears to her eyes. "I could feel my husband's presence," she said, as the emotion in her voice peaked.

In introducing her, Kanner said everybody calls her "bubbe," and she was accompanied on stage by her grandchildren.

"We are very excited by the response to the event," said Rabbi Dovid Goldman of the kollel in an e-mail. "We were forced to move the location of the dinner to accommodate 65 percent more people than we expected (207 instead of the 125 we anticipated)."

Some e-mailed Jewish News about their learning experiences.

Charles Meyerson, who attends Ahavas Torah in Scottsdale, studied the Tractate Eruvin, which defines the various spaces that people live in. He said that every time he studies a new Talmudic text, "I'm impressed by the depth of scholarship of our sages and the careful analysis that they brought to bear on every statement and question in the Talmud. If these great minds considered Judaism important enough to spend their entire lives studying it, then certainly it behooves me to take a few minutes out of my day to put on tefillin, say a few prayers, make a few brachas and learn a little Torah."

Dr. Michael Dean, who attends Jewish Community of Sedona and the Verde Valley and studied Tehillim (Book of Psalms), wrote that this study gave him "the motivation to continue to make Jewish learning a lifetime endeavor."

David B. Goldstein, who attends Beth Joseph Congregation in Phoenix and studied Orchot Tzadikim ("The Ways of Righteous," a 15th-century Mussar text), said the best aspect of being involved was knowing "that others of all denominations were participating in their own study."

In addition to the Valley event, Jewish Unity Live was celebrated on different dates throughout March in Atlanta, New York City, Dallas, Seattle, New Brunswick, N.J., and Bel Air, Calif.

Jewish Unity Live is a partnership of 11 Jewish learning organizations nationwide, Goldman said. He added that next year the kollel hopes to draw at least 800 Arizonans into studies for the community siyum.



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