

Adult Education

5787 (2026-2027) Course Catalog



Society Hill Synagogue Mission Statement

Society Hill Synagogue nourishes, strengthens, and inspires our members, their families, and the surrounding community through the rhythms and teachings of Jewish life.



Learn more about our congregation at societyhillsynagogue.org

Adult Education Enrollment Information

We believe that learning is a lifelong endeavor, and our adult education classes are thought-provoking, engaging, and a wonderful way to build new connections — with the material and with your fellow participants!

Classes are designed to meet in-person and/or via Zoom. Zoom links and passcodes will be provided to registrants, if applicable. If you need help finding them, please email our Executive Director, Sahar Oz at soz@societyhillsynagogue.org.

While we welcome drop-ins at many of our adult education classes and programs, advance registration is always appreciated, either for an entire series or individual sessions. Please see the class descriptions in this catalog, decide which class(es) you'd like to join, and scan the QR code or visit www.societyhillsynagogue.org/adult-education to use our quick and easy online form to enroll in classes.



societyhillsynagogue.org/adult-education

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Faculty Biographies

Rabbi Nathan Kamesar

Rabbi Nathan Kamesar (he/him) is honored to serve as the Rabbi of Society Hill Synagogue. Rabbi Kamesar has served the community since 2014, first as Rabbinic Intern while in rabbinical school, then as Associate Rabbi beginning in 2018, and as Senior Rabbi since 2020.

Rabbi Kamesar is proud of a number of accomplishments the Society Hill Synagogue community has made under his leadership, beginning with the move to an Immersive Shabbat Hebrew School experience, in which Hebrew School takes place on Shabbat mornings, students participate in the Torah discussion, and families stay for the Kiddush lunch. He further celebrates the move to a weekly TGIShabbat experience, in which every Friday evening, from September through May, the community gathers for Shabbat with music and dinner.

Rabbi Kamesar also serves as a member of the Leadership Committee of the Center City Kehillah, a network of communities representing the diversity of Jewish life in urban Philadelphia. He was ordained by, and received an M.A. in Hebrew Letters from, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 2018. While in rabbinical school, Rabbi Kamesar served as President of the Reconstructionist Student Association and was honored with the Tikkun Olam Award for service to the college community. He also earned an M.S. in Nonprofit Leadership at the University of Pennsylvania in 2016 and was selected by his classmates to be the graduation speaker for that program.

Before rabbinical school, Rabbi Kamesar was an attorney at the law firm, Skadden Arps. He earned his J.D. from the University of California, Berkeley, in 2010. Prior to law school, Rabbi Kamesar served two years with AmeriCorps*VISTA in Baltimore and Washington, D.C. He is a proud Oregon Duck, having graduated magna cum laude from the University of Oregon in 2004 with a degree in Economics. Rabbi Kamesar and his wife, Caroline, both grew up in the Philadelphia area and reside in Society Hill with their daughters, Lila and Nina. He loves reading, basketball, music, and life.

Hazzan Jessi Roemer

Prior to joining our congregation as Cantor, Jessi (she/her) had led engaging and interactive children's and family services at Society Hill Synagogue for many years. Her soulful voice and musical talents enhance the spirituality of our services. Hazzan Jessi has extensive experience in Jewish music education and has performed, taught workshops, and led prayer services throughout the United States and in Israel; her original compositions have been featured in many of these settings.

Hazzan Jessi grew up in the Washington, D.C., area, surrounded by her mother's Yiddish, Hebrew, and American folk music; cantorial melodies; and the bluegrass-klezmer music of the Fabragen Fiddlers. Hazzan Jessi's musical style reflects her roots, studies, and travels, which include having spent the 1990s living in Jerusalem. She served as a cantorial soloist at Congregation Leyv Ha-Ir in Rittenhouse Square and as a prayer leader at Congregation Kol Tzedek in West Philadelphia. Hazzan Jessi received her ordination from the ALEPH Cantorial Program in January 2017. She is also well known in the Philadelphia area as the director of Ezuz, an ensemble of multi-talented musicians who play Jewish world music featuring lyrics in Hebrew, English, Yiddish, Arabic, and Ladino.

Rabbi Avi Winokur

Rabbi Winokur (he/him) began his career as an attorney and earned his J.D. from Georgetown University Law Center in 1976. After eight years in practice in California, he decided to fulfill his dream of becoming a rabbi.

A graduate and current Board member of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (Ordination, 1991), and a member of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, Rabbi Winokur served as Rabbi at Society Hill Synagogue from 2001 to 2020. Prior to joining our synagogue family, Rabbi Winokur was the Senior Rabbi at West End Synagogue in New York (1992-2001) and Rabbi at Congregation Shirei Shalom in Monroe, Connecticut (1990-1992). He also served as the Director of the Community Relations Committee at the Jewish Federation of Greater New Haven (1991-1992).

With an energetic and engaging style, Rabbi Winokur has taught classes in California at Kehillat Israel in Pacific Palisades, the Orange County Adult Education Series, and the University Synagogue in Irvine. He was also invited to be a Scholar in Residence at the Whittier California Havurah. Rabbi Winokur has also taught in New York City at the 92nd Street Y and at the JCC in Manhattan, and in Philadelphia, at the Center City Kehillah's Tikkun Leil Shavuot, the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

Marc Schwartz

Marc Schwartz (he/him) has been Co-Chair of the Religion Committee and Chair of the Adult Education Committee at Society Hill Synagogue for many years. A regular Torah *leyner* (chanter), Marc also frequently serves as Gabai on the bimah during Shabbat and holiday services. Marc's passion for the Hebrew language, his patient approach, and his sense of humor make even students with no knowledge of Hebrew feel comfortable in his classes. Marc and his wife, Staci — a past president of our congregation — reside in Society Hill, and their daughter, Jamie, is a graduate of our Playschool and the Ann Spak Thal Hebrew School, became Bat Mitzvah here, and teaches our Gan (Pre-K and Kindergarten) class in the Hebrew School.

Tim Cravens

The son of an evangelical minister and nephew of eight more ministers in different denominations, Tim (he/him) grew up both deeply religious and also a spiritual seeker. He visited his first synagogue in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1981 as a freshman in high school and majored in Judaic studies with a minor in Hebrew at Emory University. He continued his education at Harvard Divinity School where, while studying for Christian ministry, 11 of the 27 courses he took were in Jewish studies. Tim went on to work in the nonprofit world, working for Hadassah for six and a half years before moving to Philadelphia in 2005. Although pastoring a small church, he kept finding himself drawn to Judaism, livestreaming services from Central Synagogue in New York for over five years. He began attending Society Hill Synagogue in 2019 and studied Mussar with the Center for Contemporary Mussar (CCM), which gave him the theology he needed to convert to Judaism in 2023. He is now a *madrikh* with CCM and works in planned giving for the Orthodox Union.

Barbara Spector

Barbara Spector (she/her) is a retired editor who worked at the Jewish Publication Society and the *Philadelphia Jewish Exponent*, among other organizations. She is a member of Society Hill Synagogue and Temple Beth Zion-Beth Israel. At both congregations, she leads weekday prayer services (*minyanim*) and reads Torah. After the passing of her mother in 2014, Barbara began attending daily minyanim to say Kaddish. Through that experience, she discovered the healing power of Jewish communal prayer.

Joseph Freedman

Joseph Freedman has been a member of Society Hill Synagogue for over a decade and is a familiar face at Shabbat services. Joseph is a retired civil servant with a lifelong interest in history, literature, and travel. He enjoys reading 19th- and 20th-century history and crime novels, as well as exploring new places through travel.

Introductory Courses on Judaism and Hebrew

Nuts & Bolts: A (Re)Introduction to Judaism

Dates: Tuesdays — October 6, October 20, November 17, December 15, January 26, February 16, March 9, April 13, May 18

Time: 7:00 - 8:15 pm

Mode: In-Person (with Zoom possible, if needed)

Faculty: Rabbi Nathan Kamesar

Fee: \$18 for Society Hill Synagogue Members | \$108 for General Public

Nuts & Bolts is both for students new to Judaism and for students looking to re-examine and reinvest in their relationship to the foundational elements of Judaism and Jewish living. This includes an exploration of different Jewish conceptions of God and God's role in the world; Torah and other sacred Jewish texts; prayer and how it fits in Jewish life; Jewish holidays and the Year Cycle; Shabbat, our weekly day of rest; the Jewish life cycle, from birth through death; Jewish history; and more.

This is a monthly nine-session course, with readings assigned between classes, and an open discussion of the readings and further resources in each class session. An emphasis is placed on each student's personal formulation of a relationship to the material, to be discussed with their peers as desired.

Hebrew — Level Offered will Depend on Enrollment

Dates: Thursdays (weekly)

Time: 6:30 - 7:30 pm

Mode: Zoom Only

Faculty: Marc Schwartz

Fee: Included with Society Hill Synagogue Membership | \$54 for General Public

Beginners Level: We are offering this class again to help our congregants learn (or re-learn) how to read Hebrew. We use the National Jewish Outreach Hebrew Reading Crash Course, which has provided more than 220,000 North American Jews with the skills to read Hebrew. The course focuses on the Hebrew alphabet and basic reading skills, including learning some basic vocabulary and grammar. No prior knowledge of Hebrew is required.

Jewish History & Rabbinic Literature

Judaism of the Heart: An Introduction to Hasidic Thought

Dates: Tuesdays — November 10, December 1, January 19, February 9, March 2, April 6, May 4

Time: 7:00 - 8:15 pm

Mode: In-Person (with Zoom possible, if needed)

Faculty: Rabbi Nathan Kamesar

Fee: \$18 for Society Hill Synagogue Members | \$108 for General Public

What would it mean not only to practice Judaism, but to be deeply moved by it?

In this seven-session course, we will explore some of the central ideas of Hasidic thought: the presence of God in everyday life, the search for spiritual attachment, the power of prayer, the role of joy and sadness, the struggle with failure, and the possibility of transforming ordinary experience into sacred service.

Using carefully selected texts from Norman Lamm's *The Religious Thought of Hasidism*, we will study these teachings together in class and consider both their original meaning and their relevance for contemporary Jewish life. No prior knowledge of Hasidism or advance reading is required — only curiosity about the inner life of Judaism and the ways Jewish tradition can speak to the heart as well as the mind.

The Joseph Saga

Dates: Thursdays — January 7, January 14, January 21, January 28

Time: 6:00 - 7:00 pm

Mode: In-Person

Faculty: Joseph Freedman

Fee: Included with Society Hill Synagogue Membership | \$54 for General Public

Our rabbis called Joseph Yosef HaTzadik, or “Joseph the Righteous.” We will explore his character, his fate, and the complex journey that ultimately leads to the passing of the torch from Joseph to Judah. Studying selected highlights in English from *Etz Hayim*, we will examine the Torah portions of Vayeshev, Miketz, and Vayigash. Since we will not have time to cover the entire text in class, participants are asked to read these three portions in full before the first class, along with Vayishlah, which immediately precedes them.

Contemporary Issues

A Religion? A Culture? A Nation? What Is Judaism?

Dates: Tuesdays — October 13, October 27, November 24, January 12, February 2, February 23, March 30, April 20

Time: 7:00 - 8:15 pm

Mode: In-Person (with Zoom possible, if needed)

Faculty: Rabbi Nathan Kamesar

Fee: \$18 for Society Hill Synagogue Members | \$108 for General Public

Is Judaism a religion, a culture, a people — or all of these at once?

Using Leora Batnitzky's *How Judaism Became a Religion* as our guide, we will explore how modernity transformed the way Jews understood Judaism itself. Rather than assuming any single definition of Jewish identity, we will examine competing understandings of Judaism as religion, peoplehood, culture, and nation — and the political and theological stakes of each.

Through some of the major thinkers and movements of modern Jewish history, we will ask: What makes someone part of the Jewish people? Is Judaism primarily something we believe, something we do, or something to which we belong?

Unlearning Jewish Anxiety

Dates: Wednesdays — November 11, November 18, December 2, December 9, December 16, January 20, February 3

Time: 6:00 - 7:00 pm

Mode: In-Person

Faculty: Hazzan Jessi Roemer

Fee: \$18 for Society Hill Synagogue Members | \$108 for General Public

We live in an anxious time! And fear can be isolating. Using the book, *Unlearning Jewish Anxiety*, by Rabbi Dr. Caryn Aviv as a base, we'll engage in reflection and discussion over seven sessions about how our experiences as Jews in the world show up in our bodies and emotional responses, how messages, education, experiences, and stories influence them, and how we might tap more deeply into our own creative resources, exploring practices and patterns that nourish, rather than deplete, us!

The Journey to Peace

Dates: Wednesdays — November 11, November 18, December 2, December 9

Time: 7:00 - 8:30 pm

Mode: In-Person

Faculty: Rabbi Avi Winokur

Fee: \$18 for Society Hill Synagogue Members | \$72 for General Public

To view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict primarily in political terms is to lose sight of the human beings whose lives are shattered by terrible violence. Aziz Abu Sarah and Maoz Inon, victims of the violence, bring us face to face with the human cost of this conflict. Along with Pope Francis, I hope that the human face of this terrible violence will find its way into our hearts and into the conflict's politics.

In the face of the suffering of these two brothers, the suffering of these two nations, I have no words. They have the courage to embrace each other. Let us pray for peace, and for these two brothers to bring the will to work for peace to their people.

— His Holiness Pope Francis

We do not see ourselves as Palestinians and Israelis, or as Jews and Arabs, but as human beings who believe in fostering a culture of dialogue, a culture of forgiveness, a culture of peace. To those who only see division lines, we say: If you must divide us, let it be as those who believe in peace and equality and those who don't...yet.

— *The Future is Peace: A Shared Journey Across the Holy Land*, by Aziz Abu Sarah and Maoz Inon, from the Introduction

Join us for this inspiring and often painful journey with Aziz Abu Sarah and Maoz Inon, and be prepared to open your heart to their quest for a culture of dialogue, forgiveness, and peace.

Jewish Practice and Skills Training

Monthly Spontaneous Choir

Dates: Mondays — October 19, November 16, December 14, January 25, February 22, March 8, April 12, May 10

Time: 6:00 - 7:00 pm

Mode: In-Person

Faculty: Hazzan Jessi Roemer

Fee: Included with Society Hill Synagogue Membership | \$72 for General Public

A monthly Monday evening gathering to delve deeply into communal song! In a space outside of Shabbat services, we'll have the opportunity to tap into weekday musical joy and healing, harmonizing, and increasing our spiritual resilience. Make singing together your monthly practice in an increasingly full and chaotic world! If there are Shabbat tunes you'd like to know better or dig into more deeply, and/or if you are yearning to increase your toolbox of singable *nigunim* (wordless melodies), this is your opportunity. All musical experiences and expertise welcome – none required!

Understanding the Kaddish: Meaning, History, and Practice

Dates: Wednesdays — October 14, October 21, October 28, November 4

Time: 6:00 - 7:30 pm

Mode: Hybrid (In-person attendance is strongly encouraged)

Faculty: Barbara Spector

Fee: Included with Society Hill Synagogue Membership | \$54 for General Public

This class will explore the different forms of the Kaddish, with an emphasis on the Mourner's Kaddish. We will examine their purpose within the prayer service, the meaning and history of the text, *halakhic* (Jewish law) considerations, and how saying Kaddish can help mourners process their grief. Through discussion and study, participants will gain a greater understanding of the role the Kaddish plays in Jewish ritual and tradition, with reference materials provided to support our learning.

Each class session will conclude with an opportunity to practice reciting the Mourner's Kaddish. Those who are already comfortable saying Kaddish may leave at the end of the lesson, while those who would like to strengthen their pronunciation skills are invited to stay. Together, we will work through the text, line by line, practicing a few lines each session and giving each participant the opportunity to recite and receive support.

How to be Holy: An Overview of *Mesillat Yesharim*, the Path of the Upright

Dates: Thursdays — March 4, March 11, March 18, March 25, April 1, April 8

Time: 6:30 - 8:00 pm

Mode: In-Person Only

Faculty: Tim Cravens

Fee: Included with Society Hill Synagogue Membership | \$72 for General Public

Mesillat Yesharim (*The Path of the Upright*) is a classic Jewish ethical and spiritual work written by the Italian Jewish scholar and kabbalist, Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707-1746). It is considered one of the most influential texts in the Mussar tradition, a Jewish movement focused on personal growth, character development, and ethical refinement.

Written in the 18th century, *Mesillat Yesharim* presents a structured path toward spiritual growth and holiness, and we will examine selected passages that can guide us on our own Jewish journeys.

Along the way, we will uncover the connection between Isaac from the Torah, the prayer *Shokhen Ad* in the Shabbat morning liturgy, and *Mesillat Yesharim* — join us to discover this fascinating connection!



Rabbi Nathan Kamesar | Hazzan Jessi Roemer | Rabbi Emeritus Avi Winokur
President Neil Cohen | Executive Director Sahar Oz



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