

Scholar-In-Residence Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz Inspires Learners of All Ages

by Joy Perla

Talk about terrific! Take the experiences and reputations of two giants of the Bible, Jacob and Elijah the prophet; view them through text and painting; share individual insightful interpretations and you get a sense of the substance and beauty of the Shabbaton at Temple Beth Sholom on April 27-29th. Rabbi Matthew L. Berkowitz, the Senior Rabbinic Fellow in the Jewish Theological Seminary's KOLLOT: Voices of Learning Program, was our dynamic and exciting Scholar-in-Residence, focusing on *"The 'Art' of the Torah: From Israel to the Diaspora How the Visual Arts Bring God's Presence into our Midst."*

Friday evening's program began with services and dinner, followed by a stimulating and thought-provoking presentation entitled "Rembrandt and the Rabbis: Jacob Wrestling." With whom did Jacob wrestle? Himself? An angel? His past and his relationships with his family? Through a close reading of the Torah text and rabbinic commentary, plus an interpretation of the works of world famous artists, we explored this fascinating episode by reading a quotation by English novelist Virginia Woolf, by analyzing paintings of the scene by Marc Chagall and Rembrandt, and by adding our own discerning comments.

During Shabbat morning services, Rabbi Berkowitz offered *"Reflections on the Parashah Aharei Mot-Kedoshim,"* emphasizing God's call for the Jewish people to be holy.

After a festive Kiddush luncheon, we filled the small sanctuary to learn with Rabbi Berkowitz about "Elijah the Prophet Through the Ages." Our clergy and congregants together studied the biblical, rabbinic, medieval and modern layers that reveal the person of Elijah, a symbol of Jewish belief and hope. We began with where Elijah appears in liturgy and ritual — at a *b'rit milah*, at the Passover seder, in the *Birkat Hamazon*, the blessing after a meal — as harbinger of the messianic age — and we considered and praised or criticized his actions, his zealotry and his successes and shortcomings as a human messenger of God.

The Shabbaton formally concluded on Saturday evening after services and *Seuda Shlishit*, when Rabbi Berkowitz led us in an examination of a new Family Haggadah which he illuminated and authored, "Passover Landscapes: Illuminations on the Exodus." "This Haggadah," he writes, is rich with influences and history, bringing the experience of the Exodus to a deeper, more meaningful level."

On Sunday morning, students in our Machon Beth Sholom met with Rabbi Berkowitz to learn about this beautiful new Haggadah and the lessons it teaches.

Young, brilliant and charismatic, Rabbi Berkowitz has left us with challenging questions, intellectual and psychological insights and a hunger for more learning. We can still enjoy the bright, colorful and highly original artwork from his new Family Haggadah, which are on view in our Rubenstein Gallery through the end of June. These pages, from a limited edition artist portfolio, are testament to his schooling in many areas of Jewish learning, including his ordination from JTS in 1999, and to his great artistic talent, developed and nurtured in high school and college studio art classes and through formal training in Jewish scribal art in Jerusalem. This Passover-themed portfolio was recently exhibited at Yeshiva University Museum.

Rabbi Berkowitz has also created a curriculum entitled "Rembrandt and the Rabbis," exploring the intersection of art and rabbinic commentary. A Wexner Fellow, he is a member of the Wexner Heritage Program Faculty. Prior to his ordination at JTS, Rabbi Berkowitz graduated from Colgate University and studied at Pardes and the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, both in Jerusalem.

