

Washington Jewish Week

Local Jewish nonprofit seeks gentile conversions

DECEMBER 30, 2015 BY [SUZANNE POLLAK](#) — [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

A Silver Spring nonprofit organization is funding outreach programs to non-Jews in an effort to bring them into the fold.

“Our primary purpose is to support programs that publicize Judaism to non-Jews,” explained Ellen Gerecht, executive director of the National Center to Encourage Judaism (NCEJ).

“We think Judaism has a lot to offer,” she said, while sitting at her desk in a second-floor office in downtown Silver Spring. “We are a great religion.”

Asked if the ultimate goal was to convert non-Jews, Gerecht said, “Yes, because we think so much of Judaism. That would be the goal down the line.”

The foundation’s mission, on its website, states, “Funding Jewish Outreach and Conversion Programs.”

NCEJ has \$2.3 million in assets and brings in about \$375,000 annually, according to its 2013 tax information. That year, the foundation gave \$50,000 to the Hebrew Union College in New York and an additional \$28,000 to various synagogues throughout the United States.

Rabbi Michael Feshbach of Temple Shalom has worked with the NCEJ both at his Chevy Chase synagogue and at former pulpits in Pennsylvania and New York, and has long known the foundation’s founder, Ash Gerecht, who is the father of the organization’s executive director Ellen Gerecht.

Feshbach conducts a free introduction to Judaism program at his synagogue called Taste of Judaism. He has used NCEJ funds to help publicize this three-week program and hopes to do so again in the fall of 2016.

“I know that this foundation believes some of the greatest and most important spiritual ideas in the world are in our tradition, and we don’t show it enough,” Feshbach said.

Temple Shalom’s Taste of Judaism “is really meant as an outreach to the community. In some ways it is designed for those not connected to Judaism, but it is open to everyone,” he said. Some attendees are congregants, but most are people who have a Jewish connection through birth or marriage but aren’t involved in Judaism.

People from other religions have participated, including a small group from an African-American church, he said. “It’s been the most amazing assortment [of participants] of anything I’ve done.”

Temple Shalom spends money from the NCEJ to advertise in area newspapers. The ads run in the secular press, rather than the Jewish press, he said. “Frankly, your circulation is not who it is aimed at,” Feshbach said, referring to Washington Jewish Week.

“Speaking personally,” he added, “I can say the more we learn about the people around us, the better we are. Sometimes, yes, this leads to continued interest. Of course, we welcome that.”

Judaism has a tradition of being open, the rabbi said. “We don’t view it as we need to convert people to save their souls.”

Gerecht said the organization she leads is more about welcoming than it is about proselytizing.

“When you think about proselytization, you think going door to door. We are not advocating that,” she explained. “We are going to try and get the word out.”

If that doesn’t happen, Judaism “will not survive,” she said.

In olden days, Jews never proselytized, Gerecht said. “When you were barely able to survive, when you were frowned upon by the community as a whole,” most people wouldn’t try to spread their religion.

To be sure, proselytizing has not been a traditional Jewish activity.

“It would be discriminatory for Judaism to proselytize and try to convert those not of the religion,”

explains an article on the website of Aish, an international organization that specializes in Jewish outreach to members of non-Orthodox Jewish communities. “That would imply that everybody needs to be Jewish in order to make a relationship with God, participate in the Torah’s vision of repairing the world, and ‘get to heaven.’”

Most synagogues NCEJ works with are part of the Reform movement. “Other branches have not been as receptive. I think that’s changing a bit,” especially among Conservative synagogues, said Gerecht. She also pointed to Chabad, which she said “has been so welcoming as a group — they will stand on corners and welcome everybody.”

NCEJ was founded in 1995. Gerecht’s parents previously had founded the Gerecht Family Institute for Outreach at Hebrew Union College in New York. That program is designed to help future rabbis and cantors “become more aware of the importance of encouraging both outreach and conversion to Judaism,” according to the NCEJ website.

The idea is to present to the world that Judaism has a lot to offer and that there are “plusses to being Jewish,” Gerecht said.

“More and more people are looking for something,” she explained. “If you can get those people in, you benefit.”

She pointed to Jews by choice. “Because they thought about it, they are often more involved.

That’s a benefit to Judaism as a whole. It’s a benefit to the congregation,” she said.

If people are looking for spirituality and religion in their life, they aren’t necessarily going to pick up the phone and call a synagogue. But if they hear of an outreach program, they may attend, she said.

People born Jewish but have drifted away and non-Jews who have married a Jew also may become more involved in Judaism after attending an introductory program, Gerecht said.

That’s why she hopes more groups will apply for NCEJ funds to host a seder for non-Jews or throw a hamantashen bake-in for the community to see how much fun they could have, as well as host introductory Judaism programs and coffeehouses at synagogues.

Not that long ago, “it used to be novel to reach out to singles,” and now that’s common, said Gerecht.

“From an overall standpoint, we all want Judaism to grow.”

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