

# Beth El Temple Men Attend Menschwork's JMR30

By Harvey Freedenberg

Imagine the pleasure of spending an invigorating and yet deeply restful Shabbat at a 400-acre retreat center in southern New England at the height of the fall foliage season, savoring nature's beauty, feasting on outstanding kosher food, and, above all, engaging in meaningful conversation with a diverse group of some 70 committed, energetic, and thoughtful Jewish men.

That was the experience Beth El members Baruch Captauber, Josh Millman, Assaf Zilbering, Joel Ressler, and Harvey Freedenberg, joined by Chisuk Emuna member Ben Chadwell, shared on the weekend of October 15-17, 2021, as they attended the 30th annual Jewish Men's Retreat (JMR30) sponsored by Menschwork at the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center in Falls Village, Connecticut.

Last year's JMR was virtual due to COVID-19, and in making the shift to in-person attendance, the volunteer-run organization took extensive precautions to enhance attendees' safety. All participants were required to be fully vaccinated and to submit the results of a COVID lab test taken within 72 hours of arrival. Most of the retreat's activities took place outdoors, and social distancing was emphasized.

In addition to a lively nondenominational Shabbat observance, at which both Josh and Harvey read Torah and Baruch accompanied some of the davening on guitar, JMR30 featured a wide range of workshops and activities, from Friday evening discussions on the joy of Shabbat or Ayurveda and its relevance to Judaism to an introduction to Qi Gong or a hike on Saturday afternoon.

But at the core of the JMR experience are the meaningful encounters known as Mishpacha Groups. Four times during the retreat, groups of ten or so participants gathered by the lakeside or in a corner of the large tent that served as the base for the weekend's activities to speak, quietly but openly, about their experiences as Jewish men in their family, work, and communal lives.

This year's theme was "Reimagining the Power of Havdalah!" – emphasizing the significance of moments of transition and separation in our lives. In the nurturing and nonjudgmental space provided by the groups, men talked candidly about how they've navigated some of their key personal turning points.

For Josh Millman, this was his second JMR and first in person. He noted that "the record is now two-for-two in offering me new perspectives on how best to pursue a purposeful life." In his case, the time provided a "thoughtful



examination of what it means to be a mensch, not just a weekend away with some welcoming guys, many of whom have done amazing things in their lives." It's something he says that will "ground me in my life."

Joel Ressler, who elected to participate in JMR30 online, observed that his group leader "did an excellent job of creating an environment where we were able to share thoughts about our struggles of living up to our ideals."

Attending his first JMR, Assaf Zilbering was grateful for the opportunity it provided to "connect spiritually with other Jewish men and establish new friendships." That emotional uplift continues, as every other Thursday he meets online with a JMR "Mensch" group on Zoom to discuss personal experiences emerging from that week's Torah portion.

Baruch Captauber, who introduced Menschwork to the Beth El community when he arrived in Harrisburg in 2020, credits JMR30 with giving him "the ability to see how changing my environment starts with bettering myself," while recognizing that he can't do that alone. And as he reflects on his participation, he understands that "rediscovering the power of masculine spirituality and healing through intentional community and ritual is my recipe for empowerment, my antidote to media-induced ambivalence and endless hand-wringing."

Although the date for JMR31 has not yet been set, planning for the event in the fall of 2022 is underway. For more information, visit [www.menschwork.org](http://www.menschwork.org), or contact any of this year's participants. They would love to have more Beth El men join them next year.