

JEWISH LIFE

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is in the air*

Susan Sygall

156 WILD Women

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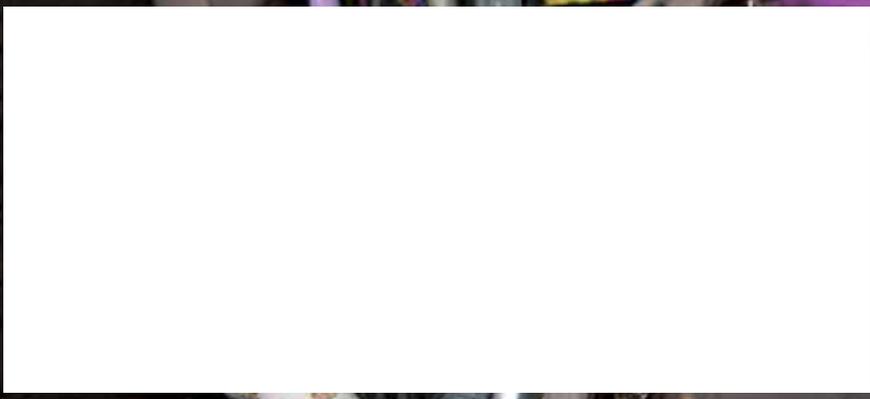
Special Sections

BAR/BAT MITZVAH

Study and repair the world, then party

WOMEN'S HEALTH

Genetics, exercise, lifestyle & fertility



Mussar dinner emphasizes ethics, friendship



Laura Fendel, facilitator of the Mussar study group at Rose Schnitzer Manor, makes a Shabbat toast with the participants at the Aug. 24 dinner. Photo by Peter Korchnak

by Peter Korchnak

Any dinner that starts with a strawberry margarita promises an extraordinary experience. The meal acquires extra significance when you pair the drink with the Mussar middot (ethical trait) of Enthusiasm, as Laura Fendel and a group of women living at Rose Schnitzer Manor did on Aug. 24.

“This is a special dinner,” said Fendel, who has facilitated the Mussar study group at the Manor for two years. “The ladies paired the Mussar traits with a dish, and then we designed our dinner.”

As appetizers, challah signified Sustenance and chopped liver brought Moderation.

“We have to watch our cholesterol,” said Natalie Stone, 88.

Fendel created the place settings and decorations with intent, too. The centerpiece, consisting of forest tree and shrub branches slightly changing color, signified the subtle change Mussar causes. Suzanne Liberman, 82, said she had learned to listen better. Charlotte Weiner, 92, quipped, “If you don’t change, you might as well stay in bed.”

In addition to sharing Shabbat and launching a month of reflection before the High Holy Days, the dinner marked a new chapter in the group’s life: after going through Alan Morinis’

Everyday Holiness twice, the group will study Estelle Frankel’s *Sacred Therapy* in the New Year.

Fendel said, “Mussar was created by men for men. We wanted it to be from our perspective.”

Ruth Henning, 92, added, “We feminized the text.”

A heightened awareness of the world and inner growth featured prominently in the stories that the women shared as they discussed the meaning of Mussar.

“Living in a community like Rose Schnitzer Manor, you’re constantly with people,” Henning said when chicken soup introduced Compassion into the discussion. “It’s hard. You need new skills.”

When the layered salad (Order) arrived, Julie Anne Feinstein, 72, whom the other participants referred to as “the baby of the group,” said, “I’ve become more aware of gossip – when it starts and how not to start it. And I’ve learned to forgive myself.”

The main course (ginger scallion steelhead salmon – Simplicity – and red cabbage with raisins and apples – Humility) compelled Fran Stone, 88, to admit, “Mussar helped me become aware of my own failings and work on them.”

Miriam Gerber, 89, highlighted the camaraderie within the group, saying, "It brought us together, and we've developed good relationships with each other."

Molly Tulin, 85, agreed. "We trust one another."

The group loves to laugh. Fendel emphasized that the basalt rocks accompanying each place setting are not smooth. "They're just like us," Fendel said. "We will never be smooth." Feigning offense, Natalie Stone said, "What do you mean?"

According to Fendel, Mussar also means meditation and chanting, so before dessert she led the women in singing the hymn "Teach us to treasure each day."

Then Fran Stone sampled the raspberry chocolate torte (Loving-kindness and Necessity), and said, "This is the happiest time of my life." 

Peter Korchnak is a writer in Portland. He explores the experience of immigration from Central Europe at AmericanRobotnik.com.

Sukkot Celebration

September 30th – October 7th

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