

Creating Judaica



At [Camp Yachad](#), the summer program run by the Scotch Plains JCC, the kids are involved in another kind of *hesed*, tapping their creativity to produce ritual objects to send to Jews in the New Orleans area whose synagogues and homes were struck by Hurricane Katrina.

Working in weekly sessions, kids from age four to nine have been decorating all manner of things, including candle holders, Havdala spice boxes, mezuzas, hallah cloths, dreidels, apple-and-honey dishes, kipot, matza and afikomen bags, Torah ties, sukka banners, a dozen tablecloths with Passover scenes, and a holiday quilt made of buttoned-together squares.

Nita Polay Levin, who is orchestrating the JCC's Hiddur Mitzva Program — "*hiddur mitzva*" means "beautification of the mitzva" — said it has provided the children with a chance not only to learn about the plight of Katrina's victims, but also to explore what it takes to help others. "Usually they get to keep what they make — and in their regular art classes they can — but they understand that they are making these things for other people, and they've been very motivated and into it," she said. "They're getting a sense of what it means that all Jews are responsible for one another."

The program is sponsored by the JCC Association and the Coca-Cola Corporation. It grew out of an inspiration Polay Levin and her Camp Yachad colleagues Tassie Becker and Marjorie Weinfeld had to combine two goals — to have the children learn about Judaism and perform acts of *tikun olam*.

Polay Levin brings all kinds of expertise to the project. She leads the junior congregation at Congregation Neve Shalom, the Conservative synagogue in Metuchen, where she lives, and teaches Hebrew at Temple Beth-El Mevor Chayim in Cranford. She also serves as an educational field worker for the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and is a member of CAJE, the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education.

"At first I was kind of nervous" about the program, she admitted. "I thought we'd have to produce hundreds of things. But then we worked it out." They actually have produced that kind of volume. "We call it our sweatshop," Becker joked. "The kids have been amazingly diligent — much more than they are in a regular art class."

Polay Levin soon found sources of Judaica kits the kids could use to make items that would be affordable and inexpensive to ship. The most expensive undertaking has been the miniature menoras and tzedaka boxes adorned with pieces of glass, with the kits and glass fusing provided by Judaica artist Gary Rosenthal. “They cost between \$20 and \$25, but they’re really wonderful,” Polay Levin said.

But, she added, she has faced a special challenge with this project: While parents might delight in anything their offspring produce, these objects are designed to please more objective recipients and to last for a while. Some have needed a little touching up. “We’ve had to do some damage control,” she said, “but we intervene very carefully only where necessary, to help them make things that will be really pleasing, while still being the work of the children.”

The youngsters’ products are being sent to three congregations in the New Orleans area: the Conservative Congregation Shir Chadash, the Reform Temple Gates of Prayer, and the Orthodox Congregation Beth Israel. Campers’ parents are asked to contribute \$18 toward packing and shipping costs, and volunteers are needed to pack up the Hiddur items on Tuesday and Wednesday, Aug. 15 and 16.