

**CONGREGATION SHAAREY ZEDEK STUDENTS
AND MILITARY VETERANS JOIN TOGETHER
TO CELEBRATE THE TRUE MEANING OF VETERANS DAY**

By Larry Katz, Department of Michigan



Students and Veterans at Congregation Shaarey Zedek in Southfield, Michigan shared views on service in the US military and obligations of citizenship at an inaugural “Be the Difference” middle school program in November.

Veterans Day events were more than just opportunities for barbeques and family get-togethers for Congregation Shaarey Zedek (CSZ) Religious School students, as this year marked the rollout of a new program designed to ensure, through interactive learning, that they remember and honor Jews of past generations who served our country in war and peace, and to bring them face-to-face with individuals who gave of themselves to preserve the personal and religious liberties of future generations.

This joint venture between the CSZ Religious School and the Jewish War Veterans--Department of Michigan (JWV) - the first intergenerational program of its kind in Michigan – took place on Sunday, November 18, 2019. It was designed with the broad missions of introducing meaningful interpersonal experiences into the school’s curriculum, allowing students to learn the lessons of history proactively, educating and inspiring students about the sacrifices necessary to protect and preserve the freedoms we enjoy, and building intergenerational connections within the Synagogue. In that our veterans told their stories to the students, the program was directly in line with the JWV-USA Project Maggid.

The project unfolded in three distinct sessions at the CSZ Berman Center for Jewish Education. Thirty-seven students attended. Participating veterans were Donald Schenk, Donald Wagner, Paul Gold, Aaron Brumbaugh, Ed Adler, Martin Pevzner, all members of JWV-MI, and Michigan Army National Guard Master Sergeant James Hill, father of one of the participating students.

Religious School Director Ari Reis, Grade 5 teacher and archivist Cillia Kleiman, Grade 6 teacher Rabbi Yaacov Gregg, Grade 7 teacher Rena Meyers, and Grade 4 teacher Barbara Dworin, played active roles in bridging the gaps between the veterans and students.

In the first session, the veterans and students gathered together in the library. Veterans introduced themselves and shared their experiences related to military service. Every speaker offered inspirational stories of his service and experience with the humility characteristic of the Jewish War Veterans, who have served our country so honorably. Several brought photographs and other visual materials to show the students. Among the areas covered were the branch of the service they were in, when and where they served, world events including wars that were going on at the time, the circumstances leading to their enlistment or induction in the service, their individual experiences during their military service, how their civilian life was disrupted or changed due to their service, how military service affected them and their families, how their service impacted their lives after their discharge, and how they feel generally about the importance of service to country, whether military or otherwise.

After these introductions, the session was opened up for questions by the students, all of whom listened attentively with absolutely no interruption, asked a wide range of age-appropriate questions relating to the veterans' experiences and beliefs, a reflection of the work and guidance of the staff and faculty of the religious school and of the students' parents. The students displayed a surprising understanding of the nature of conflict in the adult world and the historical fact of war and civilian casualties. Several students introduced stories about their family members who had served and things they had learned in their personal lives about service and sacrifice. They generally understood what service members do, regardless of branch of the military, and had some general understanding about the military and its role in American life. This session advanced the students' understanding and the connections that exist between them and the veterans sitting in front of them.

The second phase of the program consisted of three breakout sessions, taking place in three different classrooms. Students were matched with veterans in a more personal setting, enabling one-on-one discussions between veterans and students. Each of the three groups of veterans approached their sessions a little differently, tailored to the individual students and their ages. In one session, the veterans sat in front of a group of older students, who all faced them, and everyone listened comfortably as people took turns talking. In another session, with younger students, everyone sat together at tables and the veterans effectively captured their interest and curiosity. In the third session, consisting of mixed age students, the participants split up into sub-groups, and several very animated conversations were occurring simultaneously. Mr. Reis developed the program's religious component. Each student group was given prompts in the form of Torah and Talmud quotations, read them in Hebrew and English, and answered follow up questions relating to service, war, and the sanctity of human life.

The third and final phase of this program was a return to the library with the veterans once again face-to-face with the students prepared to address any follow-up questions based on what the students had learned from the veterans and what the veterans had

learned from the students. It would be clear to anyone in attendance, based on the final phase, that the students were provided with a meaningful personal experience upon which they will build in the future.

This was a comfortable, age-appropriate event which placed national service in an historic context linking that service to men the students see at synagogue, thus furthering student understanding. Additionally, it fulfilled the religious mission of the school by placing the event in the context of Jewish values and traditions. Mr. Reis and Programming Manager Sarah Klein were instrumental in planning this program.

The Jewish War Veterans, chartered in 1896, is the oldest active veterans service organization in the United States. The JWV Department of Michigan was chartered in July, 1940, and currently consists of Posts [135 \(Zussman\)](#), 474 (Bale), and 510 (Shapiro-Rose). In addition to educating the general community about contributions of Jews to the U.S. military services, the organization advocates on behalf of veterans, volunteers at Department of Veterans Affairs facilities, supports local veteran activities, and helps maintain Jewish veteran monuments.

This event was modeled after the "Be The Difference – Never Again," program, (www.bethedifference-neveragain.com) , created by Elizabeth Bettina in New York, with the goal of developing coordinated programs to increase awareness of young people of the courageous actions Americans have taken to "be the difference" in all aspects rather than being bystanders. National-level projects focus on personal sacrifice and learning takes many forms. Students, for example, sometimes explore one individual who was killed in action; or they may visit to U.S. military cemeteries; or they may undertake an action-based class project to help a service member who currently returns wounded.

Future local projects, jointly undertaken with CSZ and JWV, will feature structured dialogue with current and former military servicemembers and their families, field trips to military sites, cemeteries, museums, memorials and other sites dedicated to the victims of war and genocide, and other proactive events including face-to-face dialogues with people who have devoted their lives to public service as well as those who benefitted from their sacrifice and courage.