

**For Immediate Release**

*Contact: Adina Kay-Gross, Editorial Director*

*646-319-0511 or adina@covenantfn.org*

*Editors Note: Images Available*

**THREE JEWISH EDUCATORS MAKING IMPACT AND CHANGE**

**RECEIVE THE 2017 COVENANT AWARD**

*New York – June 6, 2017* – Three outstanding Jewish educators who are taking their visions of deeply engaging Judaism and igniting them into reality - are the 2017 recipients of The Covenant Award.

**Rabbi Tully Harcsztark, Founding Principal of SAR High School in Riverdale, NY; Meredith Englander Polsky, National Director of Institutes and Training at Matan in New York, and Developmental Support Coordinator at Temple Beth Ami Nursery School in Rockville, MD; and Dr. Jane Shapiro, Co-Founder of Orot: Center for New Jewish Learning in Skokie, IL** are the recipients of the Award, which is among the highest honors in the field of Jewish education.

"These Jewish educators exemplify inspired, courageous and visionary leadership," said Cheryl Finkel, Chair of the Board of Directors of The Covenant Foundation and a former Covenant Award recipient. “Across the spectrum of educational venues, they are stimulating their students, communities and the field to think and practice in innovative and pioneering ways. Their achievements challenge all of us in Jewish education to make our own work bolder, more ambitious, and more impactful."

Along with the recognition that accompanies this award, each recipient will receive $36,000, and each of their institutions will receive $5,000.

**RABBI TULLY HARCSZTARK** imagined a new model of what a Modern Orthodox high school could be – one balancing tradition and modernity, and promoting vigorous dialogue and debate – and made it reality as Founding Principal of SAR High School in Riverdale, NY.

Under his exceptional and visionary leadership for the past 16 years, SAR High School has become a national model of Jewish education adapting to and embracing 21st century realities and equipping students and teachers in new, novel and empowering ways.

At SAR, Harcsztark introduced a concept he calls the “Grand Conversation” – which reflects his belief that Jews should be deeply rooted in Torah while embracing the broader culture in which they live. This “conversation between Torah and the world,” as Harcsztark puts it, permeates and enriches the school and its extended community.

“As participants in the Grand Conversation, biology students learn about organ donation and genetic engineering from scientific, ethical and halakhic perspectives; students compare the reading strategies and literary theory of their tanakh and their literature classes,” Harcsztark said.

“Most importantly, we, as a school community, engage the issues of the day – feminism, sexual orientation, race – in a transparent and forthright manner through community meetings and class discussion. We teach that modernity and Jewish observance are mutually enriching,” he added.

From the open space architecture of the school campus itself, which Harcsztark helped design, to the integration of general and Judaic Studies educators and curricula, SAR reflects Harcsztark’s ideal of education as a “fusion of horizons.”

Harcsztark has nurtured a spirit of collaborative thinking in which Judaic and general studies teachers study together, discuss and debate issues within Modern Orthodox education together, and attend *shabbatonim* together.

“Our model of collaboration reflects open thinking to our students,” Harcsztark said. “It informs the way that teachers interact with students and encourages students to develop a voice of their own … fostering a culture of professional growth for teachers and an atmosphere of vibrant learning for students.”

Harcsztark is seeking to position SAR as a leading voice of Modern Orthodox thought, ideas and creativity.

“Tully has fully internalized a mindset centered on the constant dialogue between the religious and the secular,” said Dr. Gail Bendheim, a member of the Board of Directors of SAR High School, who nominated Harcsztark for The Covenant Award.

“He teaches that being open to new ideas, wherever they emanate from, is central to being someone who can make the world a better place in a uniquely Jewish way,” she said.

Prior to becoming SAR High School’s Founding Principal, Harcsztark served as Associate Principal of Judaic Studies at SAR Academy, Rabbi at Congregation Keter Torah in Teaneck, NJ, and Judaic Studies teacher at The Frisch School in Paramus, NJ.

“This award has granted me the opportunity to take a step back and look at my work more broadly, to slow down for a moment and appreciate the successes, challenges and opportunities that a career in Jewish education provides,” Harcsztark said, upon learning that he is a 2017 Covenant Award recipient.

“While my commitment to and passion for Jewish education is the driving force in my daily work,” he added, “being recognized by the Covenant Foundation has provided me with a renewed sense of accomplishment and validation. I look forward to contributing to the field for many years to come.”

----------------

**MEREDITH ENGLANDER POLSKY** is National Director of Institutes and Training at Matan in New York, and Developmental Support Coordinator at Temple Beth Ami Nursery School in Rockville, MD. Through advocacy and imaginative pedagogies, she has dramatically advanced Jewish communal dialogue and practices for inclusion of children with special needs and their families in Jewish life and learning.

Polsky founded Matan in 2000 with the realization that children with special needs and their families were living on the margins of Jewish education due to a community severely lacking the vocabulary, approaches and awareness to create paths to engagement and full participation.

Her passion was ignited at the age of 22 when she worked at a Jewish overnight camp where an eight-year-old boy with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and learning challenges was sent home early because the camp could not accommodate his individual needs.

“In an instant, I knew for certain that I needed to devote myself to enabling the Jewish community to be inclusive of children like him and their families,” Polsky said. “I saw clearly that this was a paradigm that had to change.”

With her establishment of Matan, children with special needs and their families had an immediate institutional voice where none had previously existed. Under Polsky’s leadership and design, Matan began working with synagogues, Jewish agencies, and religious and day school administrators and teachers to not only increase awareness of special needs and the obligation of the Jewish community to embrace inclusion, but also to help to create educational programs, curricula and lesson plans for this population.

For the past eight years, she has served as National Director of Institutes and Training at Matan. In this role, she trains groups of education directors and teachers to make systemic changes in their organizations to effectively include and serve children with special needs and give them and their families a welcome place on the Jewish continuum. In the past year, Matan has trained over 2,500 Jewish leaders and educators to fully welcome and support diverse learners in both formal and informal Jewish educational settings.

Since 2013, Polsky has also served as Developmental Support Coordinator at Temple Beth Ami Nursery School in Rockville, MD, where she supports teachers in working with children with special learning needs.

It is here that Polsky describes herself as “working in the trenches,” exercising her vision and pedagogies, and informing her work beyond her own community to the national level - especially in the realm of Early Childhood Jewish Education.

It is Early Childhood Jewish Education, in fact, that Polsky sees as a major focus of her work in coming years, recognizing it as “young families’ most important link into the Jewish community” and one that must be equipped to welcome all learners and families.

“Meredith does whatever is necessary to make an educational setting work for an individual child,” said Dr. Paula Sayag, Director of the Temple Beth Ami Nursery School, who nominated Polsky for The Covenant Award. “She is unabashedly determined and optimistically realistic … and has changed the landscape of Jewish education.”

Looking at that landscape as she considered the honor of receiving The Covenant Award, Polsky expressed her eagerness to keep moving forward and contributing to the field. “Receiving the Covenant Award marks a new beginning for me,” she said, “as I strive to live up to this amazing honor.”

---------------

As Co-Founder of Orot: Center for New Jewish Learning in Skokie, IL, **DR. JANE SHAPIRO** is building a new model for engaging Jewish adults in the Chicago area and beyond - a holistic approach to Jewish education that is an emerging paradigm for personal and community growth.

The founding of Orot in 2014 reflects Shapiro’s entrepreneurial, risk-taking spirit and unique pedagogy. It is a milestone on her trajectory as a change-making educator within her community and the field of Jewish education more broadly.

Orot offers Jews of all backgrounds and levels of knowledge new entry points into Jewish knowledge and practice to fuel and empower individual and communal engagement.

Programming at Orot integrates Jewish wisdom and text with meditation, yoga, music, art and writing - opening up new pathways to Jewish learning. And it is this integration of serious text study with alternative creative expression that brings to daily practice Shapiro’s belief that adult learners who crave in-depth Torah study can find it through a variety of pedagogical methods.

“I am energized by the chance to develop this new pedagogic practice and help students cultivate this type of learning so they can explore what the Torah has to offer them in this totally new way,” Shapiro said. “In these days of intractable conflict and anxiety about the world, I believe that this type of Torah learning is desperately needed.”

“The rational, mind-centered drive to take in more data is not sufficient when people are looking for wisdom that springs from the heart and from a sensitive moral tradition they can use for guidance,” she added.

Orot’s popularity and growth in the Chicago area is dramatic. When it began in 2014, 70 people attended a half-day of learning to prepare for the High Holidays. It has since grown to serve over 500 students each year through weekly classes and meditation sessions, yoga workshops, immersive learning experiences, weekend retreats, and trainings of Jewish educators, social service workers, and communal professionals.

“Jane’s unceasing passion, energy and creativity have pumped essential fuel into the fire of this new startup,” said Rebecca Minkus-Lieberman, Orot’s Co-Founder and Executive Director. “She has dedicated her entire professional life to reflective, innovative Jewish teaching, continues to imagine new, progressive models of Jewish learning and brings her whole self to their realization.”

As a Jewish educator, Shapiro is an architect, driver and practitioner of visionary and impactful teaching. Prior to starting Orot, Shapiro was Associate Director of the Florence Melton School of Adult Jewish Learning in Northbrook, IL, and Coordinator of Mentoring for students in the Masters of Arts in Professional Jewish Studies program at Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership in Chicago. As a professional coach, she has trained Jewish educators and created curricula for dozens of synagogues and Jewish organizations around the country.

“To Jane, it is *all* about the students,” said Sandy Starkman, a student of Shapiro’s in an Artists Beit Midrash, who nominated Shapiro for the Covenant Award. “The learning truly radiates from her. Jane views her work as a true calling.”

Upon learning that she is a 2017 Covenant Award recipient, Shapiro reflected on her students, and how teaching has sustained her.

“I share this honor with all the wonderful students whom I have had the privilege to serve for many years,” she said. “The chance to bring them into a deeper relationship with the vitality of the Torah and to explore ways to engage them even more through artistic expression and embodied practices means an experience of personal transformation for us all.

“Covenant has given me the chance to follow the advice of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and continue to grow my practice as an educator by being ‘tremendously surprised’ by ideas and by developing new skills to create conditions for the inner light of Jewish wisdom to shine out into the world.”

---------------

Reflecting on the distinguished group of award recipients for 2017, Harlene Appelman, Executive Director of The Covenant Foundation remarked, “Each of the 2017 Covenant Award recipients is a dreamer, and each brings with them a breath of optimism for the field.”

“When peeking into the learning spaces where Tully, Jane and Meredith do their work,” she continued, “one can see the inspiration on the faces of their students. We are so grateful to them for continuing to nurture and cultivate the minds and hearts of Jewish learners of all ages.”

The Foundation and the Jewish community will honor the 2017 award recipients on Nov. 12 in Los Angeles, at an annual awards dinner during the General Assembly of The Jewish Federations of North America.

**For guidelines on nominating an educator for a 2018 Covenant Award, and to read biographies of past recipients, visit** [**http://www.covenantfn.org/awards**](http://www.covenantfn.org/awards).

*The Covenant Foundation is a program of the Crown Family Philanthropies.*