



# The Covenant Foundation

## **For Immediate Release**

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*Editors Note: Images Available*

## **THE COVENANT FOUNDATION ANNOUNCES RECIPIENTS OF 2019 COVENANT AWARD**

*New York – June 5, 2019* – The Covenant Foundation has announced the names of three Jewish educators who are the 2019 recipients of the Covenant Award.

**Dr. Gregory Beiles, Head of School, The Toronto Heschel School and Director, The Lola Stein Institute, Toronto, Canada; Sally Grazi-Shatzkes, Registered Drama Therapist, Licensed Creative Arts Therapist, and Theater Director, Yeshivah of Flatbush, Brooklyn, New York; and Risa Strauss, Education Director, Beth Shalom Synagogue and Founding Director, Camp Gesher, The Katie and Irwin Kahn Jewish Community Center, Columbia, South Carolina,** are the recipients of the Award, which is among the highest honors in the field of Jewish education.

“Each of this year’s Award recipients is deeply embedded in the work of their respective institutions, each wears multiple hats, and each learns and teaches alongside colleagues and faculty members for the betterment of their individual school communities,” said Cheryl Finkel, Chair of the Board of Directors of The Covenant Foundation and a 1999 Covenant Award recipient.

“It is so heartening to know that across the map of North America, there are Jewish educators modeling this kind of teamwork, partnership, and dedication. We are thrilled to amplify each of their accomplishments and hope they serve as role models to other aspiring Jewish educators.”

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

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**DR. GREGORY BEILES** is the Head of School at The Toronto Heschel School and the Director of The Lola Stein Institute.

At the Toronto Heschel School, where he has worked for the past 22 years and has served as Head of School since 2014, Beiles continues to be guided by the teachings of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, and seeks to shape Jewish education as a ‘work of art’ by looking to Jewish wisdom not merely for content, but also to shape the methodologies and approaches for teaching and learning. At his school, he ensures that *tikkun olam*, daily acts of *chesed*, and ethical practices based on the weekly *parsha* are woven into the school’s daily curriculum. The school also nurtures intentional Jewish pluralism in which children from diverse Jewish backgrounds discover the strength of diversity within unity.

As a curriculum developer and teacher mentor, Beiles challenges teachers to create educational experiences in which students see each discipline of study as a unique way of thinking and appreciate knowledge as a source of awe and wonder.

Beiles has been the lead developer of an integrated curriculum that combines intentional pluralism, learning through the arts, interdisciplinary study, and fusion of general and Judaic Studies. By launching Project Mishna, an initiative to create and document interdisciplinary units of study in all grades of the school, Beiles has fostered a community of teachers-as-peer mentors in a ‘Learning Center’ environment. Ample time for peer planning is budgeted into the school day, fostering a deep faculty culture of collaboration and mentorship.

Aiming to nurture interfaith learning and appreciation, three years ago Beiles began a partnership program with a local Islamic School in Toronto. After the synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh, leaders from the school visited Heschel with a book of condolences for the Jewish community signed by each of their students. Toronto Heschel students responded by forming a circle of peace around their partner school following the Christchurch mosque shooting. Moving forward, Beiles plans to make the “art of *tikkun*” a fuller dimension of learning at Heschel, by deepening relationships with communities in Israel and First Nations in Canada.

In 2004, Beiles was appointed Director of The Lola Stein Institute – a think tank associated with the school – whose mandate is to raise the bar for discourse on Jewish education in Canada and beyond. At the LSI, he designs professional development workshops on topics including metaphor and God, *tefillah* as the art of wonder, teaching mathematics for understanding, democracy in Jewish sources, and more.

“Greg is a visionary leader, teacher, and writer who elevates relationships and opens pathways to Jewish spirituality, values, and knowledge,” said Pamela Medjuck Stein, Chair of LSI and Editor of *THINK: The Lola Stein Institute Journal*, who nominated Beiles for the award. “Visitors to the school marvel at the complex themes and intensely engaged children that they witness, which is the result of pure Moreh Greg.”

“I am incredibly honored to be counted among the Covenant Award recipients,” Beiles said, upon receiving the news that he had been chosen for a 2019 Covenant Award.

“Jewish teaching is a ‘leap of action,’ a creative risk on behalf of our children. I am humbled to accept this award for all those who dedicate themselves to the art of Jewish learning, and I am deeply appreciative to The Covenant Foundation for recognizing the value in taking this creative leap.”

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**SALLY GRAZI-SHATZKES** is a Registered Drama Therapist, Licensed Creative Arts Therapist, and Theater Director at Yeshivah of Flatbush.

At the Yeshivah of Flatbush Joel Braverman High School, Grazi-Shatzkes is the lead drama therapist in the Witness Theater program, an innovative intergenerational program run by Selfhelp Community Services, Inc., that brings together Holocaust survivors and high school students to elicit, expose, and memorialize the moving stories of survival. Grazi-Shatzkes facilitates the program by utilizing a guided drama therapy process through which group members explore issues of war, loss, and trauma, Witness Theater allows participants to also form deep and meaningful relationships that dissolve the barriers between generations. Grazi-Shatzkes also trains drama therapists to facilitate the program at multiple other locations.

Grazi-Shatzkes is also the designer and facilitator of two original curricula for younger students (grades 1-3) at the Yeshivah of Flatbush Elementary School, which both focus on social and emotional awareness and character development. *Friends and Feelings* combines creative arts and counseling within a playful and educational environment and offers students an opportunity to find common ground with their classmates and celebrate each other’s differences. *Kids Speak* is an original, creative arts-based program for children whose parents are separated or divorced. The curriculum includes storytelling, role-play, clay work, puppets, theater games, and other creative arts-based techniques.

In 2015, Shatzkes introduced the “Tommy & Amy Series” to her students, a collection of original and vibrant puppet skits that complements the *Flatbush Five* program, an original Yeshivah of Flatbush curriculum that integrates the values of respect, honesty, kindness, responsibility, and humility as a way to promote a hand-in-hand approach to values and academics.

Beyond Flatbush, Grazi-Shatzkes teaches weekly Shabbat classes at Congregation Bnei Yitzhak about Torah, *Mussar*, and other Jewish topics to girls ages 5-13, using the tools of bibliodrama and theater games, as well as an interactive reading of texts and role playing. During the summer, she serves as the Head of the Drama Department at Camp Morasha, a modern Orthodox residential summer camp in Lakewood, Pennsylvania, where she has worked since 2015. There, Grazi-Shatzkes teaches daily drama classes and works with the educational staff to integrate drama into camp-wide programming. She also writes, directs, and produces original dramatic productions based on pivotal events in Jewish

history.

“Sally is an educator unlike anyone I have ever known,” said Jill W. Sanders, Administrative Consultant and retired Associate Principal at Yeshivah of Flatbush Joel Braverman High School, who nominated Grazi-Shatzkes for the Award. “Sally dedicates herself to Jewish education and actively engages Jewish hearts and souls, transforming their understanding of what it means to be part of the Jewish community. As a drama therapist, she changes the lives of young and old alike, strengthening Jewish values and commitments while providing the context in which her students learn to express their feelings, solve problems, and achieve therapeutic goals.”

“The Covenant Award is a humbling reminder of how blessed I am to have the opportunity to teach Jewish character values through drama therapy and theater,” Grazi-Shatzkes said, upon learning that she had been selected for a 2019 Covenant Award.

“This high honor matches the love and pride I feel for my students. I accept it on their behalf and thank them for making me want to be a better teacher, artist, and person every single day.”

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**RISA STRAUSS** is the Education Director at Beth Shalom Synagogue and the Founding Director of Camp Gesher at The Katie and Irwin Kahn Jewish Community Center.

During her tenure as Education Director, Strauss has increased enrollment and reinvigorated the Religious School through enhanced teacher training and meaningful interaction with parents, and worked to develop positive connections with adult learners and the synagogue Board through outreach and creative programming.

Known as the “pied piper” of the synagogue community, Strauss draws children to Shabbat, holiday, and community events through her reimagined Tot Shabbat and junior congregation program. Dubbed “the Jew Crew,” the junior congregation program begins with Torah study via informal conversation and moves on to a Shabbat service where the students lead. Under Strauss’ leadership, the children at Beth Shalom are challenged to examine and question the Torah portion and build on one another’s thoughts. For younger children, Strauss created the Shabbat Play & Learn program, a fun, interactive Shabbat service with a puppet show *d’var Torah* to engage the synagogue’s youngest learners and their parents. Strauss reintroduced a once-a-month “Dinner and a *Minyan*” program to merge students and adults on Wednesday evenings for *minyan*. Strauss also introduced a Shavuot program in which members of the congregation each speak about a commandment closely aligned to their professional work.

Strauss guides her teachers to utilize multiple approaches when teaching a topic: reading, writing, music, art, drama, dance, and movement are employed to engage children of all ages and abilities. With a deep commitment to fostering relationships amongst all of the Jewish children in Columbia, Strauss has often brought together students from the local

Reform and Conservative synagogues for joint programming, to allow students to get to know one another.

In 2013, the Columbia Jewish Community Center recognized Strauss' innovative and creative skills and recruited her to redevelop and "re-jew-venate" its day camp, which allowed her to interact with Jewish children beyond her synagogue and infuse the informal camp experience with Jewish life and learning. The day camp program is based in Jewish values with an emphasis on respect, compassion, and tolerance. The camp demographic is only 20% Jewish, but the entire population embraces Strauss' educational curriculum, which includes Hebrew, Israeli Music, Bible Stories, Israeli Dance, and Shabbat.

"Risa is the touchstone for members of the congregation and community," said Rabbi Jonathan Case, who nominated Strauss for the award. "It is not uncommon to see adults or children huddled together around her. She functions as a 'bright light' that people are drawn to, and she reaches out to the unaffiliated, interfaith, and otherwise unattached members of our community and continually brings into the congregation new participants and potential leaders."

"Being honored by The Covenant Foundation is so exciting because it truly recognizes all of us in the Jewish world who work in smaller Jewish communities," Strauss said, upon hearing that she had been chosen for a 2019 Covenant Award.

"Here in Columbia, and other places like it, you have to be a little bit of everything in order to provide the best and most inspiring service you can to the members of your community. This award acknowledges that particular kind of work, and I am so grateful for the recognition."

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"This year's cohort of Covenant Award recipients possesses an array of truly distinct talents but they share a crucial trait: they are each deeply committed to serving their respective Jewish communities," said Harlene Appelman, Executive Director of The Covenant Foundation and a 1991 Covenant Award recipient.

"How fortunate we are to discover new pockets of vibrant and inspired Jewish education across the map, each year. We can't wait to see what transpires for Greg, Sally, and Risa, and we'll be cheering them on every step of the way."

The Covenant Foundation and the Jewish community will honor the 2019 Award recipients on Tuesday, November 5 in New York, at the annual Covenant Awards dinner.

**For guidelines on nominating an educator for a 2020 Covenant Award, and to read biographies of past recipients, visit: [www.covenantfn.org/awards-prizes/awards-program/](http://www.covenantfn.org/awards-prizes/awards-program/)**

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