



Leaders and members of Troop 118 worked on their service projects and honed their outdoor skills during the Presidents Day break.



Two new members are welcomed to Troop 118 at a Court of Honor last fall.

## Learning from scouting

### MetroWest BSA troop teaches Jewish values as it helps kids grow

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**R**abbi Lisa Vernon and her husband, Mike Schatzberg, lead the only Jewish Scout troop in MetroWest. And they'd like more people to know about it.

Part of BSA – the organization used to be called Boy Scouts of America – Troop 118 welcomes boys and girls between the ages of 11 and 18 – that's sixth-graders to 12th-graders. The troop now is comprised of seven boys and two girls, mostly from Essex County.

"We do this as a family activity,"

Rabbi Vernon said. "We love helping young Jewish kids learn values and life skills and watching them mature from 11-year-olds to self-assured young men and women with wonderful leadership qualities, who take responsibility. It's a pleasure to watch them develop into competent and capable young adults."

Troop 118 was founded in June 1995 by Solomon Schechter Day School of Essex and Union – now the Golda Och Academy – and it is sponsored by North Essex Post 146 Jewish War Veterans.

The troop caters to families interested in having their children experience an



Troop 118 places flags on veterans' graves before Veteran's Day.

authentic scouting program while maintaining Jewish standards and reinforcing the values of a Jewish education.

Charles Shapiro, who has a son and daughter in the troop, said the experience has instilled his kids with confidence, capacity, and leadership ability.

A Jewish troop, Mr. Shapiro said, "is important for many reasons. It shows our children that one can be Shabbat observant, keep kosher, and live a Jewish life while still participating in the storied American tradition of scouting."

Rabbi Vernon, a former teacher and chaplain, explained that all activities are kosher, shomer Shabbat, and considerate of Jewish educational schedules.

While regular BSA troops often meet on Saturdays and have weekend campsouts where both Shabbat and kashrut are a problem for Jewish Scouts, Troop 118 meets on Sundays at the Kol Rina independent minyan in South Orange. When these scouts go camping, they take along meat and dairy mess kits and Shabbat prayerbooks.

"Even those kids who are not shomer Shabbat can see that it can be a very

spiritual day and not just about things you can't do," Rabbi Vernon said.

Before the pandemic, Troop 118 Scouts would often help behind the scenes at the Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest's Super Sunday fundraiser, in uniform.

"People would invariably come up to me and my husband say, 'We didn't know there were Jewish Scout troops.' A lot of people think scouting is Christian, but it never has been," Rabbi Vernon said.

Indeed, the first Jewish Boy Scout troop in the United States was formed in 1913 at the 92nd Street YMHA in Manhattan.

"Scouts can earn religious awards and emblems and the original Jewish emblems go back to the 50s or before," Rabbi Vernon said. "The National Jewish Committee on Scouting added more over the years."

Eagle Scout, the highest achievement or rank attainable in the Scouts BSA program, requires mastery over areas of leadership, service, and outdoor skills. Troop 118 counts 19 Eagle Scouts to date,



Over Presidents Day weekend, the scouts went to the South Mountain Reservation to roast marshmallows and work on their fire building, axe, knife, and cooking skills.

with three more now on the path. Some of its Eagle Scouts have performed their service projects on the Kol Rina building where they meet.

"We have a strong Eagle ethic but we're not an Eagle 'factory' – the kids don't get it unless they really complete all the requirements," Rabbi Vernon said.

Mr. Schatzberg emphasized that the troop welcomes members from other areas of New Jersey, especially because there are few other Jewish BSA troops in the state, such as Troop 226 in Teaneck.

Members of Troop 118 include public school students as well as students at Golda Och and the Joseph Kushner Hebrew Academy.

"We serve multiple constituencies," Mr. Schatzberg said. "Some of our Scouts are observant, while for others this is their first exposure to the Jewish observances and rules. The kids are welcoming and open to kids they haven't seen before since we draw from such a large area."

"We are also attractive to families with children who need individualized attention to be able to fulfill the scouting program," his wife added. "If a kid

physically can't accomplish an activity there are other ways to do it. My background is in Jewish education, so I am very sensitive to that." She added that all adults in scouting are required to go through youth protection training.

While covid curtailed many of the troop's activities over the past two years, Troop 118 did not miss a beat, meeting virtually for a year and a half until it was safe to gather in person.

A typical weekly meeting begins with the patrol leader assigning scouts to hoist the American and troop flags, and lead the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, Scout Oath, Scout Law, and Outdoor Code regarding respectful outdoor manners.

The day's activity is led by assistant scoutmasters – usually former members of the troop – and senior patrol leader. Often these activities are geared to earning badges; during a recent meeting, the Scouts made fire starters.

At the end of the meeting, the color guard takes down the flags, and the troop forms a circle. "Everyone joins hands, and an adult leader gives a 'Scoutmaster's minute' – an inspiration item or

summary of what we've done that day, maybe about an upcoming Jewish holiday," Rabbi Vernon said.

"We close with the phrase, 'May the great Scoutmaster of us all be with us until we meet again.' The kids repeat 'Until we meet again' and raise their linked hands and then drop them and let go."

When scouts age out of the troop, Rabbi Vernon and Mr. Schatzberg keep in touch with many of them.

"We love watching them grow and mature and we are sad to see them go, but we try to stay in touch and we recruit new kids to take their place," Rabbi Vernon said.

"They leave our troop with a sense of accomplishment and of their place in the world. They see they can do all those things while living a Jewishly structured life."

For more information, or to visit a meeting or activity, email Mr. Schatzberg at [schatz110@comcast.net](mailto:schatz110@comcast.net) or Rabbi Vernon at [rabbiv@aoi.com](mailto:rabbiv@aoi.com).



The scouts are on service project in West Orange, led by Assistant Scoutmaster Daniel Gottschalk, right, a former Eagle Scout.