

'Moving Traditions' hires Talia Kushnick

Texas, 11 other states encompass portfolio for Southern regional director

By Deb Silverthorn

With a mission to embolden Jewish youth to thrive through the pursuit of personal wellbeing (*shleimut*),

caring relationships (*chesed*) and a Jewish and feminist vision of equity and justice (*tzedek*), Moving Traditions has hired Talia Kushnick to serve as the organization's first Southern regional director.

Kushnick, who is overseeing Moving Traditions' programs in 12

states including Texas, looks forward to sharing the organization's full suite of programs; to engaging with organizational partners and individuals; and to serving as a resource for rabbis, educational directors and teachers, youth group leaders and others.

"Moving Traditions, with close to 200 partners around the country, is a 'living curriculum,' something we are constantly revising. Because it's entirely digital, there's no lag between our creative and academic updates and what the youth get to experience," said Kushnick.

Founded in 2005, Moving Traditions has offered programs to more than 31,500 youth, supported more than 2,640 educators and clergy and shared their work to more than 560 partner synagogues, JCCs, camps, day schools and emerging organizations.


The organization has championed impact-focused youth-serving programs at the intersection of gender, wellbeing and Judaism. Its complement of programs includes B-Mitzvah Family Education Program for preteens and parents; Rosh Hodesh for girls; and Shevet for boys. There is the Tzelem program for LGBTQ+ teens; the Kulam curriculum for Hebrew high school settings; and the Kol Koleinu Teen Feminist Fellowship, for which Kushnick serves as a cohort leader.

Moving Traditions offerings also include Kumi, an Anti-Op-pression Teen Leadership Experi-

ence and CultureShift, which provides training for those who work with Jewish teens at camp and elsewhere about how to navigate gender, healthy boundaries and more. With Kumi and CultureShift, Jewish teens are prepared for bold leadership and activism on college campuses, in social justice spaces and beyond. Each of the programs includes a full lesson plan to support seasoned educators and even those just beginning. Moving Traditions partners can run the programs as designed or use them as a starting point.

Kushnick is engaging day schools, congregations and youth group leaders. The 2023-2024 school year will open, locally, with congregations Anshai Torah, Shearith Israel and Temple Emanuel-El already on board. In Austin, Kushnick is supporting Congregation Agudas Achim and Temple Beth Shalom. In Houston, she is working with Kehillah High — a joint program of Congregations Beth Israel, Beth Yeshurun and Brith Shalom.

Andrew Paull, Temple Emanuel's director of youth education, worked with Moving Traditions a decade ago at a congregation in



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New York. He views it as a top-level organization that emphasizes social, emotional and spiritual learning, which is a priority for Temple Emanu-El as well.

"Moving Traditions is nationally revered in providing contemporary and cutting-edge content and, with Talia as our lead here, we couldn't be more excited," said Paull, who has incorporated Moving Traditions into the seventh-grade curriculum.

At Anshai Torah, Moving Traditions' Kulam curriculum will support its Hebrew High participants. Sixth and seventh graders and b'nai mitzvah students and their families will be guided by the B-Mitzvah Family program.

"We are thrilled to be better equipped at tapping into the social and emotional learning of our teens, to address topics and concerns they have and to be able to do that with Jewish context," said Congregation Anshai Torah's Rabbi Michael Kushnick. He is proud of his wife Talia and the opportunities she and Moving Traditions are bringing to the North Texas and the Southern region's greater Jewish community and throughout the country.

Kushnick is a New Jersey native and graduate of Binghamton University. She earned a Master of Arts in Experiential Jewish Education from the Jewish Theological Seminary. She moved to Dallas in 2013 with her husband; the couple now have two sons, Nadav and Levi. In addition to her engaged role as rebbetzin at Anshai Torah, Kushnick spent the last seven years



Photo: Courtesy Talia Kushnick
"We want to bring teens on board where they are and to show them how they really are connected to our Jewish history and values," said Moving Traditions Southern Regional Director Talia Kushnick.

as director of admissions at Akiba Yavneh Academy.

"The teen years are impressive. When students find themselves realizing what living a Jewish life means to them — what their Jewish identity is — Moving Traditions guides them with a robust curriculum. It meets each organization's needs whether it's an elective at a high school/day school program, a once-a-week Sunday school or occasional youth group. It's very flexible," said Kushnick.

She added, "We want to bring teens on board where they are and to show them how they really are connected to our Jewish history and values. We want them to realize they are relevant and that they have a place now and in our future."

For information about Moving Traditions' programming, visit MovingTraditions.org; to learn more about registration, email tkushnick@movingtraditions.org.

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College Essay Writing Involves a Process Rather Than One or Two Drafts



By Casey Gendason

When asked if I planned to participate in the "dad's dance" at my daughter's final dance show of the school year, I went back and forth about agreeing to it or passing on the opportunity. I went with a down-the-middle response of "possibly," and the next day an invite to a private group chat for dads willing to dance popped up on the dance company's app. With a combination of a half laugh and a half what-did-I-get-myself-into thought, I read the message posted by the dance instructor.

She offered five options for our first rehearsal and stated that, based upon everyone's availability (everyone meaning three other dads and me), we would then find a consistent rehearsal day and time.

It was official - I would perform a choreographed dance during the show!

I informed my wife (who registered for the moms' dance) and daughter of my plan, which led to my wife being thrilled and my daughter offering a slight smile and slight eyeroll followed by a "please don't embarrass me" undertone. I assured her I would never embarrass her!

Within the first 10 minutes of the rehearsal, I realized this was no joke. The instructor, who my daughter adores and I could easily sense why, created a hip-hop dance number full of intricate moves, stops, hand motions and facial expressions. This was a legit dance, and she meant business. Secretly, I loved learning it!

One rehearsal turned into multiple rehearsals, and each rehearsal lasted a couple hours (This included four hours of practice in the 48 hours preceding the performance!). The three dads and I walked onto that stage prepared to wow the audience and to show our children that we can take risks and do hard things.

The process of learning, shaping, and tweaking the dance aligns closely with the process I recommend my students use for college essay writing. Walking away from the dance performance, I reminded myself that any process completed properly requires numerous rounds of analysis, assessment, and change. Before we learned each part of the dance, we talked through every single and small step, and there were numerous moments when the instructor asked us if we wanted to make a slight change to it (aka is this hurting your legs or back too much??!!). If you want your college essay to pop off the page, then you should begin by talking aloud about the messages and ideas you want the reader to understand and to conclude about you after reading it. Much self-control is re-

quired to avoid the temptation to begin writing immediately when one idea comes to mind! Discussing ideas first can lead to more vivid and interesting writing, not to mention greater efficiency. And be prepared to write multiple drafts. Unlike your English papers for school, a college essay requires more time to edit, to mull over, to sit, and to return to in order

to make sure the correct messages about the applicant land at the appropriate spots.

In addition, when students write their essay, I encourage them to use all their senses. Painting an image in the reader's mind of how the scene and surrounding area looked and smelled, what they heard, what they touched, and depending on the topic, what they tasted is much more attention-grabbing than beginning the essay with "During the summer before my junior year of high school..." Hook the reader with an opening that makes the reader wonder where the essay is headed. The more mysterious the opening to your essay is, the more likely the reader will feel drawn to your writing and excited to keep reading. If the hook intimidates you, then begin writing the story you wish to share because there is a sizable chance that the hook will come to you as you write.

With college application and essay season upon us, I offer these tips so high school students and their parents know they are far from alone when wondering what works well versus does not work for a college essay. Often, families ask me about topics they should avoid. I always suggest to think twice about writing a college essay about: (1) sports injuries (way overused topic), (2) the big win or big loss, especially related to sports or school elections (equally way overused topic), (3) mission trips/community service trips (it's difficult not to end this topic with a cliché point), (4) travel (fair or unfair, this will likely be viewed as high privilege), and grandparents (I loved my grandparents dearly but they do not distinguish the applicant when writing about them). Of course, there are exceptions depending on the story attached to these topics, but I hope they give a glimpse of how some topics may sound distinguishable to the applicant but fall into the bottomless pit of "we read this all the time!"

Perhaps you decided to hop on stage, felt vulnerable and displayed your polished (or not-so-polished) dance moves. Now that could be a story worthy of telling a college!

Casey Gendason, former Emory admissions officer and St. Mark's college counselor, assists families with the application process to college and independent schools. Contact Casey at casey@caseygendasonguidance.com for information about his services.

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