

# JFCS Cancer Support Group creates community

BY JENN DIRECTOR KNUDSEN

Community is important. Cancer is lonely. Jewish Family & Child Service has combined these two truths to create a no-cost Cancer Support Group. It's the Jewish community's first and one of few available in the greater community.

"Cancer is a lonely road to travel on," says JFCS' Caitlin DeBoer, LCSW and group co-facilitator.

An expert in helping clients suffering from chronic pain, Caitlin says she too often hears the refrain, "Where are my people?" People with cancer, too, feel more isolated due to their illness and treatment regimen. "If we can alleviate this isolation even in one small corner, then this is great."

The Cancer Support Group's other facilitators are Rabbi Mel Young and Rabbi Barry Cohen. Known as Rabbi Mel, he moved three years ago to Portland from L.A. with his wife, Linda, and is a cancer patient himself. He facilitated support groups in Southern California. Rabbi Cohen is the community chaplain and co-led Walking Beside You, JFCS' inaugural grief-processing group.

Beginning April 13, the Cancer Support Group will meet via Zoom the second Wednesday of every month, from 11 am to noon. While the opportunity is free, registration is required. No medical advice will be offered. (See box for registration information and details.)



Caitlin DeBoer



Rabbi Mel Young



Rabbi Barry Cohen

***"I am a cancer patient who happens to be a rabbi. This work transcends my professional work."***  
~ Rabbi Mel Young

In 2005, Rabbi Mel was 53 years old and a secondary school program administrator when he received a diagnosis of renal cell carcinoma, kidney cancer. His diseased left kidney was removed. Four years later, his cancer hit stage 4. During treatment, he entered rabbinical school in 2010. He was ordained in 2017. In summer 2020, his second year in Portland, the rabbi was diagnosed with cancer of the esophagus, resulting in an esophagectomy.

No stranger to hospitals, treatments, surgeries, pre-scan sky-high anxiety and the isolation

cancer often causes, Rabbi Mel, 70, receives medical care at a local teaching hospital. "But when I exit the building after an appointment or treatment, then what?" he asks. "There is no support whatsoever."

Rabbi Mel met Rabbi Cohen when the latter visited him in the hospital while he was recovering from a procedure. Rabbi Cohen brought up the need for a support group for cancer patients and then introduced his idea and Rabbi Mel to JFCS' DeBoer.

"I learned from Rabbi Young the unique challenges of going through cancer treatments and the need to find support and strength from others," Rabbi Cohen says.

"When it became clear that there are limited cancer support group offerings, Rabbi Young and I began to ask how we could create one for our community," he says. "I am appreciative of how receptive JFCS was to combine our talents, experiences and resources in this

effort. Together, we will help those with cancer navigate the road of healing and health."

The facilitators stress that the Cancer Support Group is open to anyone with a cancer diagnosis. "I am a cancer patient who happens to be a rabbi," Rabbi Mel says. "This work transcends my professional work."

The rabbi says the group members will benefit from being heard and supported by the facilitators and one another. Their role is to honor the presence of those also on this journey, acknowledge what he calls signposts (say, surgical procedures) and celebrate milestones (such as the half-way point in chemo treatments).

Caitlin, Rabbi Mel and Rabbi Cohen are creating community for anyone along the cancer continuum.

"If we can provide a safe space, where people can be honest with one another and themselves – where they are not taking care of others – that is key," Caitlin says.

## Cancer Support Group

**Presented by Jewish Family & Child Service**

What: A no-cost, safe, online space for those with a cancer diagnosis

When: The second Wednesday of each month, beginning April 13

Where: via Zoom

How: Please contact Caitlin DeBoer, LCSW, with questions or to register at 971-400-3533 or [cdeboer@jfcs-portland.org](mailto:cdeboer@jfcs-portland.org).

More information: [jfcs-portland.org/cancer-support](http://jfcs-portland.org/cancer-support)

### Deadlines near for Havurah Shabbat School

Havurah Shalom, Portland's Reconstructing Judaism community, is currently planning for next year's Shabbat School, the congregation's cooperative Jewish education program for children and families.

April 18 is the deadline to become a Havurah Shalom member for those considering enrolling children in Shabbat School. The school enrollment deadline is May 1.

Information about Shabbat School is available on Havurah's website ([havurahshalom.org/shabbat-school-grades-k-6.html](http://havurahshalom.org/shabbat-school-grades-k-6.html)). Anyone seriously considering Shabbat School and Havurah Shalom membership should contact Deborah Eisenbach-Budner, Havurah's Education Director, at [deborah@havurahshalom.org](mailto:deborah@havurahshalom.org) as soon as possible, as Shabbat School staff will meet or have a conversation with all prospective families before March 31.