



UNDER EMBARGO UNTIL: February 6, 2023/15 Shevat 5783

Contact email: aviwestjea.nominations@gmail.com

MollyBeth Jacobs Rushfield named inaugural recipient of the Avi West Jewish Education Award in the DC Metro Area with two additional educators honored in memory of Jewish Educational leaders

Rockville, MD – MollyBeth Jacobs Rushfield has been named the inaugural recipient of the Avi West Jewish Education Award, honoring the memory of our beloved community educator - Avi West's (z"l). The [Avi West Endowment Fund](#), established in 2022, supports an annual award for professional development for an exemplary Jewish educator who embodied Avi's character, his love of Jewishness, Israel, and every Jewish individual. The endowment was funded by hundreds of community members and colleagues close to Avi who were enriched by his teachings and leadership.

The quality of the candidates was so impressive that an anonymous donor stepped forward to remember two more exceptional Jewish educational leaders and honor two of Avi's beloved Jewish education colleagues and collaborators – Barry Krasner and Shulamith Reich Elster. This additional gift recognizes two additional outstanding Jewish community educators from the initial group of Avi West nominees. These two individuals have continuously initiated vibrant and innovative Jewish educational experiences in the Greater DC Jewish community.

[MollyBeth Jacobs Rushfield](#) was selected from the many exemplary Jewish educators nominated to receive the first Avi West Jewish Educator Award. MollyBeth has had a substantial impact on her students, campers, community, and organizations. Her application and stories stood out among the many Jewish educators nominated, who currently serve the Greater Washington Jewish community in a variety of settings, including day schools, congregations, youth groups, summer camps, adult education programs, or universities.

Molly Beth embodies Avi's enthusiasm, warmth, inclusivity, values, joy, and compassion for everyone as well as models the inspirational, creative, accessible, and imaginative Jewish learning experiences he created. MollyBeth has taught children of all ages in the classroom, led Junior Congregation, and run camp programs in the Washington DC metro area for more than 30 years.

As described by one of her nominators, "MollyBeth is a unicorn, truly unique and singularly gifted in being able to meet diverse learning needs of children through her creativity, empathy, and dedication. MollyBeth meets every child where they are and supports their growth, offering a 'perfect fit' education for students who otherwise likely would not be able to attend a Jewish day school."

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[Debra Beland Ackerman](#) is being recognized in memory of Barry Krasner (z"l), who committed his career to elevating excellence in congregational education and educators. Blending formal and informal Jewish educational experiences for over 50 years, Barry's talent inspired countless campers, educators, and students. Debra has worked in Jewish education locally for 24 years. One of her nominators said "everything Debra does is done with *seichel* (intelligence), thoughtfulness, selflessness, and deep commitment. Her commitment to keeping the youth of our community connected, educated, and respected is unparalleled." Another nominator noted that Debra "has open ears, an open heart, and a love of teaching Jewish kids. She knows how to make religious school a special experience for learners of all ages and has created an environment for students to be lifelong Jewish learners."

[Sharon Freundel](#) is being recognized in memory of Dr. Shulamith Reich Elster (z"l), a mentor of mentors and educational leader in, and founder of, many Jewish institutions in our community. Shulamith was considered a dean of Jewish education, serving the Jewish community in multiple capacities for over 57 years. Sharon has been teaching learners of all ages – with an emphasis on children and teens – in our local community for 30 of the 45 years she has served as a Jewish educator. One of her nominators called her "the quintessential Jewish educator of educators," highlighting her talent for developing creative Jewish learning experiences for students, faculty, and families, emphasizing how everyone found meaning in the Jewish experiences she facilitated.

The three award recipients will each receive a \$5,000 award to impact our community through their continued Jewish learning and/or professional development. All three educators will share the outcomes of their learning, funded by their awards in the future.

"We are so grateful to the Washington DC Metro area Jewish community for everyone's generosity and enthusiasm in creating the award in memory of my father," commented Liron West Silbert, daughter of Avi West. "Jewish education is a cornerstone of building strong Jewish identity, and Jewish educators are at the core of this work. My family truly looks forward to celebrating all three educators at an award recognition event in coming months."

As a master teacher and a creative, innovative educator, Avi's depth of Jewish knowledge was only matched by his depth of character. Embodying warmth, empathy and humility, Avi demonstrated a unique talent for weaving together rich Jewish content with contemporary topics. He brilliantly created relevant, joyful learning experiences for people of all ages, backgrounds and identities. Avi exuded endless optimism and hope that lifted our spirits. His spirit was lifted every day by his greatest treasures—his wife, Chagit; children Yohai (Yael) and Liron (Justin); and grandchildren whom he cherished dearly. Avi died at age 68 in August 2021/Av 5781. His words, lessons, and actions will endure through the people he taught and then all of the people they taught. We are a better Jewish community because Avi was a part of it. *Zichrono l'vracha* – his memory will always be a blessing.