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COVER STORY: A New Beginning

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Rabbi Jason Miller often heard the same skeptical question when he mentioned Congregation Beit Kodesh. "They'd come back with, 'Really? There's a shul in Livonia?'" said Rabbi Miller, who admits driving past and forgetting it was there, too. Then he walked inside Beit Kodesh. From September 2005 through July 2006, Rabbi Miller served as rabbinic adviser, helping the synagogue become more noticeable, not just from the street, but through its programming and its new-found vibrancy and youth.

Just as Rosh Hashanah, which begins at sundown Friday, signals a new beginning for Jews worldwide, this year also brings a fresh start for Beit Kodesh, the only Conservative synagogue in western Wayne County.

As recently as the early 1990s, Beit Kodesh was a flourishing 90- to 100- family congregation with an active sisterhood and men's club, a thriving Sunday school and standing-room-only High Holiday services.

But, with fewer Jewish families living in Livonia and the departure of their rabbi in the late 1990s, the progressive, egalitarian Conservative congregation was down to 40 families with a small Sunday school and no clergy.

"There was never talk of dissolving," said Martin Diskin of Farmington Hills, synagogue president. "We just looked at our declining membership and decided we'd better do something. We knew we needed young families and would need to offer them something if they were going to join."

So, in late 2004, the congregation began the "Save Our Synagogue" (SOS) campaign.



The first thing they did was to renovate the sanctuary and adjoining social hall. "We knew if we were going let area families know we were here, we needed to update our building," said Jeff Kirsch of Farmington Hills, religious committee vice president.

The building includes all the expected amenities, from offices and classrooms to a sisterhood gift shop and "a classy, full-fledged, categorized, up-to-date library," said Martin's wife, longtime sisterhood treasurer Dorothy Diskin.

Heavenly Match

Once changes were under way, Kirsch went to the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism to have the synagogue's lapsed membership reinstated. There he learned about Rabbi Miller, then associate director of University of Michigan

Hillel Foundation in Ann Arbor.

"As much as I enjoyed my job at Hillel, I was ready to do some congregational work also," Rabbi Miller said. "And they had so much potential."

So, while retaining his full-time Hillel post, he consulted at Beit Kodesh until beginning a position as rabbi at Congregation Agudas Achim in Columbus, Ohio, this summer.

"Rabbi Miller helped to turn around the synagogue, bring in more members and is very much still involved with us," Kirsch said.

Through a donation he secured from the Mandell and Madeleine Berman Foundation, one of the initial things Rabbi Miller did was conduct a feasibility study to determine the synagogue's potential to survive. He discovered two main things: Many unaffiliated Jews lived in the area - including young families who would be needing religious education for their children - and many didn't know the synagogue was there.

He learned the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit was ready to sell the former United Hebrew Schools (UHS) branch because it didn't realize a functioning congregation still existed.

"The shul, it was decided, is not ready to die," Rabbi Miller said.

"Rabbi Miller," Kirsch said, "was able to look outside the box and help us restructure our programs and our services to benefit members who have been here for years and also accommodate our new families. And he helped provide us with the tools to build on what he started."

Way Back

Beit Kodesh has been around since 1958, when a group of families new to Livonia began to hold Shabbat services, first in members' homes and then at Clarenceville Central Elementary School. About 200 people gathered for the first High Holiday services. In 1959, the Livonia Jewish Congregation was officially organized; and, in 1990, the name was changed to Beit Kodesh.

Over the years, the congregation has held services in several locations, including a farmhouse, a tent and a church. Since 1971, they have been renting and meeting at the former UHS Molly and Samuel Cohn Building on West Seven Mile Road, between Merriman and Farmington roads.

The building has been defaced with swastikas at times and the congregation's Torah breastplates were once stolen. But members are proud of their family-oriented synagogue that is reminiscent of shuls in Detroit's old neighborhoods, according to founding member Phyllis Lewkowicz, who has lived in Livonia since 1958.

Beit Kodesh was most recently led by Rabbi Craig Allen, who left in 1998.

Many who are involved now are longtime members, like the Diskins, who have been at Beit Kodesh for 20 years, and Kirsch, who remembers going to services there with his grandfather 35 years ago. He later joined with his wife and children.

"Beit Kodesh means 'holy home' and for some Jewish members of the community, this is their holy home," Rabbi Miller said. "I'm optimistic that others in the community will step forward to ensure this shul doesn't fade away."

Congregants are confident that won't happen, and they understand rejuvenation could be a slow process.

"It took many, many years for the membership to dwindle; and we know rebuilding will take some time," Kirsch said. "But we're starting to fill the sanctuary again."

And they're not looking to be massive.

"We've always been a small synagogue," Kirsch said. "If we wanted to be large, we would have moved. But we chose to stay in Livonia to provide the families here and in the surrounding locations with services and education. We chose to remain here and be a family-type - heimische - synagogue."

Dorothy Diskin agrees. "We are such a friendly congregation, where everybody knows each other and you don't get lost in the crowd. We share happy occasions and support one another in sickness and bad times - like a family."

The warmth isn't what brought Fern and Randy Soper's family to Beit Kodesh, but it is part of what keeps them coming back.

They had never noticed the synagogue just a few miles from their home until last year when Fern Soper saw a sign in front of the building - part of the congregation's new visibility campaign.

"It said, 'Free Sunday School,'" Soper recalled.

It was a one-year promotion offered to new kindergarten students. "We didn't belong to a shul and we were looking for a religious school for our son, Jeremy [now 6 ½]," Soper said.

The Sopers are thrilled with Jeremy's education, and they became hooked on Friday night services through the school's monthly children's Shabbat program. Now they attend regularly, along with their daughter, Jillian, 2 ½.

"Even when I can't go, my husband, who is not Jewish, goes with the kids," she said. "And he feels very welcome there. We took his mom to the shul's Mother's Day program, too. Everyone there is always looking out for everyone else. It's such a warm place to belong."

Adding Momentum

Revitalization means progress on many levels. This past spring, the congregation was involved in its first co-sponsorship of a community event in quite some time, the Melanoma Research Foundation's fundraiser in Novi.

A Torah class is held each week and the congregation volunteers at food banks and homeless shelters. Socially, they gather for bowling, road rallies, ice cream and dance socials; and they hold a weekly table tennis tournament.

The sisterhood, which remained active throughout the history of the congregation, is now up to 38 members who are involved in social, cultural, educational and charitable programs, run a fundraising gift shop and maintain the synagogue kitchen. The Shalom newsletter keeps members in the loop, and there's talk of re-starting the men's club.

While the hope is to hire a rabbi, for now lay staff and members fill the void. Members lead services, and Kirsch and Martin Diskin teach haftorah for those planning to become b'nai mitzvah. Members Aron Zoldan of Livonia, Marcel Halberstadt of West Bloomfield and Jerry Cohn of Novi alternate reading Torah during services.

And the children always have been, and continue to be, a big part of what's vital at Beit Kodesh.

A search for a new director of education has begun. Kirsch is acting director, meeting on Sunday mornings with grades one through four. "The Sunday school is still small," he said, "but our new families are bringing more students. And once a month the children participate in Shabbat services, with the plan for them to be able to learn to lead part of the service themselves."

Kirsch also oversees the Teens on the Go program, involving post-b'nai mitzvah youth who visit Jewish communal sites and volunteer for tzedakah projects.

While most members - whose annual dues are \$400 with a yearly \$50 building fee - live in the Livonia area, some come from as far as Bloomfield Hills and Dearborn. Seven new member families have joined Beit Kodesh in the last year or so, bringing the total to 47 families.

Weekly Shabbat services are described by Kirsch as "a more modern service with a lot of English on Friday nights and a more traditional service on Saturday mornings."

As in previous years, Cantor Harry Sturm will conduct High Holiday services at the synagogue. This year, Cantor Emeritus David Gutman will also officiate.

"Today, as my wife and I look back and recall the memories of our children coming to services with us, attending Sunday

school and having their bar and bat mitzvah, we see that our heimishe shul, after all these years, still remains just that," Kirsch said. "It's a warm and inviting place for friends and family to worship, to learn, celebrate and socialize together."

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