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Synagogues go multiplex with worship options

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Saturday activities at Agudas Achim Synagogue tend to start off at a quick pace these days. The synagogue has begun a runners club. It meets each week at 7:30 a.m.

Shabbat services begin at 9.

Club founder Mike Gertner said the group has met only a couple of times so far, but word is spreading.

"For me, running is a spiritual experience," he said. "It's like meditation; it's live davening. To be able to run, then go in and pray, it's quite a combination."

Rabbi Jason Miller says he wants everybody to get involved in the Shabbat experience, even if they aren't especially religious. So the Conservative synagogue is going multiplex in its approach to programming.

On Oct. 27-28, it will offer its first of five planned "Synaplex" Shabbats, simultaneous programming from which worshippers can choose.

The weekend, packaged as part of a national concept, includes a "Friday Night Live" Shabbat outdoor service, dinner, a special blessing for pets (an homage to the week's Torah portion, *Parashat Noach*), "Yoga and Yiddishkeit," workshop and a nature walk. A Havdalah service and bonfire Saturday night for young adults will cap off Shabbat.

On Sunday, preschool and Hebrew school families will gather for a trip to the Columbus Zoo.

"If you want to get people involved, you've got to do what they're doing," said Rabbi Miller. "I'm tired of hearing that the kids can't come on Saturday because they have karate."

The idea isn't new. For years, synagogues have searched for ways to engage members and encourage them to attend weekly Sabbath services.

Congregation Tifereth Israel has long held a monthly shorter, family-friendly Shabbat service. On Oct. 13 Cantor Jack Chomsky will conduct his first monthly "Service of the Spirit," centering on the music of the late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach and incorporating yoga and meditation.

The cantor also has started a listserv, or Internet e-mail group, called "Pray and Mean It" with information about specific prayers to help engage those who use it.

Temple Beth Shalom continues to build a slate of activities such as guest speakers, book clubs, a Rosh Chodesh group for girls and family-oriented worship.

Congregation Ahavas Sholom is starting a learners' service to appeal to those who feel uncomfortable with the Orthodox liturgy.

The national project Synagogue 2000, a partnership of synagogues and other Jewish organizations, was designed to study synagogue life and discover how to revitalize it.

In their recent book, *The Jew Within*, Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen documented findings from 60 in-depth interviews and 1,005 mail surveys to individual American Jews. Cohen and Eisen, now chancellor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, observed:

"Few Jews go to synagogue looking for God and few find God there. Like other Americans, few Jewish worshippers take the content of prayers very seriously, even among those who 'pray' with fervor. Rather they seek tradition, familiarity, comfort and community, and if they are lucky, they find them."



Ruth Portnoy :: TNS

Rabbi Jason Miller talks about his plan for several Synaplex Shabbats in the coming Jewish year.

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Synaplex is an organized way of viewing programming. Run by the national STAR (Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal) based in Minneapolis, it provides guidance and support to its 115 members. These Reform, Conservative and Orthodox institutions talk to one another about programming. STAR consultants aid members with packaging and marketing and teach them how to conduct focus groups to evaluate their efforts.

In 2001 and 2002 as it began the concept, STAR provided 21 grants to congregations and Jewish organizations, channeling more than \$1 million into synagogues for innovative programs.

This is Rabbi Miller's third Synaplex-affiliated congregation. At Agudath Israel in Caldwell N.J., "Synaplex helped us organize our marketing and increase our reach," he said.

At Adat Shalom in Farmington Hills, Mich., he said: "Our numbers doubled. The marketing buzz around the community really publicized what was going on. We brought in a lot of new, young families."

Synaplex Director Rabbi Hayim Herring said the idea of creating multiple programming around Shabbat is to reclaim the traditional function of the synagogue as a gathering place.

"It's a place where fellowship and *tefillah* (prayer) took place," he said. "Some synagogues are doing these things anyway, but by putting them together during prime time on Shabbat we're building a congregation."

Temple Israel is preparing to follow a similar track. Rabbi Misha Zinkow is leading plans for a series of simultaneous Shabbat programs that include a book club, musical worship and services led by teenage members.

Rabbi Zinkow says synagogues have to offer multiple paths along the Jewish journey. "In today's world, it isn't an either-or situation," he said. "We have to think of a spectrum."

The Oct. 21 Shabbat slate includes a social-justice worship and discussion session and "a yoga experience integrated with Shabbat worship," said Rabbi Zinkow.

The temple has hired several new staff, including a music director and family educator.

"We have a staff capable of running parallel programming," Rabbi Zinkow said.

Lifelong Temple Israel member Kim Feinknopf, one of the temple's younger adults, said she likes the idea. "We have things already. People attend lectures," she said. "But they aren't interacting. It will be good having certain Saturdays where there is lots to do. We need more intergenerational programming so people can get to know each other at all levels."

For more information on Synaplex, visit www.starsynagogue.org.