

Rabbi brings synagogue home

It's the first in community

By Jillian Orlando, Globe Correspondent | February 13, 2005

Nehar Shalom means River of Peace, and it's the name for what the Jewish Religious Information Center in Boston and the Jamaica Plain Historical Society say is the first synagogue in Jamaica Plain.

The aim for the new synagogue, says its leader, is to create a community by combining the old traditions of Judaism with the work of social justice and a modern, welcoming atmosphere.

Rabbi Victor Hillel Reinstein, 54, who has been a conservative Jewish rabbi for 26 years, is seeking to develop an independent congregation to meet the needs of the Jewish community in JP.

"My hope really is to draw on warmth and that which is beautiful from the past and to really try to bring it into a new context," said Reinstein, whose house on Lochstead Avenue serves as home for the synagogue.

The idea for Reinstein's synagogue grew from the concept of a shitbel, a Chassidic prayer room for people to gather together, often in a rabbi's home. The congregation's name symbolizes the bringing of ideas to the community, the way rivers bring water to the ocean.

"It's a wonderful addition to a very diverse and vibrant community for those of us who are Jewish or exploring a Jewish path," said Alice Lowenstein, 37, who has lived in JP for six years.

She said she will continue her participation in synagogues and Jewish programs outside of JP, to which she has commuted in the past, but is glad to now have this unique space in her neighborhood.

Lowenstein feels especially grateful for the new synagogue on Sabbath, when many Jews try to refrain from reliance on worldly devices, such as cars.

"Being able to walk to a synagogue, for example, is really quite a gift and can enhance the observation of the Jewish Sabbath," she said.

In addition to honoring the practices of a shitbel, Reinstein wants to bring Jewish representation to the diversity of the local neighborhood.

The goal is to develop connections with other religious and community groups, "to create bridges of understanding with other religious and cultural and ethnic communities," he said.

Reinstein, a former rabbi at Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Boston in Newton, plans to meet with clergy from a variety of religious communities in the area. He will be preaching today at First Church in Jamaica Plain Unitarian Universalist.

According to Reinstein, the Jewish community in JP has been growing over the past several years, and while living in Newton, he became aware of the increasing need for a synagogue and began to look for a space.

"At first I wasn't sure I was really serious about this, and it gradually grew on us as something that might really be worth trying."

Reinstein moved to the home of the new shul last November with his wife, Mieke Verfaellie, and 13-year-old daughter, Tzvia.

He began to network in search of old synagogues that had closed, merged, or dwindled to acquire the needed religious items.

One object with a particularly exceptional history is the synagogue's mezuzah -- a small box containing a religious scroll that is placed on the doorpost -- which was made by Aviel Barclay, believed to be the first woman scribe certified to rewrite official copies of the Torah scrolls in the lengthy, traditional process.

At a ceremony and open house last Sunday, this traditional piece was installed at Reinstein's home.

To start the new community, individual and family memberships are being sought.

Members will be eligible for a variety of classes and programs as well as bar and bas mitzvah preparation.

Though financial support is needed, the synagogue will not turn anyone away for monetary reasons, according to Reinstein, and will accept donations geared to what families, individuals, and students can afford.■

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