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A sukkah joins tents at protest

Jews tie holiday to Occupy Boston
By Elise Kigner
 Advocate Staff



Hebrew College rabbinical and cantorial students in the Occupy Boston sukkah. From left: Risa Wallach, Suzie Schwartz, Getzel Davis, Sarah Bracha Gershuny, Micah Shapiro, Arielle Rosenberg, Nate DeGroot and Joanna Lubkin.

This sukkah has been a place for study and prayer, for enjoying meals, and catching up with friends. Some hearty souls even have slept in this sukkah, which is like any other, except for one thing.

Instead of being in a family's backyard, or behind a shul, this sukkah is in Dewey Square – a Jewish tent of sorts at the end of a row of the camping tents of the Occupy Boston protest. The movement is calling for a variety of economic and social reforms, decrying the gap between the richest 1 percent and the rest of Americans.

In the past week of Occupy Boston, which began Sept. 30, there has been an identifiable Jewish presence at the protest: A brightly colored sukkah has hosted everything from Shabbat services to art projects to a performance by a Yiddish chorus. The week

before impromptu Kol Nidre services were held in Dewey Square.

Wednesday afternoon a small group of Jews pulled up lawn chairs around the entrance of the sukkah for a text study session with Rabbi Victor Reinstein of Nehar Shalom Community Synagogue in Jamaica Plain.

Reinstein, sitting cross-legged on the blue tarp, read a portion of Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz's Ha'Sh'loh Ha'Kodesh about the meaning of the sukkah. Horowitz, a rabbi from Europe, wrote about the mitzvah of a sukkah that teaches people not to put their trust "in the greatness of their house and its strength and fine furnishings, even if it is filled with much good," and instead to put their trust in G-d.

Reinstein read Horowitz's reflection:

"I share with you that my heart burns whenever I see people building houses to be like the castles of princes...as though it will be forever...if G-d gives you great wealth, build houses according to your needs, and not more."

One student piped in: When was this written?

Reinstein explained that Horowitz lived about 400 years ago. The group cramped into the sukkah on a square of grass surrounded by towering buildings seemed surprised. They

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felt like Horowitz was talking to them, about Occupy Boston.

"This is the whole point of this," one woman said, referring to Occupy Boston, "the arrogance of the one percent and the building of the bank castles."

As the text study was wrapping up, Arthur Maserjian, a 20-year-old international business major at Northeastern University peeked into the sukkah. Maserjian was on his lunch break from his co-op job at State Street Bank, and was curious about the sukkah, even though he was unsure about how he fit into the Occupy movement.

He said he is riddled with student debt, but is employed by corporate America. His parents work in business, and taught him about how individuals can work their way up in society.

"I grew up with the Jewish American dream," said Maserjian, who serves on the board of NU's Hillel.

While videos of anti-Semitic protestors in New York have circulated around the Internet, Jews at Occupy Boston said they have seen no evidence of anti-Semitism here. But there have been pro-Palestinian protestors in Dewey Square.

Tuesday night a group of about 30 pro-Palestinian protestors stood on the sidewalk with signs facing the cars whizzing by.

They distributed a flyer titled "Occupy Boston/Not Palestine" that condemned US spending on military aid for Israel and urged that the money instead go toward jobs, homes and healthcare here.

The protest was sponsored by Jewish Women for Justice in Israel/Palestine, and was also supported by Jewish Voice for Peace, American Jews for a Just Peace and Boston Coalition for Palestinian Rights.

A group of Jews not involved with the sidewalk protest gathered in and around the sukkah. Leonard Fein, founder of *Moment* magazine and an *Advocate* columnist, said he and the other Jews in the sukkah decided to ignore the protestors.

"They are so pathetic. I don't want to add to their visibility by getting into an argument," Fein said.

The sukkah will stay up throughout the holiday. Thursday, 5:30-8:30 p.m., Hebrew College rabbinical students will lead a Simchat Torah celebration with learning, prayer and dancing. Jocelyn Berger, who is studying international affairs at Tufts, and Suzie Schwartz, a rabbinical student at Hebrew College, will lead Shabbat services Friday, 5:45-7 p.m.

Schwartz said she expected Shabbat services to continue in Dewey Square after Sukkot is over.

"We're not just going to show up and not bring ourselves to the movement, and not bring ourselves to the struggle, and by bringing ourselves we bring our Judaism" she said.

Another Hebrew College student, Nate DeGroot, led Yom Kippur services at the Brandeis Reform Chavurah, and then came to Occupy Boston to sleep out in a tent. He was arrested earlier this month, along with about 100 others, when the protest expanded beyond Dewey Square. Last week, he was back in the square helping to build the sukkah.

"Sukkot is about building a world that you are imagining - constructing a world that feels right," he said.

This is happening, he said, at Occupy Boston.

"It is about setting up your life here, and this becoming your life and your home."

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