

## **A Jewish community makes a comeback Younger generation revitalizes Temple Hillel Bnai Torah**

Author: Kahn, Ric

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WEST ROXBURY -- On Sept. 4, 1993, God willing, Daniel Moshe Gelbtuch will be bar mitzvahed at his parents' shul on Corey Street, Temple Hillel Bnai Torah.

The ceremony will mark more than young Gelbtuch's rite of passage into manhood. As the first bar mitzvah celebrated by a child of the new generation of West Roxbury shulgoers, the event will also represent the coming of age of these young turks, who in the 1980s pumped new blood into a synagogue that, like other urban temples, was dying of old age. The prophets had predicted that without a new life force, the aging congregation would have perished in 1995.

But the future of West Roxbury's only synagogue is still uncertain. Without a continuing inrush of young members to solidify the shul's financial foundation, Temple Hillel Bnai Torah may yet close the doors of its holy ark forever.

To prevent that, the conservative temple last month kicked off a major recruitment drive, aided by a \$3,000 grant from the Combined Jewish Philanthropies, one of 15 offerings made from the agency's Synagogue Program Fund.

The shul's recruiting committee, coheaded by young Gelbtuch's mother, Madelyn Bronitsky, 40, has billed itself as Project Geshar, the Hebrew word for "bridge." In attempting to link the shul to unaffiliated Jews living in West Roxbury, Roslindale, Jamaica Plain, Dedham and South Brookline, the Geshar group has proclaimed its mission to be no less than "The Revitalization of an Urban Jewish Community."

It may not be an overstatement. Intergenerational partnerships like the one forged at Temple Hillel Bnai Torah have been the savior of other shuls in greater Boston -- most notably Congregation B'nai Brith in Somerville, Temple Beth Shalom of Cambridge, and the Boston Synagogue at Charles River Park -- according to Alan Teperow, executive director of the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts.

Though sometimes tense, observers say, these alignments between the wise old ones and the young whippersnappers have helped reverse the trend of the '50s, '60s and early '70s, when urban shuls shut down after their memberships died or migrated to the suburbs.

Project Geshar hopes to attract the young Jewish families who have relocated to, or quietly remained in, urbania. Through word of mouth and written list, Project Geshar has identified about 140 Jewish families in the West Roxbury area who don't belong to a shul.

On Oct. 18, responding to personalized invitations, about 25 of those families assembled at open houses held in a series of succot, huts built to commemorate the temporary desert dwelling places used by the children of Israel during the 40 years of wandering that followed their exodus from Egypt.

Watching four of the families gather in her succah, Bronitsky was kvelling, gushing with the pride of a Jewish mother who was able to watch history repeat itself. For it was at small gatherings like this one that, not so long ago, she and others first connected with Temple Hillel Bnai Torah. And in finding their way to the shul in the '80s after such get-togethers, the new group was following in the footsteps of the synagogue's founding mothers and fathers.

History shows that in 1949, 31 Jewish women in the West Roxbury area seeking an identity established a communal group called the Parkway Jewish Women's Club. The men followed suit the next year, forming the Parkway Jewish Men's Association.

In 1951, the groups held High Holiday Services in a rather unlikely place: the Parish House of the Unitarian Church.

In 1953, having joined forces to become the Parkway Jewish Community Center, the men and women set up shop in a building they had purchased on Corey Street. The holy place was named first the Parkway Temple and Community Center, then Temple Beth Torah -- "The House of the Law." The shul later merged with Temple Beth Hillel, formerly of Dorchester, and used the amalgamated name Temple Hillel Bnai Torah.

During the '60s, according to current president Marvin Rosenkrantz, 59, the synagogue flourished, with 250 to 300 families, a full-time rabbi and a soup-to-nuts Hebrew School. But the congregation wasn't getting any younger. The average age, Rosenkrantz said, was closing in on 50.

Over the next decade, the congregation dipped below 100, as members moved to the suburbs, made their exodus to Florida or passed away.

In 1983, when Madelyn Bronitsky and her husband, Sam Gelbtuch, entered the shul for the ceremony to name their daughter, Ruth, they saw a sea of 75-year-olds.

The couple had moved from their Brighton apartment to West Roxbury in 1981. Like many other Jews living in West Roxbury, they could not afford a house in Newton or Brookline.

As Jews in a largely Irish-Catholic community, the couple felt the alienation of living in the Diaspora. No group walkings to shul on the Sabbath with everybody dressed in their Saturday best. No sending a basket of goodies to a neighbor on Purim, the holiday commemorating the saving of the Jews from elimination under Persian rule.

In 1985, four women sat at Bronitsky's kitchen table and lamented: "There have to be more Jews in West Roxbury."

They put up posters and, like their synagogue forebears, called for a meeting in an unusual place: the community room of the police station. About 40 people showed up at the meeting. Out of this group grew the West Roxbury Chavurah, a Jewish circle of friends.

With their children getting older, and seeking to be part of the epicenter of Jewish life, Bronitsky and Gelbtuch joined Temple Hillel Bnai Torah in 1986. A pair of social workers, they have been joined since the mid-1980s by an influx of eclectic young Jews: doctors and lawyers, but also a musician, a photographer, a secretary and a machinist.

The new generation was greeted with open arms by many. But, according to members, some of the old guard wanted to jerk away the welcome mat. They seemed to chafe under the different ways of the newcomers: The young upstarts wanted to serve fruit salad and not eggs and lox at the rabbi's farewell breakfast? They wanted women called to the torah and counted in the minyan, the daily prayer quorum of 10?

"The attitude was `You can lick my apple, but you can't take a bite out of it,' " said Rosenkrantz, who has acted as a one-man bridge between old and young.

Today, despite some flare-ups, members on both sides of the age gulf say tensions have largely faded and credit an intergenerational federation for kindling a synagogue renaissance. Though there's just a part-time rabbi and no Hebrew school, only junior congregation services every other week, the membership is up to 150 families, with 24 joining in the last year alone, Rosenkrantz said. About 30 percent of the congregation is 40 and under, with 45 or 50 little ones running about. And the young turks, with the three vice-president positions and near control of the board, are poised to take over the shul's leadership.

But, pending the outreach results of Project Geshet, the temple's future footing is still up in the air. The congregation's young cadre will feel confident if they can look at Daniel Moshe Gelbtuch and his friends gathered at Temple Hillel Bnai Torah on Sept. 4, 1993, and say: "This shul one day will belong to them."

### **Illustration**

PHOTO; CAPTION: Cantor Haskel Altman helps Daniel Gelbtuch, 12, prepare for his bar mitzvah at Temple Hillel Bnai Torah in West Roxbury. / GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / JOANNE RATHE

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