

Wednesday, May 24, 2006/26 Iyyar 5766

(05/19/2006)

## Curing The 'God Talk' Allergy

*From meditation to discussing religious 'journeys,' local congregations incorporate more spirituality into their services.*

Merri Rosenberg - Special To The Jewish Week



When Emma Reisman walked into Pleasantville Community Synagogue in August 2005, she finally found what she had long craved in a synagogue.

In this nondenominational congregation, which features meditation, dancing, monthly Rosh Chodesh services, healing services and congregational retreats focusing on spirituality, Reisman felt that "it was my home. I felt happy to participate. The meditation part of the service is the space in

the week I give myself. I like that there is that time."

Nor is Pleasantville Community Synagogue alone in offering a more spiritually-based experience to its worshipers.

Partly prompted by discussions that emerged a few years ago from the Synagogue 2000 initiative, and partly by the often inchoate desire of many middle-aged baby boomers who want more from a shul than a social group or a place to have their children prepare for bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies, there is growing interest in having congregations become places where members feel comfortable talking about their spiritual journeys. While not universal, increasing numbers of Westchester synagogues are offering special services or tweaking their existing ones to incorporate this search for enhanced spiritual experiences.

An initiative dedicated, according to its Web site, to "revitalizing and re-energizing synagogue life in North America," Synagogue 2000 has worked with 21 Westchester congregations, helping them rethink many aspects of their operations.

"Jewish spirituality is not new," explains Rabbi Mark Sameth of Pleasantville Community Synagogue, which incorporates aspects of the Jewish Renewal Movement. "Jewish spirituality is uncovering something that has always been there in the tradition. In this generation, there's greater interest in picking up this strand and drawing it out. A lot of it is generated by the baby boom generation, but spirituality is not a bubble or a bulge. My perspective is that Jewish spiritual tradition is the foundation of the Jewish religion. It's not an overlay. It's the essence. You can't program spirituality." Some congregants come and meditate before the Saturday morning service as well.

In fact, adds Lisa Lipkin Werbin of her experience at Pleasantville Community Synagogue, "There's a spiritual significance to everything you do. There's absolutely a feeling coming from the bima that we are in this together, praying together. The place was built on the idea that we should be seeking something spiritual. Even people who don't come looking for it, find it there."

Not everyone finds spirituality inside a synagogue. Westchester Jewish Community Services, for example, has launched programs for those who crave an authentic spiritual Jewish

experience through other avenues. Programs include early morning meditations and walks at various parks throughout the county, as well as a spiritual support group for those in recovery.

“Most people don’t know how to talk about the experience of God,” says Rabbi Pamela Wax, spiritual care coordinator of Westchester Jewish Community Services. “They think prayer is [only] in the prayer book. Spiritual text study is itself a form of prayer. You can meet God in prayer, in text study, in relationship with other people. It’s an enlargement of what prayer can be. Spirituality is out there more, but it’s not out there enough.”

Rabbi Wax, who is currently leading a course on meditation and middot, or virtues, with Rabbi Jonathan Slater, adds that some of the people who come to the healing services she co-leads are looking for “a place outside the traditional synagogue, where their spiritual needs might get met, or possibly be met.”

In congregations that have embraced a more self-consciously spiritual approach to services, clergy are quick to point out that this in fact represents a return to Judaism’s roots.

“The heart of Judaism is spirituality,” says Rabbi Richard Jacobs of Westchester Reform Temple in Scarsdale, where healing services and meditation have been part of Shabbat services for many years. “There’s an allergy people have towards ‘God talk.’ A lot of people may feel uncomfortable. I try to open up the conversation. People think that public prayer is the thing you do. We’re working on how to deepen the connection to God. Synagogue 2000 made efforts to try to deepen spiritual life and offer more options on how people choose to worship.”

For example, Rabbi Jacobs teaches each student in his 10th grade confirmation class how to meditate. “We have a rich spiritual tradition,” he explains. “I want them to know the fullness of Jewish experience within the congregation — the spirituality of tikkun olam, Shabbat as spirituality in time. At college, the spiritual marketplace is very broad. Those who have been unfulfilled may go somewhere else. I want them to know that the synagogue has something to offer in terms of spiritual growth.”