

A NEW WAY OF PRAYING...

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Rochelle Katz, left, and Jane Shapiro.

A NEW WAY OF PRAYING...

By Pauline Dubkin Yearwood (07/06/2007)

It all started with an unusual religious service—not in Chicago, but in Israel.

Many Americans visiting the Jewish state have been enchanted with the Shira Hadasha minyan, held in a community center in Jerusalem's German Colony neighborhood. There, although there is a *mechitzah* (physical separation between men and women) in accordance with Orthodox law, women read Torah, give Torah commentaries and participate in the service much more than is usual. In addition, nearly the entire service is conducted in song.

When a Chicago Jewish educator, **Jane Shapiro**, prayed at Shira Hadasha during a visit to Israel several years ago, she was impressed.

"They figured out how to create a space for more people to have their voices heard in davening," or praying, she said during a recent phone conversation.

She told her friend and running partner **Rochelle Katz** about the experience and Katz, on her next trip to Israel, visited Shira Hadasha.

"I thought it was beautiful, magnificent," she says. "It was transformative to see women who were obviously Orthodox so engaged in *tefilot*," or prayer. "Typically when there's a mechitzah the women either *daven* quietly or talk (to each other) and don't do anything. To have women contributing equally with the men, and singing, was just transformative."

When she returned to Chicago, she said to Shapiro, "Why can't we have something like this here?"

Shapiro's response was, "Let's do it."

And so, joined by their husbands and several other Chicago Jews, in late 2003 they began holding "Shira Hadasha" services in Katz's home, then in other homes. (Shapiro says that "'Shira Hadasha' has become a brand name for this kind of davening," and that the same thing is happening in communities all over the country.)

They started out with Friday night services, and it was an instant success.

"It's not Shira Hadasha, we don't have 500 people, but it's the same idea," Katz says. "Shira Hadasha is like the mother ship. The point of

it is to make everybody get involved in *tefilah* (prayer). The experience is enhanced for everyone if you don't marginalize people. What is so interesting about Shira Hadasha is that, if you give women just a few small areas where they can lead, all the women feel empowered, like they count. It changes the whole nature of the thing. If their voice is included they feel respected and valued."

Over the next few years the minyan-which still didn't have a name-grew to include High Holiday services, then Shabbat morning services.

At that point "we needed a Torah and Torah readers," Katz says. And they needed a space. Through an unlikely connection, they found one at **Temple Beth Israel**, a Reform synagogue in Skokie.

"Beth Israel was incredibly warm, kind and generous," Katz says. "A mechitzah is not part of what they believe in, and when they first offered" to let the group hold services there, "we asked if they were aware that there was going to be a mechitzah there." The offer stood.

Now, for the past few months, the group has been holding Saturday morning services, as well as some special programs, at the synagogue, primarily in the library. They will also use Beth Israel's sanctuary for High Holiday services since Beth Israel moves to the much larger auditorium at Evanston Township High School for those services. Friday night services continue to be in members' homes.

The group also has a name-Kol Sasson, loosely translated as "voice of joy." (Contact them at www.kolsasson.org.)

In addition to services, there are now children's programs and a Kiddush and lunch after Saturday morning services, all held at Beth Israel.

"The setup they have for us is fantastic," Katz says. "They let us use one of their Torahs-it's a huge, huge help. We wouldn't be able to manage Shabbat morning if not for them. Beth Israel is just extraordinary."

Rabbi Michael Weinberg, Beth Israel's spiritual leader, is equally enthusiastic. "We're thrilled to be able to be of help to another congregation or minyan or whatever they call themselves," he says. "We have a very nice relationship with them and we are thrilled to have them in our building and be able to help them. We have a nice cordial relationship."

So cordial, in fact, that the two congregations have started to do some joint programming, such as a joint study session they held on the eve of Shavuot.

As for Kol Sasson, Katz says that "our growth has been slow, organic, but it's worked for us."

Many of the members, like Katz herself, were brought up in a Traditional synagogue. "We don't attract right-wing *haredi*," or fervently Orthodox Jews, she says, and although there are a few Conservative Jews, "people who are Conservative would not necessarily embrace a mechitzah. It's a small niche of people who embrace the values of Orthodox Judaism and want to be respectful of *halachah* (Jewish law) but interpret it in a way that can be as embracing of as many people as possible." Many members have moved from the city, where they may have belonged to more conventional Orthodox synagogues, to the suburbs and have young children, she says.

Shapiro says partly because of that trend she sees the congregation as in a growth mode.

"Our mission is to expand the ways people can daven," she says. "We need to grow it for the children," many of whom will soon need a place to celebrate their bar and bat mitzvahs. Others in the community, too, are invited to "try it a different way," she says. "It's not boring, and we push everybody to take it seriously, to do it beautifully."

"There is so much diversity, so much passion" in the service, Katz adds. "In a typical service you never see that passion."

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