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Home With BAYITT

Beth Am program connects young adults to synagogue life.

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Staff Reporter

Eliza Feller and her group, Beth Am's Young Adult Initiative for Twenties and Thirties (BAYITT), have undone the myth that young adults want nothing to do with a synagogue.

BAYITT — which is the Hebrew word for home — began three years ago this month when Ms. Feller walked into the Reservoir Hill synagogue's office, where she works as a fund-raiser, and said, "Why don't you offer anything for me?" The group brought more than 40 new young adult members to the *shul*.

As the volunteer chairwoman, Ms. Feller, 29, said she believes the

approximately 100 people involved in BAYITT come because they are looking for a venue to get involved in the greater synagogue community. She said the participants, mostly between the ages of 25 and 35, are not looking for something splashy or expensive.

"We just want to see that the organization really reflects our values — our very progressive, social values," she said.

The group does a lot of social action activities, including greening projects in Reservoir Hill. But they also have a lot of fun, according to Ms. Feller.

"We started out with a Friday evening service, followed by a

wine-and-cheese reception. That was our primary event once a month, until we built up a core group," she said.

Since then, BAYITT has done coffee houses, happy hours, rock climbing, skiing and discussion groups on controversial topics relating to the Jewish community, although the once-a-month Shabbat experience continues.

Locust Point resident Gary Suskauer, 36, and his wife, Stacy, got involved with BAYITT in the summer of 2005, shortly after moving to Baltimore from Cincinnati. He said BAYITT eased his transition into life here and continues to "give us a sense of belonging."

"It's a nice home away from home," said Mr. Suskauer. "If not for this group, I don't know how we would have met so many people." Mr. Suskauer said he sees his Beth Am friends socially outside of BAYITT programs.

Bryna Zumer, 25, a journalist from Hampden, got involved in March 2006. She said BAYITT gave her a window into the Jewish community, which despite having grown up in Reisterstown, she never felt she had.

"It's been a good opportunity to meet other Jewish young adults who are in the city and tend to be interested in similar things, like social action," she said.

Ms. Feller said many people have contacted her, including professionals from the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism Seaboard Region,

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for suggestions on how to start similar programs at other congregations.

"Because people are getting married later and affiliating later, we run a great risk that people will become completely unaffiliated from a religious standpoint," said Ms. Feller. "Synagogues have kept the Jewish community together. If we lose this generation from the synagogue community, we are in a lot of trouble."

That could have been the case for Charles Fisher, 30, a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University. He said he found it difficult to learn what sort of activities were available for people like him, and discovering BAYITT has given him a "welcoming environment," a group of peers who share similar Jewish values, and access to the synagogue's rabbi, Rabbi Jon Konheim, on a regular basis.

"I went to day school and summer camp. I participated in Hillel in college," said Mr. Fisher. "But getting involved from a synagogue perspective has been nice. It really focuses everything." □



Two BAYITT coordinators, Charles Fisher and Eliza Feller, at Beth Am synagogue