

The Urban Rabbi

The new leader of Reservoir Hill's Beth Am draws Jews back to Baltimore City.

By Evan Serpick

It's just after 10 o'clock on a spring Saturday morning, and Rabbi Daniel Burg is leading the congregation at Beth Am in Reservoir Hill in a hymn before opening the ark and removing the Torah to read for Shabbat services. ¶ At his feet, under the altar, his children Eliyah, 5, and Shamir, 3, quietly look at books. Nearby, a half-dozen kids gather for the "Torah parade," when youngsters proudly march down the aisles with real or toy Torahs (depending on age).



A late-arriving middle-aged man struggles through the crowd and smiles. "I feel like the oldest person here," he says.

As the congregants pray silently, a couple of kids squeal and giggle. Rabbi Burg looks over and grins. "The former rabbi here had a rule: 'No shushing,'" he explains later. "That's the future of the Jewish community there."

The future of Beth Am, downtown Baltimore's largest Jewish congregation, is as bright as ever, thanks in no small part to Rabbi Burg, who came from a synagogue in Chicago last July and instantly became a beloved leader to the committed flock, as well as a fixture in Reservoir Hill. While synagogue membership is down nationally—drastically in urban areas—

Beth Am has grown to 430 families, up more than 50 since Rabbi Burg took over.

"I fell in love with the people of Beth Am," says Burg, who lives with his wife, Rabbi Miriam Burg, two blocks away and maintains a blog called *The Urban Rabbi* (theurbanrabbi.com). "I've never heard people speak with such allegiance and affection for a synagogue."

Burg, who grew up in the Chicago suburbs, discovered city living after landing his first pulpit job at the Windy City's Anshe Emet, a large synagogue two blocks from Wrigley Field. Seeking a smaller *shul* where he could implement a vision of urban Jewry committed to community, education, and social justice, he found Beth Am, which is affiliated with Judaism's Conservative movement.

"The people here made a choice to stay, and they are fiercely committed to this city," says Burg. "I love that."

The feeling is mutual.

"He's been phenomenal," says Lainy LeBow-Sachs, the longtime aide to William Donald Schaefer and a former president of Beth Am's board of trustees. She was on the search committee that brought Rabbi Burg to Baltimore and hosted him for dinner when he came to discuss the position last January.

"We could feel that he was connecting with us," she recalls. "We needed a true spiritual leader, an intellectual, and a good person. He just has all the qualities—it's almost scary."

LeBow-Sachs is one of many bold-faced names at Beth Am, which *Baltimore* magazine named a "power place" in the January issue. Developer David Cordish is a member, district court judge Nancy Shuger and The Johns Hopkins University vice provost Scott Zeger co-chaired the search committee, and former state delegate Julian Lapidus is now president of the board of trustees.

"When I came, I was told, 'It's the kind of

place where everybody has a title and nobody cares,'" Burg says, adding that plenty of members *don't* have titles—and still nobody cares.

To understand its members' devotion, it helps to know Beth Am's history. The beautiful stone building on Eutaw Street that houses Beth Am was built in 1922 as the home for Chizuk Amuno Congregation. When that synagogue followed many of its members to the suburbs in 1974, a committed core of city dwellers, led by Dr. Louis Kaplan, founding president of Baltimore Hebrew University, stayed behind and founded Beth Am.

While many *shuls* flourished in the 'burbs, Dr. Kaplan doubled down on urban life, opening the synagogue doors to the community, particularly on Yom Kippur when he held public Q-and-A sessions, answering queries on faith, law, politics—anything anyone could throw at him. Rabbi John Konheim started a post-high-holiday tradition of delivering the congregation's potted plants to residents of the neighborhood as gifts.

Rabbi Burg has continued the Q-and-A sessions and plant deliveries. He and his wife, a director at the Center for Jewish Education, have worked with the Reservoir Hill Improvement Council to build a playground for local kids. He holds services in Druid Hill Park. Students in the Hebrew school work on projects at a homeless shelter and an urban farm.

Rabbi Burg also maintains Beth Am's intellectual life, inviting scholars-in-residence like Rabbi Brad Artson, a dean at Los Angeles's American Jewish University, neurologist Michael Saleman, and Morgan State architecture professor Jeremy Kargon.

"Beth Am is humming," reports LeBow-Sachs. "People are more engaged, more active on committees, our annual campaign is up."

And still, Beth Am is a laidback place. Jews from all backgrounds, including converts, inter-married couples, and young and unaffiliated Jews are part of synagogue life.

"People are welcomed as equals," says Rabbi Burg. "We accept all with open arms and encourage them to live their Judaism." ■

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