

Beatles tribute fills seats at Emerson temple

BY GARY SCHWINDER
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Cantor Lenny Mandel, of Congregation B'nai Israel, knows how difficult it can be to fill the pews of his temple for Erev Shabbat, Friday night services. The temple competes with so many other activities that attract today's active Jewish families; it is not easy to fill the pews on a weekly basis. Sure, there are the 40 to 50 "regulars" who he can always depend on, but there are so many others who he would also like to reach out to on a more regular

basis.

Cantor Mandel therefore has to employ new and progressive strategies to make congregants want to attend services, but even more importantly, make them feel comfortable and provide them with a meaningful Jewish experience. To this end, the Cantor has been proactive in planning and promoting a series of special themed Shabbat services. The results have been rewarding, as attendance at these services has been increasing.

One such service was the "Fiddler On The Roof" Shabbat, where many of the prayers were sung to

the tunes from the famous Broadway show. At Tailgate Shabbat, congregants were encouraged to wear their favorite NFL team's colors and come early for a hamburger and hot dog tailgating dinner at the temple.

According to Mandel, "If I have to draw people to temple with a sense of spirituality different than the norm, so be it. If they are going to make the effort to attend services, I want them enjoy the time spent and be immersed in the experience."

By far and away the most successful program was a Beatles-inspired Shabbat held on a recent Friday night in February. Cantor

Mandel promoted the evening as "The Beatles Shabbat" to the congregation and promised to sing the Sabbath prayers with melodies of famous Beatles tunes. Congregants were encouraged to wear clothing reminiscent of the Beatles era. And as a bonus, Mandel invited Q104.3 DJ Ken Dashow, who hosts "Breakfast with the Beatles," a Sunday radio show on New York's WAXQ, to attend the service. Dashow was brought in to pepper the evening service with explanations of the significance of each melody as it related to the Beatles and life in general. It worked! The temple's pews were completely filled. There were more than 200 people when services commenced at 7:30 p.m. and additional chairs had to be set up for latecomers.

Mandel prepared a special "prayer/songbook" for the evening. He matched up the Hebrew liturgy with the English words of the Beatles' songs to make it easier for congregants to follow along in tune. Shalom Aleichem was sung to the tune of "Hard Day's Night." L'Chah Dodi to the tune of "Eleanor Rigby." Mizmor l'David to the tune of "Obla di obla da." And, Ahava-a-at olam to the tune of "In My Life." Dashow referred to the song, "In My Life," as John Lennon's version of the Mourner's Kaddish.

Dashow said, "That song has become a spiritual song for all of my listeners. It seems to be a song that connects us."

This was a first for Dashow, a long-time friend of Mandel's. Dashow is very comfortable speaking to millions of listeners over the airwaves, but facing a sanctuary packed with 200-plus faithful who have come to pray was uncharted territory for the veteran disc jockey. Dashow was especially concerned that congregants might think applying the prayers to Beatles' tunes was disrespectful of the traditional service. But when he heard the enthusiasm of the congregation as they sang along, any concerns that he had quickly dissipated.

After services, Dashow answered questions about the Beatles and their music and thanked Cantor Mandel for inviting him. Cantor Mandel was especially pleased with the service because it generated so much interest and so much interaction with the congregation. He promised to continue to pursue creative new ways to integrate contemporary themes into the centuries old liturgy. Congregation B'nai Israel certainly "prays to the beat of a different drummer," especially when the drummer is Ringo Starr!