Bet Aviv Is Smaller, Older and More Diverse Than Most Synagogues — and They Like it That Way

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An event at Bet Aviv.

Courtesy of Bet Aviv

Bet Aviv isn't your typical synagogue. The Reform Columbia shul is made up of mostly older folks who, according to Co-President Darla Strouse, absolutely adore their children and grandchildren, but don't go to services with them.

Bet Aviv is a rarity for a few reasons, one of which being that it's an adults-only synagogue.

The synagogue was founded in December 1997, with Strouse being a member for the last 11 years or so. She said that the community was designed quite intentionally.

"We were all members of other synagogues, and our children kind of grew up, and we decided we wanted an all-adult synagogue," she said. "We all have children, grandchildren, etc., but we decided that we would comprise an adult community."

The 200 or so members of Bet Aviv talk to each other about their families all the time, but they aren't concerned with hosting a religious school or confirmation classes. They're focused on each other, Judaism and relationships within the Columbia community.

Growth, advertising and revenue aren't issues on the forefront of most members' minds. The staff is entirely made up of volunteers. Those who attend are usually more focused on, say, the litany of adult education courses that Bet Aviv offers.

"We have five-plus adult learning programs, and they can really range topically, but the rabbi leads most of them. We also have a scholar-in-residence program, which is very popular, and then we have guest speakers come in," Strouse said. "We have 'lunch and learn,' which tends to be more connected. We did something like 14 weeks looking at the Talmud and discussing them. It's amazing how many people will come. It's really opened up my view on my adult learning and how critical it is."

One of the other things that makes Bet Aviv unique is their space and the importance they place on interfaith relationships. Bet Aviv became equity owners in the Oakland Mills Interfaith Center in 2004, sharing the location with other Jewish and Christian organizations. They don't have a building fund, nor interest in creating their own physical structure. For Bet Aviv, daily interactions with Christians and other Jews are part of the appeal.

"We kind of grow up thinking that we're in silos, and I think that interfaith center really brings people out of that. I mean, the clergy meet on a monthly basis, and exchange ideas, and have a retreat or two each year, and it just brings a kind of peacefulness to each of us, no matter what congregation we're a member of," Strouse said.

The efforts to reach the community at large don't stop at getting to know other faith communities, either. Strouse said that another element of Bet Aviv that continues to attract members is the social action program, which helps local disadvantaged folks.

"It's heartwarming, to be honest with you," she said.

You may think that with the all-adults dynamic, Bet Aviv misses out on some core Jewish experiences. Bet Aviv still hosts baby namings. And, while there aren't b'nai mitzvot every weekend, that doesn't mean they've never had one.

In June 2022, the community welcomed their first ever adult bar mitzvah to the *bimah*. With members of their community who have converted, older women who weren't able to have a bat mitzvah when they were younger and older members approaching 83, the age of a traditional second b'nai mitzvah.

The Bet Aviv approach of prioritizing inclusion and learning can be summed up well by the message of a speaker they had a few years ago.

At the time, an astronaut who lived on the International Space Station for six months visited to speak. He described what it was like existing in a confined space with a diverse group of people for so long.

"He said, 'it was about being a scientist, and all the experiments you did on the space station, but it was being able to get along with people from different countries [that was so important]," Strouse said. "People made an effort to get along with each other, and I think that applies to many areas, and we all thought that was neat." ■

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