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[INDEX](#)

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[Local News](#)

[Israel News](#)

[Candle Lighting Times](#)

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Temple Emeth opens doors to local Israelis

Synagogue launches outreach initiative

By **Alexandra Lapkin**

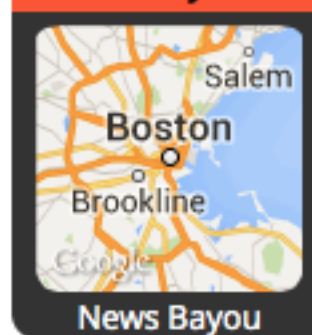
Advocate staff



A recent Lag B'Omer Celebration Israeli-style.

The Israeli

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community may be making business, educational, and cultural connections in America, but when it comes to religion, something is missing.

Temple Emeth in Chestnut Hill is trying to change this and bring the Israelis into synagogue life by reaching out to the community with innovative programming.

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PARSHAT KI TEITZEI

BOSTON 7:07

FALL RIVER 7:07

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WORCESTER 7:10

PORTLAND, MAINE 7:06

MANCHESTER, N.H. 7:10



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"There is a segment of the Israeli population that is highly secular and shies away from the synagogue," said Philip Platcow, president of Temple Emeth, which is a Conservative shul. "Some are a little more reluctant to approach the building than others, but I think that when we reach out to them on their level, then some of the wall is taken down and people feel more comfortable here."

Temple Emeth's Israeli-American integration, as this initiative is called, has been going on for about a decade. It came about with the temple's first director of congregational learning, Rabbi Golan Ben-Chorin from Israel, who wanted to engage his fellow Israelis in the temple.

Platcow noted that a synagogue is based on three principals: it's a place of prayer, a place of study, and a place of assembly. "When we reach out to the Israeli population, we utilize each of those three dynamics," he noted.

"We offer programming that is across the gamut." These include weekly Chugim (enrichment clubs) for Israeli dance, cooking, martial arts, events in Hebrew, hosting Tzofim (the Israeli scouts), and more. The temple also hosts holidays such as Lag B'Omer and Tu B'Shevat, celebrated the Israeli way.

"We do a lot of things in the Hebrew language that also make Israelis more comfortable inside the walls of the synagogue," Platcow noted.

In addition to the current director of congregational learning, Samara Katz, the temple employs a part-time Israeli program liaison, Yamit Barkaee, as the coordinator of Israeli outreach and family programs. Barkaee connects to the Israeli community at the grassroots level.

Although other synagogues have become interested in Temple Emeth's Israel connection, they have not been able to recreate its success. "I think the program is very well known in the Israeli community in Greater Boston," Platcow said. "People come in from at least an hour away."

While the Israeli community in the Greater Boston area is growing, the program at Temple Emeth is growing as well. Some of the bigger events draw crowds of about 300 Israelis.



Performers of the P'ninei Emet, an Israeli dance troupe at Temple Emeth.

"American society can be difficult and here at Temple Emeth, Israelis are invited and encouraged to be Israeli, to be themselves," Platcow noted. To make this experience even more immersive, the temple often serves Israeli food at events.

Although people who participate in the program are of all ages, many of them are families with young children. The initiative helps parents expose their kids, who very quickly become Americanized, to Israeli culture.

American-born children also find Israeli culture appealing in this type of setting. As of this week, all three of Platcow's children are living in Israel. His 21-year-old daughter Melanie is a corporal in the Israeli Defense Forces, his 23-year-old daughter Alissa is on a volunteer mission; and he just dropped off his youngest son at an Israeli college.

"The reason I believe so strongly in this program is because Jews can be a fractured people. We're bringing people together so that we're one people," Platcow said. "Bringing Israelis into our fold is not so much about bringing Israelis together as bringing Jews together as one people. It's good for the Israelis to be able to interact with other Israelis; and it's good for Americans, and Jews of all sorts of different backgrounds to be able to interact in an environment that really emphasizes one peoplehood."