

A FREE HIGH HOLIDAY SERVICE SO EXCITING IT MADE THE NEW YORK TIMES

Free Services for High Holy Days

By LYNNE AMES

It is Rabbi Mathew E. Hoffman's opinion that money and religion don't always mix. "To ask a Jew to pay for Judaism is a mistake," he said recently. "My kids once drew a picture of God charging admission to see the Bible, and showed it to me and said, 'We don't believe in this.'"

So Rabbi Hoffman, who is a lawyer by profession and a rabbi by avocation - "I don't make a penny from my rabbinical duties," he said - is conducting free services for the High Holy Days this month in Scarsdale.

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Although the services are free, Rabbi Hoffman stressed that reservations must be made.

"We did this two years ago for the first time, and we drew 150 people," he said. "So many people called us and said, 'I really wanted to go to High Holy services, but I cannot afford the fees elsewhere.' The capacity for services this year is 200.

Although he knows of a handful of synagogues that periodically run free services, Rabbi Hoffman said that many congregations ask members and/or non-members to buy tickets for the popular High Holy Days services, which can cost several hundred dollars a person.

"I'm not condemning these congregations," Rabbi Hoffman said. "There are expenses involved in running a synagogue - building fund, religious classes, paying a rabbi's salary - and I don't judge them negatively. But I do want to make these services available to anyone who wants them."

The 39-year-old rabbi lives in New Rochelle and works in the civil division of a large Manhattan law firm. He began organizing religious activities 17 years ago. At the time, he recalled, he and some friends at Columbia Law School "wanted to put together an organization to explore Judaism intellectually." They named their group the Flame and held informal discussions four times a week on such topics as Jews and politics, Judaism and the ethics of

Euthanasia, Judaism and sexual ethics.

The organization was "a smash success," Rabbi Hoffman said, and is now on campuses nationwide.

Two years ago, Rabbi Hoffman was asked to run Rosh ha-Shana and Yom Kippur services at the mid-Westchester Y.M.-Y.W.H.A. in Scarsdale. He enlisted the help of a friend and fellow lawyer, Joseph Rackman, a scholar of Judaism but not a rabbi, and together they presented a service that "had a little of everything - English, Hebrew, elements of all branches of Judaism."

It proved so popular that he and Mr. Rackman borrowed the Columbia group's name, the Flame, and began running free services once a month in people's homes in the north end of New Rochelle and in Scarsdale, and holding weekly discussion groups.

"We talk about the Bible, the Talmud and contemporary issues affecting Jewish life. Much of our

service is in English, but we also satisfy Orthodox prayer requirements. I tell people during a service, if you don't understand something in a prayer or if you find something puzzling, tell us and we'll explain it."

The High Holy Days, he added, are a good time for people to become reacquainted with the Jewish religion. "If someone hasn't been to synagogue in a long time and is just now seeking a place to worship, Rosh ha-Shana and Yom Kippur services are often the place to start," he said. "Other people may put people down and say, 'Oh, why haven't you been to synagogue for a long time?' Or, 'Why do you only go on the High Holy Days.'"

"I don't put people down at all.

The person who comes to us is making a statement - he is reaching out as a Jew, and we encourage and applaud that."

*** indicates a deletion from the original article.

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