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Rabbi Zushe Cunin, left, and Haim Pekelis are members of the Chabad Jewish Community Center in Pacific Palisades. Pekelis didn't stay up for the all-nighter, but said he studies the Torah on Saturdays and every weekday before work. (Anne Cusack, Los Angeles Times / May 17, 2010)

Jews pull an all-nighter for Shavuot

The holiday, during which observers stay up studying the Torah, commemorates God's revelation of the sacred book to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai.

By Nomi Morris, Special to the Los Angeles Times

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Danny Parzivand, a UCLA biology student, pulled an all-nighter Tuesday, but it had nothing to do with exams.

Parzivand, 20, like hundreds of Jews across Los Angeles, stayed up all night studying the Torah to celebrate Shavuot, the holiday that commemorates God's revelation of the sacred book to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai.

"It's like pushing the restart button for learning. You don't bother sleeping, and suddenly you see the sun coming up," said Parzivand, who spent his night at the Chabad Jewish Community Center in Pacific Palisades.

Parzivand attended a study session by local attorney Eva Field, 52, who related a Torah passage about good neighborliness to California civil law.

After a hard day in his psychiatry practice, Dr. Michael Torwin, 56, stayed up to give a presentation on how the Torah and modern psychiatry complement one another. Torwin

planned to stay up until "my eyes start closing," then make his hospital rounds early Wednesday morning before coming back to the center to pray.

"Learning is the key to success. It's very powerful and we are celebrating that," he said.

Across town in the Pico-Robertson district, members of a group calling itself the "Happy Minyan," or "prayer quorum," were studying at the local karate academy. Upstairs, others were reading from the Torah.

While the Shavuot study-fest is nothing new for Orthodox Jews, growing numbers of less observant Jews have also taken up the practice in recent years — even if they don't stay up until dawn.

"The reengaging with Shavuot reflects a resurgence of Torah study," said Rabbi Laura Geller of Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills, a Reform congregation. "People are looking for an engagement with spirituality."

Geller says the night of study is the culmination of a seven-week journey — physical and spiritual — from Passover, commemorating the exodus from Egypt, to the epiphany at Mt. Sinai.

Shavuot means "weeks" in Hebrew. Each day and week in the 49-day period has a particular attribute, about which Geller reminded her congregants through daily e-mails in the weeks leading up to the holiday.

"It's kind of like a step program for spiritual growth," she said. "It's a journey from slavery to freedom. We're pretty busy people and we don't often take the time to see what counts."

Shavuot was originally a spring harvest festival, but after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD, it was recast by early rabbis to commemorate the giving of the Torah, also known as the Five Books of Moses.

The practice of marking Shavuot with all-night study sessions dates to 1535 and hails from the Kabbalistic, or mystical, tradition in Judaism.

As the story goes, the Israelites overslept on the day they were to receive the Torah, and Moses had to wake them up. The 16th century rabbis designated the prolonged study session as a night of *tikkun*, or repair, to make up for that shortcoming and show that Jews were ready to receive God's word.

Geller's congregants tend not to take off work for the holiday, so her synagogue's program wrapped up at midnight.

But a few blocks away at the conservative synagogue Temple Beth Am, 16 sessions lasted as late as 5 a.m., when those still standing went to the roof for morning prayers to greet the sun.

Temple Beth Am teamed up with the Reconstructionist IKAR congregation, along with the Ma'or group, the Pico Egal Minyan and the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, for a marathon of learning under the general theme of food and eating. More than 300 people attended the opening session at 9 p.m.

Organic farming, the meaning of Kosher food laws, and "What Feeds Your Soul" were among the study options. Between 1:15 a.m. and 2:45 a.m., Ilana Schachter, a rabbinical intern at the Progressive Jewish Alliance, was prepared to lead a groggy group through the issue of what

she called "food deserts" in Los Angeles.

"East L.A. and South L.A. have limited or unequal access to fresh fruits and vegetables and supermarkets," she said. "I'll examine what is necessary, in the Talmud, for a city to exist."

Beth Am Rabbi Adam Kligfeld said the physically and mentally arduous process of studying the Torah all night can lead to a deeper spiritual connection to Judaism, much as ascetic customs do in Christianity and other religions. He compared it to fasting on the Jewish Day of Atonement.

"People get slap-happy by 2 or 3 in the morning," he said. "There is a rawness and openness when you're depleted, a bit like fasting on Yom Kippur."

But unlike Yom Kippur, Shavuot is little known among many secular Jews. To make it fun and relevant to younger, less observant Jews, other groups held special evening programs for them.

About 50 young professionals attended a Shavuot "Shmooze and Speed Torah" at Sinai Temple on Wilshire Boulevard. In a nightclub atmosphere, clergy spoke for 20 minutes on a theme from the Torah and then participants broke into small discussion groups for 10 minutes before the process began again on a new topic. "Torahtini" cocktails were served.

The group JConnectLA, also geared to those in their 20s and 30s, held "Torahrama: Shavuot on Tap," a Mexican feast with beer followed by late-night Scripture study.

Back at the Palisades Chabad Center, there were snacks, but no beer, lest it put the Torah students to sleep. And one active member, Haim Pekelis, 68, was at home in bed because his wife no longer wants him to stay up all night.

But Pekelis, interviewed earlier that evening, said he makes up for it by studying the Torah on Saturdays and every weekday morning before he heads to his job as a financial advisor.

"I'm a lifetime learner," he said. "I feel like I'm standing on the shoulder of giants. If my ancestors did it, why shouldn't I do it? If it worked for them, it can work for me."

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