



ADVERTISEMENT

KOHL'S
 expect great things

**LOWEST
 PRICES
 OF THE SEASON**

bonus buys through Oct. 25.
 storewide savings through Oct. 31

Sale Starts Friday, October 21

Visit [Today's Ad](#)



October 23, 2005

latimes.com : Magazine

Single page Print E-mail story Change text size

Shabbat

- Synagogues across the country are selling Sabbath services with a new brand name: Synaplex. To some, it sounds like Judaism Lite.

By Deborah Netburn, Deborah Netburn last wrote for the magazine about Allan Heinberg, a TV writer-turned-comic book author.

"In the same way that you plan for a concert or theater series or for family time, we want you to plan to be with us," said Rabbi Arnie Rachlis, launching a new monthly program at the University Synagogue in Irvine with a sermon titled "Synaplex: Opening Soon in a Shul Near You (Ours!)."

Standing behind a different lectern, this one in Beverly Hills, Rabbi Laura Geller launched the same program at Temple Emanuel. "It used to be if you wanted to go to synagogue on a Friday night or Saturday morning, there would be one service and maybe a cookie and a cup of tea. Not anymore," she said.

ADVERTISEMENT At still a different lectern, in New Jersey, Rabbi Alan Silverstein of Congregation Agudath Israel of West Essex introduced his synagogue's new program with an enthusiastic collision of metaphors: "Friday evening through Saturday night is Jewish prime time, and CAI will be issuing free tickets of admission—VIP passes—for a multiplicity of gateways, many portals into the Shabbat rhythm."

In all, Synaplex opened in 11 synagogues across the country in the fall of 2003, and in six more in 2004. This year, another 17 announced Synaplex programming in yet another series of High Holy Day sermons.

Synaplex is a concept, a franchise, a marketing tool and a monthly event, all designed to improve synagogue attendance on Shabbat (Sabbath) weekends. The wordplay is hokey but apt. Like a Cineplex that screens several movies at once, the Synaplex formula suggests that by offering several activities simultaneously, a synagogue will draw a bigger audience.

One Friday night or Saturday morning each month (the "Jewish prime time" that Rabbi Silverstein spoke of), synagogues participating in Synaplex offer their congregants choices. You don't like sitting through a Friday evening service? That's no excuse to skip shul! Maybe you'd prefer a Jewish-themed yoga class, or tai chi. Or come to temple after services for Israeli dancing, or come early for a discussion on current events, or to sit in meditation. Synagogues are encouraged to be creative—this month Temple Aliyah in Woodland Hills offered "a night at the Improv" with the AB3 Troupe after Friday night services and invited kids to "experience Shalom through the ancient art of a

Magazine

[Trouble in Paradise](#)

[Porn of the Gods](#)

[Towers of Power](#)

[A Healthy Dose of Civility](#)

[Everything's Coming Up Violets](#)

[Magazine section >](#)

MOST E-MAILED STORIES

[Sure, it kills birds, but it won't kill you](#)

[Now Comes the Heavy Lifting](#)

[Big Sign Firm Accused of Corruption](#)

[> more e-mailed stories](#)



CLICK HERE to have Times
 news sent to your inbox

Sign up now for home delivery!



drumming circle" on Saturday morning.

The goal, says Rabbi Hayim Herring, executive director of STAR, the organization that conceived of and funds Synaplex, is "to have the congregation become the place to be, no matter who you are, what you believe."

It may sound like Judaism Lite—do a bunch of Jews doing yoga in a synagogue really constitute a valid expression of the religion?—and Synaplex certainly has its critics. "It is a project that asks Jews to come to synagogue not for transformation, but for confirmation of who they have become—assimilated, secular and alienated," wrote Rabbi Rafi Rank, vice president of the International Rabbinical Assembly, in a column for the Jewish Post of New York.

Ron Wolfson, co-founder and president of Synagogue 3000, a nonprofit institute dedicated to revitalizing synagogue life, has been studying synagogue transformation for 10 years. He sees Synaplex as an old concept with a fancy new name. "The first thing to understand when it comes to Jewish prayer experience is that it is different strokes for different folks," he says. "Some people love traditional chanting and the kind of very straightforward service that comes with it; some people really want something that for them is more accessible. The idea of there being multiple activities, or minyanim, is new to some communities, but in some Conservative and Orthodox synagogues it has been going on for 25 years."

Wolfson thinks the programming is the easy part. "Synaplex opens the door and brings people in, but the next challenge is how do you translate that attendance to commitment and relationship? . . . *Kol Ha-Kavod*, all honor to things that bring people into the synagogue, but my job is to keep pushing us further, and deeper."

The founders of Synaplex aren't necessarily interested in getting Jews to become more religious or less secular. While they talk about "nothing less than a renaissance of Jewish American life," for now they seem content simply to get Jews in the synagogue door.

"*Halachically*"—by Jewish law—"you don't have to believe in God to be considered a good Jew," says Herring. "Sure, it would be nice if everyone believed in God, but it is not going to happen. It hasn't happened in the state of Israel, and they have a monopoly on the religion there. Getting more people to believe in God, that is not the goal of Synaplex. Getting more people to show up is not the goal. The goal of Synaplex is building community, because community-building has always been the genius of the Jewish people."

Star, an acronym for synagogues: transformation and renewal, is the result of a broad idea that occurred to a wealthy Jewish oilman from Tulsa named Charles Schusterman. The idea went something like this: Synagogues reach more Jews than any other Jewish institution—more than federations, more than Hillel (the foundation for Jewish campus life), more than summer camps and day schools—so if Judaism is going to survive, synagogues need to become less alienating. Now.

"My late husband Charles was concerned because he realized that people needed synagogue spirituality, but that synagogues were not welcoming," says Lynn Schusterman, Charles' wife of 38 years. "Jews would go twice a year for the High Holy Days, but that was basically their synagogue-going. He wanted to see if there was an idea that would make synagogues more engaging."

The Schustermans themselves were not frequent synagogue-goers—"we were those Jews who went twice a year," Lynn admits—but they were frequent donors to Jewish causes, giving millions through the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation to projects that they felt strengthened Jewish identity.

Charles Schusterman began thinking seriously about synagogues in late 1997 and came up with the idea for STAR in late 1998. In 1999, about a year before he died of leukemia, he asked his friends Edgar M. Bronfman Sr. and Michael Steinhardt—both prominent Jewish philanthropists—to join him in putting up a few million dollars each to "lay the

foundation for comprehensive synagogue transformation and renewal across the denominational spectrum," as stated in a December 1999 press release announcing the venture.

"For me, this project is another down payment toward creating an infrastructure to sustain Jewish identity in a free, open society," said Steinhardt, who identifies himself as an atheist, in the same press release.

It was business speak from business folks, and that business approach to synagogue renewal would become a defining part of STAR, which also has developed a program called PEER (Professional Education for Excellence in Rabbis) to school new rabbis in executive leadership.

After Charles died, Lynn Schusterman took over STAR, which had spent its first 18 months compiling research on what makes synagogues work and identifying and studying synagogues that had transformed themselves. It gave out challenge grants to see "what innovations would bubble up," as Herring says, when already thriving synagogues were handed an extra \$20,000 to \$50,000. ("Ten of those original programs are still ongoing," he adds, "so not a bad initial investment.")

Ultimately it concluded that there is no single formula for success. "We learned, as others have before us, that synagogues are idiosyncratic," says Herring. "There is no one-size-fits-all." Undeterred, STAR came up with a plan to give synagogues what Rabbi Michael Strassfeld of the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, a Reconstructionist and Conservative synagogue in New York City, calls "several cups of tea."

CONTINUED

1 2 next

>>

 [Single page](#)

MORE NEWS

[Greek Officials Demand the Return of Getty Antiquities](#)

[More Homeowners With Good Credit Getting Stuck With Higher-Rate Loans](#)

[Unmatched Pair of Socks](#)

[Wilma Lashes at Florida; Yucatan Is Left in Tatters](#)

[latimes.com](#)

[Site Map](#)

[California](#) | [Local](#)

[World](#)

[Nation](#)

[Business](#)

[Sports](#)

[Travel](#)

[Editorials, Op-Ed](#)

[calendarlive.com](#)

[Arts & Entertainment](#)

[Columns](#)

[Education](#)

[Food](#)

[Health](#)

[Highway 1](#)

[Home](#)

[Outdoors](#)

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at [latimes.com/archives](#).

TMSReprints

[Article licensing and reprint options](#)

Copyright 2005 Los Angeles Times | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)
[Home Delivery](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Archives](#) | [Contact](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Help](#)