

Beth El Congregation Prepares for High Holy Days

Anna Merod. *The Winchester Star*. September 27, 2019

WINCHESTER — Beth El Congregation is preparing for the High Holy Days.



For people of the Jewish faith, the 10-day period is a time for spiritual reflection and growth, said Beth El Rabbi Scott Sperling. The High Holy Days are an opportunity for Jewish people to think about what they did well in the past year and what they can do better in the coming year.

The High Holy Days start with Rosh Hashanah on Monday, which is the Jewish New Year, and end with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, on Oct. 9.

Beth El's first Rosh Hashanah service is at 8 p.m. Sunday.

Music plays a special role at Beth El during regular Shabbat services and the High Holy Days. During Shabbat services, Sperling said he often brings a "folky spirit," strumming his guitar and singing. Shabbat is the day of rest in Judaism. During High Holy Day services, Karen Webber, an ordained cantor, will share the bimah, or pulpit, with Sperling.

“She leads the congregation and people feel comfortable in singing along with her when it’s appropriate,” Sperling said.

For Yom Kippur, a Shenandoah University student will play the cello for the Kol Nidre melody, which means “all vows.” The Kol Nidre is a special prayer on the eve of Yom Kippur. The cellist will be accompanied by the cantor and the congregation.

The shofar, a ram’s horn, will be blown to signal high points during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services at Beth El. The congregation has two experienced shofar blowers.

Sperling said he’s “OK” at blowing the shofar, but when others do it can make a person feel as if they’ve been transported back to ancient Israel.

Not all Jewish congregations use music in the same way. Some use no outside instruments, while others have a choir.

Because Beth El is the Winchester area’s only synagogue, it works hard to be “right down the middle” with the music it chooses for High Holy Day services, Sperling said. He includes music that is familiar to Jewish people who grew up in a variety of synagogues, as well as providing accessible music to those who may have not attended a synagogue.

The role of music at Beth El, from Sperling’s viewpoint, is for meditation and prayer. It also draws people to participate in the liturgy.

“Music that really draws you in to participate so that you’re not just sitting there having the service performed at you,” Sperling said. “Our goal is to provide a spiritual environment in which people feel really both comfortable and motivated to join in and participate.”

Beth El, located on Fairmont Avenue, has about 85 members, which represents a steady increase over the past several years, said Sperling, who cited the area's growing population as a reason.

"Things have just really taken off in last couple of years, and it's just so exciting for me and I think for all of us to see new people and new energy," he said.

Sperling said he plans to retire in June. He came to Beth El in 2010 and retired briefly in 2016 and returned again last year.

"Rabbis come and rabbis go, but the congregation is really ready for its next phase," Sperling said.

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