

## Bethlehem Hebrew Congregation Synagogue Hosts First Ever Visit By a Consul-General: BHC To Celebrate 100 Years In Bethlehem In 2022

By Robert Blechl

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BETHLEHEM — As it prepares to celebrate 100 years in the community, the Bethlehem Hebrew Congregation hosted the first-ever visit to its synagogue by a consulate-general of Israel for New England.

On Friday, Meron Reuben, consul-general since November, visited the synagogue, where he received a warm welcome and enjoyed a musical performance in the sanctuary by the internationally acclaimed Tempest Trio, an event co-sponsored by the BHC and the Consulate-General of Israel for New England.

Facilitating Reuben's visit to Bethlehem, which came on the eve of Rosh Hashana, the two-day Jewish New Year that began on Monday, was Martin Kessel, a BHC member and chairman of the Sounds of the Sanctuary concert series.

"When I lived in Israel in the earlier years, I was very friendly with his mother, who was a piano teacher," said Kessel. "We are all from South Africa, but knew each other from being in Israel. I recollect meeting him as a young man when I was just finishing the army. When I noticed he was consul up here, I wrote a note to introduce myself and remind him who I was. I had just sent the email and there was a call back from him. I told him a little bit about the concert series. And totally unsolicited, he said maybe we can help support the series, and that's exactly what they did. He put me in touch with his cultural attaché and they came through with some support for the concert."

Before the performance, the ambassador spoke a few words.

"It's an honor to be in Bethlehem and it's also wonderful to be able to partner with this event," said Reuben. "For some of you who don't know the histories of Israel and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we were slightly starved for a budget the last few years, but are pleased to say with this new government some of our budgets are coming back."

The hope is to partner for future concerts in Bethlehem, he said.

On Friday morning, the prime minister of Israel was speaking via Zoom to the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, said



Reuben. "It definitely shows the importance of the Jewish communities in the United States to Israel and the continued connection that the state of Israel has with communities all over the United States and all over the world," he said.

Based in Boston, Reuben is one of eight Israeli consuls-general in the United States. Within his New England region of six states are hundreds of synagogues, with Bethlehem being one of the northernmost. "This is the farthest north I've been since I've been on the job," Reuben said to The Caledonian-Record following the concert. "It's very interesting that there would be a Jewish community so far north and in the North Country. It's very impressive, and it has also been a very active community."

He was surprised to learn that the BHC synagogue was converted from an Episcopal church in 1920.

"Usually, it's the other way around," said Reuben.

Initially called Lloyd's Hills, the town of Bethlehem was incorporated as Bethlehem in December 1799. In Hebrew, Bethlehem means "house of bread," said Reuben. Among the duties of a consul-general is promoting good relations and diplomatic ties with communities, collaborating in economic, cultural and other shared interests, and providing services to Israeli nationals in the United States.

"Greater Boston is the second-largest concentration of Israeli investment, in high tech, artificial intelligence cyber companies, in the United States, after Silicon Valley in California," said Reuben. "Then, of course, we have the cultural side of advancing Israeli culture. We're trying to focus in and show what Israel can offer the United States and what the United States can offer Israel. There's a lot of collaboration that goes on."

Although the Israeli embassy is in Washington, D.C., the large size of the United States makes having eight con-

suls-general necessary, he said.

Two consuls are on the West Coast, four on the East Coast, and one each in Chicago and Houston. Reuben noted New England's long tradition of tolerance. "New Hampshire has been very open for religions and even for immigration," he said.

One of the strengths of the United States is separation of church and state, which didn't happen in modern Israel, said Reuben.

For the past 2 1/2 months, political parties of left, right and center and an Islamist party have made up Israel's new coalition government, he said. All groups want different things, and while there are disagreements, there is a focus on the greater needs of the nation, said Reuben. "At a time when the world is splitting along ideological and religious divides, the state of Israel is actually trying to collaborate with all the different groups," he said. "If the budget passes, everyone seems to think that the government will survive. There are specific things that they don't see eye-to-eye on, but at the same time they are trying to push forward a whole bunch of resolutions to improve daily life for all citizens. It seems to be a very interesting experiment and experience for Israel because everybody is trying to get along."

Closer to home, in the synagogue's sanctuary in Bethlehem, the Tempest Trio — comprising Alon Goldstein on piano, Ilya Kaler on violin, and Amit Peled on cello — performed for more than an hour on Friday evening.

In 2015, Kessel became aware that Goldstein would perform at the Northeast Kingdom concert series. He reached out to Goldstein and asked him to come to Bethlehem. Since then, Goldstein has performed in BHC's sanctuary three times, and Peled twice.

"As the trio, this is the first time they've performed here," said Kessel. "It was dream of mine to get the trio to come. It's Carnegie Hall comes to downtown Bethlehem. It's that caliber of music that is world-class."

Because of the pandemic, BHC's 100th-anniversary celebration did not proceed in 2020. It's scheduled for early August of 2022, during BHC's official summer season that runs through July and August. While details are still being worked out, Kessel said the current plan

is to have a Friday evening concert and a special dinner.

"When we celebrated our 90th, we got people who had come up to Bethlehem as children with their parents who were involved in some way or another with the Jewish community," he said. "We got a bunch of these children together to tell stories. That was a wonderful afternoon of memories."

The synagogue, which features a library with more than 1,000 books on various aspects of Jewish history and geography, has a current membership of more than 100 people. While many BHC congregants in the early decades were summer residents, many today are permanent North Country residents living in Bethlehem and neighboring towns.

"It's gone through various phases," Kessel said of BHC's century-old history. "It was once a summer-only very Orthodox synagogue."

In Orthodox Jewish synagogues, women sit separately. At the BHC synagogue, the back area where the library is located was where the women once sat. "Then it evolved," said Kessel. "In the 1990s, Moocho Salomon [co-owner of Northern Lights Music in Littleton] and a group of young parents were looking to bring up their kids in the Jewish background." The group was given the keys, so to speak, to the synagogue as the old generation moved on, said Kessel. "She and this young group of people really brought the synagogue into the modern era and it became a much less Orthodox synagogue," he said. "It attracted many more younger people."

In 2010, BHC published a book celebrating the 90th anniversary. In the book's welcome, David Goldstone, president of BHC's board, said his family discovered Bethlehem more than 50 years before and were among those Jewish families leaving the sweltering heat of New York or Boston for the beautiful scenery and climate of the North Country.

"Bethlehem was unique," Goldstone wrote. "It was the only town in New England which offered pollen-free air, kosher markets and bakeries, resort hotels where dietary laws were observed, and the 40-year-old synagogue of the Bethlehem Hebrew Congregation. Times have changed, but Bethlehem is still as unique and welcoming as it was from our grandparents' days to our own children and grandchildren today."