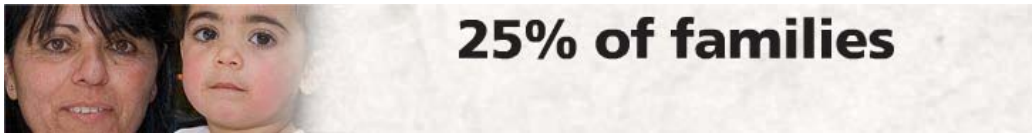


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Mountain Jews

By HILARY LEILA KRIEGER
PARK CITY, UTAH

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Alix Railton moved from New York City to this tranquil aspen-coated hamlet 18 years ago for the same reason that millions of tourists visit each year: She loved to ski. Just about the last thing on the 32-year-old jeweler's mind was being part of a [Jewish community](#) and, accordingly, she soon married a Roman Catholic real-estate appraiser and stayed far away from the synagogue in [Salt Lake City](#) - not difficult at a distance of 50-odd kilometers.

It was still far from her mind 12 years later, in 2002, when she attended an "evening for the disenfranchised," a get-together to introduce locals who hadn't been part of the town's slowly growing Reform congregation to its first rabbi, Josh Aaronson, and see if they could find a comfortable place in a religious setting. Railton, who describes her attitude toward Judaism at that point as "turned off," had gone only because the host was a friend and she wanted to be supportive.

Yet what she found was a Jewish community like no other she had experienced, one where she felt welcomed despite her lack of knowledge and observance; one that didn't deduct points because her husband wasn't Jewish; one that so wanted to accommodate members it moved Sunday school to Wednesday so it wouldn't compete with weekend skiing.

"I had kind of dragged my heels and thought, 'What do I need this for?'" Railton recalls. "We felt very warmly embraced the minute we walked into the building, and we walked out of there fully ready to be part of this community."

So ready that she and her husband, Sean, joined the congregation and enrolled their son and daughter in Hebrew school. They have since had a bar and bat mitzva. And though he has never converted, Sean goes to services and is a member of the synagogue's board.

They are just one example of Park City Jews who have crawled out of the woodwork - or more precisely, out of the woods - to swell Temple Har Shalom's ranks from a few dozen families to more than 300. That bounty enabled the congregation to construct its first building this summer, a striking new multimillion dollar facility complete with sanctuary, classrooms and a spacious function hall.

At a time of soaring intermarriage and waning affiliation, a blossoming congregation in the most unlikely of places - a spot known for the [Sundance Film Festival](#) and outsize Mormon population it hosts - sees itself as a



Views of Temple Har Shalom, a blossoming Jewish congregation in a spot known for the Sundance Film Festival and outsize Mormon population it hosts. Photo: Courtesy/ Scot Zimmerman

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model for the future of Jewish life in America, a template for drawing Jews in rather than turning them away.

They call themselves "mountain Jews." Not because they're descendents of the rugged Jews of the Caucasus who have traditionally claimed that moniker, but because they have made their home here, where the snow-capped peaks of the Wasatch mountains define the way of life - Jewish life included.



Skiing in Park City, Utah.
Photo: Courtesy

"We have the only ski-in/ski-out shul in the world," according to Paul Zane Pilser, who used to lead services until Aaronson arrived. "People want to ski here on Friday and Saturday. So we do takeout."

During the winter, at 3 p.m. on Fridays in a cabin of the Deer Valley resort, Aaronson hosts Kabbalat Shabbat, talks a little Torah and performs Kiddush over halla and wine. (All in all, "ski shul" never goes more than 30 minutes so parents can pick up their kids from ski school before the lodge closes.)

During the rest of the year, congregants can now gather in a sleek modern synagogue nestled in those same mountains. The maple-hued wood and granite-colored brick structure includes floor-to-ceiling windows in its entrance foyer and function room providing sweeping views of blue-green hills dotted with ski resorts and vacation estates, like that of erstwhile GOP presidential contender Mitt Romney, just visible in the distance.

Indeed, adherents of Romney's Mormon faith are much more the norm in these parts than Jews. Utah, after all, was settled in the mid-1800s by Mormon pioneers who were escaping religious persecution and chose the barren area as a place they could worship freely.

ROBERT SACKS saw himself as something of a visionary pioneer as well when he relocated to Park City from California 15 years ago and decided to start a synagogue. The move alone raised lots of eyebrows. "How can you be a Jew and go to Utah?" he was asked.

But Sacks wanted to move to the "recreational paradise" for the common Jewish reason of seeking a better place to raise his children - somewhere safe, with clear air, excellent schools and quiet streets. And once he got there, he realized that a Jewish community, which had never been a big focus of his life, was also something important to provide for his kids.

"It was ingrained within my soul, which I don't think I realized as much then as when I arrived here, how important it was that I not break the link with my Jewish heritage," he says.

And part of that realization may have stemmed from being in a place where there weren't many overt signs of Judaism - by noticing what was missing, by recognizing that some people had moved there to get away from traditional Jewish communities and by discovering that some people had felt they should hide that background.

So he and a few like-minded souls called on them to come out via a newspaper ad published in 1994.

"The time has come," it said. And come they did. Some 100 people showed up at the first meeting. They formed a Jewish community group, started holding Friday night services and gradually evolved into Temple Har Shalom.

Sacks himself is a manifestation of the trend which allowed such an improbable dream to become reality. Old-timers estimate there had been only a few dozen Jews some years earlier, when the town population as a whole was a mere 2,500. Ski operators had recently begun their slow rescue of sleepy Park City from the [national registry](#) of ghost towns, a designation earned once the local mine closed in the early 1960s.

But starting in the mid-'90s, urban congestion made increasing numbers of white-collar workers look to rural environments for a better quality of life. As Aaronson, himself lured in part because he and his wife enjoy skiing, puts it, "Twenty to 30 years ago, people said, 'I

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