

KOSHER

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Aish in the Southeast

CHEYENNE

By CHRIS LEPPEK

IJN Assistant Editor

For the small but active Jewish community of Cheyenne, the last year has been pretty rough.

In March, 2020, when the dangers of the coronavirus pandemic were first realized, Cheyenne's Mt. Sinai congregation shut down all in-person services and gatherings. A year later, they have yet to resume.

In terms of COVID, of course, the same can be said of virtually every other Jewish community around, including Cheyenne's much larger sister, Denver, 100 miles to the south.

But Mt. Sinai's ill tidings were

hardly over.

In August, 2020, the synagogue's spiritual leader, Rabbi Larry Moldo, passed away after a long battle with cancer.


The double blow — dealing with collective grief over the loss of its popular rabbi and coping with

CHEYENNE

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USED CAR

Price of abandoned synagogues in East Europe



Christian woman wants to restore and preserve this synagogue in Slonim, Belarus.

Wikipedia Commons

By CNAAN LIPSHIZ

JTA

MINSK — On a visit to the city of Slonim in Belarus, Ilona Reeves fell in love with a 380-year-old dilapidated building that used to house one of the area's largest and oldest synagogues.

Reeves, a 40-year-old author and mother of one son who lives in the Belarusian capital of Minsk, is a

Christian, like virtually everyone who lives in the country. The synagogue hadn't been operational since before the Holocaust, when three quarters of Slonim residents were Jewish. Virtually all were murdered by the Nazis.

Still, Reeves looked at the structure, which had fallen into disrepair after years of use as shops, and saw something she wanted to save.

"Standing outside the Great Synagogue of Slonim, I felt how small I am, we all are, in the face of such architectural monuments and traditions they represent," she said.

With money that she'd freed up by selling her apartment in Minsk — partly to buy the synagogue — Reeves bought the synagogue in December for about \$10,000 from the Slonim municipality on the promise that she restore it. She was the sole bidder.

The Slonim synagogue is just one of a number of similar structures to hit the market across Eastern Europe in recent years, and Reeves is among a small group of people who have committed to their upkeep.

"Buildings, including old buildings, that used to be synagogues appear on the market pretty regularly in Eastern Europe, and for relatively

SYNAGOGUES

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MATZAH

'Just matzah — not even a seder — is the link'



By CNAAN LIPSHIZ

JTA

CHISINAU — Last month, Rabbi Mendy Axelrod was working to secure a supply of matzah for his Jewish community in Moldova ahead of Passover. It's no easy task this year, as air and land traffic into the small Eastern European country has been suspended due to the coronavirus.

Then near tragedy struck.

Axelrod, working in the capital Chisinau, had to drop everything to save the life of an Israeli tourist, a man in his 40s who was teetering on the brink of death from a severe case of the coronavirus in a poor country with a fragile public health system that has been overwhelmed by the pandemic.

The timing was disastrous. But

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NEWS: Intermountain

Cheyenne likes Zoom; plans to keep it

Besides the pandemic, Mt. Sinai’s rabbi died — but participation is rising

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the many diminutions forced by the virus — has been a heavy burden for the congregation to bear, Mt. Sinai president Dave Lerner told the **INTERMOUNTAIN JEWISH NEWS** last week.

“Yeah, it’s been difficult,” he says. But the small congregation, which in its long history has not affiliated with a formal denominational movement, has proven itself nothing if not resilient and adaptable. In fact, in some ways, Lerner says, things at Mt. Sinai are actually starting to look a little better already.

A year ago, when Wyoming started shutting down, Mt. Sinai followed suit, along with other houses of worship, schools, businesses and other gathering places.



PRESIDENT
Mt. Sinai president David Lerner stands before the synagogue’s front doors.

“When COVID hit, we closed the synagogue and shifted to conducting services via Zoom,” Lerner says. It took awhile to get the tech set up. The congregation was just getting organized by the time Passover arrived last year so there were no virtual seders or services, but regular Friday night services on Zoom were happening in relatively short order.

“We’ve been having services every Friday night, with the exception of a brief period right after the rabbi died.”

Mt. Sinai was also able to put together a Simchat Torah services during the last High Holidays, a candlelighting service for Chanukah and a Purim gathering last month, all via Zoom. The Purim gathering was augmented with the delivery of *shalach manot* to members’ homes by volunteers who left gift bags of hamantaschen, fruit and cookies at front doors.

In addition to occasional stints by guest rabbis, regular services via Zoom have been led by Mt. Sinai members Jeff Weinstein, Dr. Jason Bloomberg and Tikvah McKinnon.

“These people are knowledgeable enough to do a good job in taking the rabbi’s place,” Lerner says. “They don’t do pastoral counseling, prepare young people for Bar Mitzvahs or work with people in conversions, but they do lead services.”

The virtual approach has been well-received among Mt. Sinai’s membership.

“We actually have higher attendance at our services because of Zoom than we did before COVID hit,” Lerner says.

The congregation has an official membership roster of about 50 people, Lerner says, and pre-COVID, an average of eight to 12 members would regularly show up at in-person Shabbat services. With virtual worship, as many as 15-20 individuals are in attendance.

Some of the attendees are new members of the congregation; others aren’t even actual members, but are interested in what’s going on.

Still others are former Cheyenne residents who have moved elsewhere and want to stay in touch with their former congregation, something that wasn’t possible before the virtual approach.

“It’s been a great way to reconnect with people,” Lerner says. “We now will have a Friday service with people jumping in from Providence, RI, or Portland, Ore., somebody else from Idaho. These are people who are familiar with our synagogue but have moved away.”

The downside to canceling in-person worship is that it has left some of the congregation’s older members out of the loop. Some of them, residing in quarantined or isolated senior care facilities, don’t own or have access to — or know how to use — the computers or cellphones that would enable them to participate virtually.

“That is something we’re very unhappy about,” Lerner says, “and we really don’t have a solution for it.”

Overall, however, the reception to virtual gathering has been so positive that the congregation has decided that Zoom is likely to remain part of its activities.

“We’ve decided that using Zoom will become a permanent part of our synagogue and our services, even after COVID has gone and we don’t have to worry about getting in close contact personally. We want to maintain contact with people who are far away.”

There will have to be tech upgrades to enable Zoom services in the future, he adds. Using video to capture the congregation and rabbi in an in-person sanctuary will be more challenging than the now-routine Zoom screen, composed of individual — and separate — images of participants.

“We haven’t purchased equipment

to do that yet, but that’s because we’re really not quite ready to open the doors.”

It will be worth it when the time comes, Lerner says. The enthusiasm created by virtual worship has proven to be a silver lining to the pandemic cloud. Lerner describes it as “a wonderful thing.”

Another way that Zoom has proved itself valuable to Mt. Sinai has been in its search for a new rabbi.

The synagogue’s rabbinical search committee has held frequent meetings in recent months, doing the usual search committee routine — everything from where to advertise the pulpit position to agreeing on the wording for the questionnaire — but in the new virtual medium.

Several candidates for the pulpit have been interviewed on Zoom. The original list was reduced to a small group of finalists who did their second interviews the same virtual way.

A decision on a new spiritual leader could come very soon, Lerner says.

“After we had three finalists, we held a meeting to get input from the congregation, which was well attended. We have come up with a recommendation which we’ll bring to the board of directors this coming week. So, we may have a rabbi on board literally next week.”

If contract negotiations go well, he adds, a rabbi could be in Cheyenne by midsummer.

Lerner is hoping that a similar timeline will apply to the synagogue’s physical reopening.

He describes Wyoming’s vaccination program as well-organized and speedy, like Colorado’s, which bodes well for Mt. Sinai and everything else in Cheyenne.

“We have a committee that’s been meeting monthly to go over plans for reopening and determining



SINAI ZOOM
Members and friends of Mt. Sinai participate in the congregation’s Shabbat Zoom service last Friday, March 5.

policies, but at this point we’re still not ready to do that.”

The congregation is preparing for it all the same.

Mt. Sinai’s annual Yiddish Food Festival, a popular event that has attracted hundreds of participants for more than a decade, was canceled last May but has been scheduled to take place in mid-June this year, in slightly altered fashion.

“We’re hoping that by that point it will be safer. From the way the vaccinations are going, that seems to be a pretty good bet,” Lerner says.

He tentatively predicts that Mt. Sinai should be able to open its doors right about the time the festival takes place, or perhaps a little later, right about when a new rabbi is likely to be standing on the *bimah*.

Both developments are of tremendous importance to Mt. Sinai and both have been long-awaited.

“I think the morale at Mt. Sinai is fine,” Lerner says. “People are feeling good. It has really been a plus

for us to stay in touch with people in distant cities, because they still feel very much a part of our community and we feel that too.”

Additional hope has come from other sources. When the rabbinical search committee questioned candidates for the position, the candidates were asked to provide advice on how the congregation could recover spiritually from the effects of the pandemic.

“The approach of the candidates was interesting,” Lerner said. “They were talking about how Jews have faced challenges like this before, and more serious challenge actually, such as 40 years in the desert, the Holocaust and other horrible things that have happened to us in the past, and how we have not only recovered from those but thrived.”

The salient message — “we’ve been through worse and come out better” — is particularly meaningful for the members of Mt. Sinai this year. ■

Medical matzahs turn two tricks at once in Minsk

MATZAH
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Axelrod, who moved to Moldova four years ago from his native Israel, ended up solving both problems in a single gesture.

On Feb. 28, he got the insurance firm MedAssis to load boxes of matzahs onto the medical airplane that flew in from Israel to take the patient back home, where he is now recovering.

“Caring for the patient took a lot of effort,” Axelrod said. “We ended up buying a ventilator for him and caring for him in a rented apartment” to avoid having the patient hospitalized in Moldova. The public hospitals are prone to spread infections and are short on medical supplies.

Axelrod procured hand-baked *shmurah* matzah. Axelrod and other rabbis are currently negotiating the import of regular matzah into Moldova through the border with Ukraine, where the Jewish community is at least 10 times larger than Moldova’s Jewish population of 5,000.

With 4,000 COVID-19 deaths in a population of 2.6 million, Moldova has the world’s fourth highest death rate per million inhabitants following an outbreak that appears to have peaked in late February.

Strapped for cash, Moldova’s government only began vaccinating

against the virus on March 2 — nearly three months after countries such as the US, Israel and the United Kingdom.

The Axelrod family and many others are observing a self-imposed confinement in order not to contract the virus, which according to some tests has already infected most Moldovans.

This makes public Passover events unlikely, which only makes providing Jewish families with matzah even more important in a former Iron Curtain Country where matzah was a major link to Judaism.

“Because of communism, there is a huge attachment to matzah here,” Axelrod said. “It seems like everyone who was alive under communism has a story about getting matzah — standing in line at a secret bakery, getting a package from friends.”

At a time when communist authorities frowned on religious worship, especially by Jews, “matzah provided an easy link to Judaism. It was just a piece of bread,” he said. “It didn’t involve the risk of going to synagogue or actually holding a religious ceremony.”

To this day, Axelrod says, Passover prompts more engagement by local Jews in Moldova than Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year.

“Coming from Israel, it surprised me to see more Jews in synagogue on Passover than on Yom Kippur,” Axelrod said.

“But it’s part of this place’s specific history.” ■

Roof crumbles on Great Synagogue of Brody

KIEV (JTA) — Large parts of the roof of a centuries-old crumbling former synagogue in Ukraine have collapsed.

The latest damage to what remains of the Great Synagogue of Brody, an 18th-century house of worship near Lviv, in western Ukraine, was observed this month. It follows an earlier implosion from 2006, Jewish.ru reported last week.

The building is listed as a monument but authorities in Ukraine, one of Europe’s poorest countries, have not taken action to salvage the dilapidated structure for years.

Ukraine has hundreds of former synagogues, some of them as old as the Brody one, in various states of disrepair.

The Turei Zahav Jewish Community, an organization that helps revive Jewish life and heritage in Western Ukraine, has warned repeatedly in recent years that

inaction on the synagogue would lead to its disappearance.

“At the moment, the synagogue continues to collapse, and if no changes take place in the near future, we will once again lose one of the monuments of sacred architecture in Ukraine,” the group said on its website.

The synagogue was severely damaged during WW II, and the southern and northern out-buildings were lost.

During the war, German troops tried to blow up the building but failed, according to Turei Zahav.

The synagogue was nationalized during communism and used as a warehouse.

After Ukraine’s independence in 1991, internal scaffolding was installed to slow down the building’s collapse.

Brody had many thousands of Jews before the Holocaust; most were murdered. No Jews live there today.