

BY MARY ANN STERNBERG

A High Holy Day Home Where the Buffalo Roam

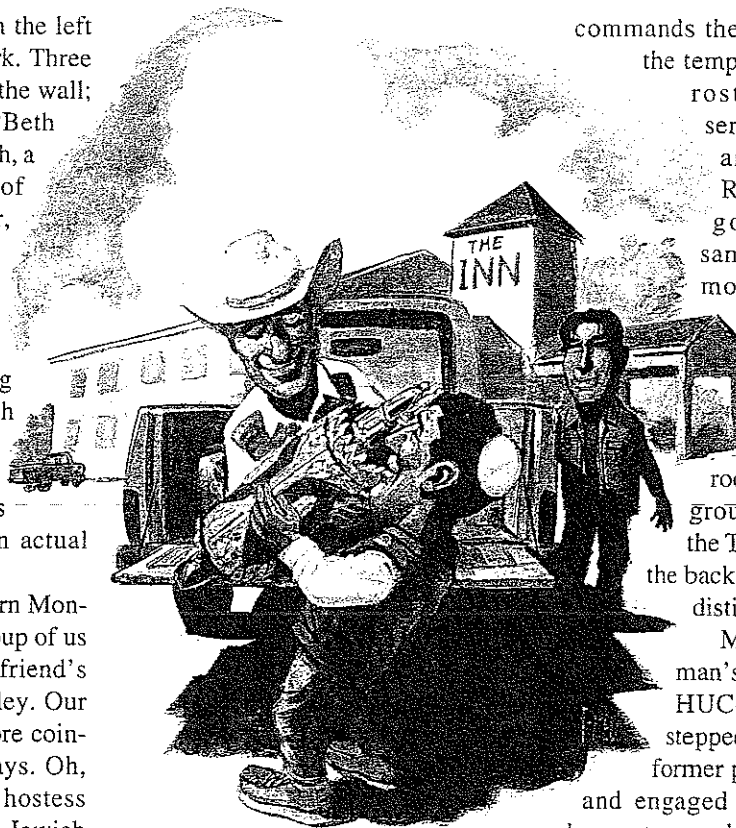
I admit I came to services with an attitude. Congregation Beth Shalom of Bozeman, Montana held Rosh Hashanah services in the Comfort Inn. A student

rabbi stood behind the hotel podium, flanked on the right by a banquet table draped in shiny fabric, and on the left by an ungainly blond-wood ark. Three appliquéd banners hung from the wall; one featured the words "Beth Shalom" in Hebrew and English, a Magen David, and cutouts of Montana icons—buffalo, bear, coyote, and squirrels. Around me sat men wearing bolo ties with *tallitot* draped over plaid shirts; other men in jeans and buckskins; and women in long denim dresses. So although many congregants were dressed like me in "city clothes," the effect was nevertheless more like a stage set than an actual place of worship.

What was I doing in southern Montana on Rosh Hashanah? A group of us were spending the week at a friend's house in nearby Paradise Valley. Our annual reunion had never before coincided with the High Holy Days. Oh, no problem, my non-Jewish hostess responded, recalling that her Jewish friends in Bozeman attended services there. But where?

My inquiries led me to Bob Rasmus, president of Congregation Beth Shalom, who assured me that I would be welcome at both evening and morning

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Rosh Hashanah services, held at the Comfort Inn. I'd previously attended services at synagogues away from home, but they had been more or less like the Classical Reform temple of my youth in uptown New Orleans. Temple Sinai's cavernous Romanesque sanctuary is decorated with elegant stained-glass windows, and its proscenium pulpit, defined by marble and brass, with an ark that resembles a royal vault,

commands the space. And of course the temple offered an extensive roster of programs and services. When I married and moved to Baton Rouge, our new synagogue was much the same—a proud history, a modern temple, and an abundance of programs and services. So now, in this plain, low-ceilinged Comfort Inn meeting room, in the company of a group of Jews who carted the Torah and the ark here in the back of a pickup truck, I felt distinctly out of place.

Michael Lotker, Bozeman's 52-year-old third-year HUC-JIR rabbinic student, stepped up to the podium. The former physicist, clearly joyful and engaged in his new vocation, began to speak with quiet devotion, leading the service with passion, digressing on occasion to explain the history and significance of various prayer-book passages. I noticed the dozen or so children listening attentively. We all did. Mysteriously, the meeting room began to evolve into a place of worship.

But still I resisted. That is, until we arrived at a passage I had read many times in the prayer book: "For the whole House of Israel, scattered over

ILLUSTRATION BY FRED HARPER

...I ALREADY GAVE.

...I pay my dues.
What more do you want from me?

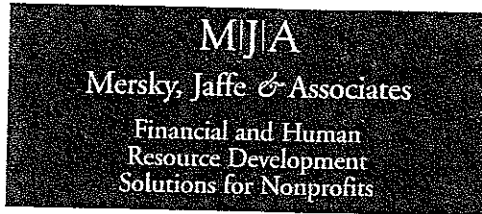
...the economy is bad.

Are you raising money or objections?

...I have to think about it.

...hmmm. I'll have to ask my accountant.

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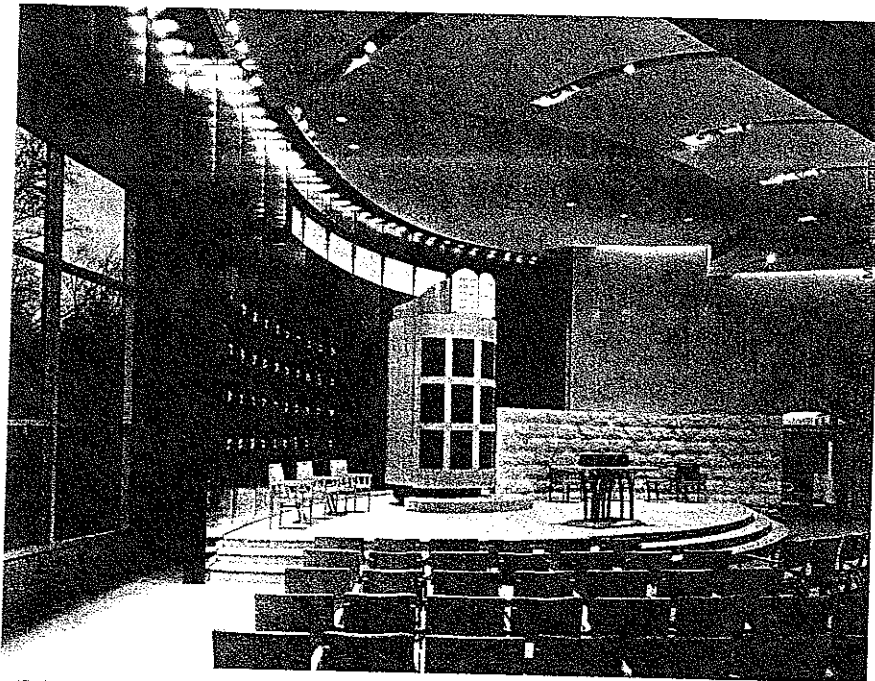
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the earth yet bonded together by a common history and united by a common heritage of faith and hope...."

And then I understood, perhaps for the first time in my life, the meaning of that phrase. "Scattered over the earth" meant the far-flung Jewish Diaspora, from a tent in the Negev to the old Jewish quarter of Prague, and, yes, to the Comfort Inn in Bozeman, Montana. What makes me a Jew is not the outer trappings, not synagogues with awe-inspiring architecture or plentiful programs, but being "united by a common heritage of faith and hope."

Before Rosh Hashanah in Bozeman, I had never witnessed a Jewish community in the making. Driven by the strength of their beliefs, the Jews of Bozeman, like generations of Diaspora Jews before them, were forging a Jewish identity for themselves far from the Jewish mainstream. They were pioneering Jewish life. It was a powerful realization. I felt more proudly Jewish than ever before, and the three-hour service on Rosh Hashanah morning only amplified the feeling.

"Jews have only been in the Bozeman area for about twenty years," Bob Rasmus' wife, DeeDee, told me later. "Everyone's come from somewhere else"—to start new lives in this rugged, safe, beautiful, but very Christian place. With perhaps seventy men, women, and children, Beth Shalom draws from a radius of a hundred miles; there are many intermarriages, and many competing ideas of what the congregation should become. In this sparsely populated stretch of Montana, where the nearest city with a Jewish presence is hundreds of miles away, the members of Beth Shalom are struggling to continue a Jewish tradition that began with Moses under the big sky of Sinai.

At the end of the morning service, Bob Rasmus delivered a traditional president's greeting, concluding with a report on the congregation's efforts to locate a building. I was about to stand up and warn these pioneers that by building a permanent temple they might lose the holiness of this place. And then I remembered we were in the Comfort Inn. □