



Archives

---

Rabbi's Shabbat includes davening, Torah ... and basketball

By [Debbie Levison](#)

*Published: Thursday, September 8, 2005 11:38 AM EDT*

NORWALK -- Each Saturday during the years, as the quiet afternoon hours wore on, Rabbi Ron Fish of Congregation Beth El in Norwalk found himself longing for the kind of Sabbath community he has experienced in Israel - the kind where "Shabbat time" existed in a dimension of friends and family coming together for a little praying, a little Torah reading, a little reflection on world events and Israel...and a good game of pick-up basketball.

In Israel, he remembered, Shabbat invariably meant hordes of children - including secular and "black hat," Arab and Jew, rich and poor - playing together in parks. And of course there were his fond memories of Shabbat at Camp Ramah, which included basketball, softball and Frisbee golf, plus time set aside for learning and relaxation.

With the death of his father this past February and his new ongoing need for a minyan - along with the desire to stay home with their three small children - Rabbi Fish and his wife Leah decided to take steps to create just such a community.

Each Shabbat since April, the Fish family has hosted an open house at their home with all the members of his congregation invited to drop by.

"The response has been very enthusiastic...as many as 70 people have attended at once, with kids running around outside," Rabbi Fish said. "I've been selling it as 'Play Basketball with the Rabbi.' I have a hoop, and there's been some learning, some songs, havdalah...and I've been able to say kaddish."

Most of the credit for the afternoon events goes to wife Leah, Rabbi Fish is careful to point out. It is largely up to her to prepare the Israeli salads, cold soups, lasagna or quiche that they have offered as "seudah shlishit," the traditional late afternoon third meal of Shabbat with its own corresponding, bittersweet songs that express both the joy of being together and the sadness of seeing Shabbat depart. And congregants have pitched in with their own home cooked items, kosher Chinese, or case of beer.

An unexpected side effect of the Shabbat open houses, said the rabbi, has been a tremendous boost in attendance at services across the board as congregants began enjoy coming together more and more.

"The future of the Jewish community depends on breaking out of the box. When you have a program at synagogue, it fits into a certain category no matter how wonderful it is. By changing the venue to our home, for instance, I think we are expanding people's experience of Shabbat." Another venue that was successful was Beth El's recent "Shabbat Under the Stars" at the beach.

Steve and Shari Davidson of Wilton and their two children have participated in the open houses nearly every week, saying, "We've enjoyed visiting with the rabbi and his family, and some of the other families from the shul, in an informal setting. It's been a wonderful way to spend our Saturday afternoons and evenings. And havdalah at the rabbi's home is a perfect way to start the week."

"This is something that the kids will look back fondly on: Shabbat afternoons at the rabbi's," Rabbi Fish said. "It's what I always wanted - a congregation that feels like Camp Ramah.

"It may appear selfless for us to open our homes each week, with all the preparation and clean-up it entails, but it's actually selfish too," he said. "We wanted this kind of community life and we feel inspired to do this."