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High holidays to be more accessible

Biddeford synagogue to use contemporary approach this season

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Staff Writer

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BIDDEFORD — Services at Congregation Etz Chaim, located on Bacon Street, will be more “user friendly” this high holiday season, as one member of the synagogue describes it.

Services for Rosh Hashanah, which will take place Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, and for Yom Kippur, which will occur on Sept. 17 and 18, will include more music, more community participation and some of the prayers will be spoken in English, said synagogue member Beth Strassler of Arundel.

The changes should make the services “more interesting and more approachable,” she said.

Strassler is a cantorial student and will participate in performing more of the services, which will be led by Scott Rappaport, a cantor from Bangor.

Congregation Etz Chaim is non-denominational, she said, but she described services as “contemporary conservative.”

The changes were established by the synagogue’s Ritual Committee, which was started six months ago.

“We wanted to make the services the way people want,” said Strassler, as opposed to the very traditional services that have been performed at the synagogue. “We’re trying to make everyone more comfortable in the synagogue and know what’s going on,” said Strassler. “We’re hoping if they understand what’s going on, they’ll have a more personal experience with the service.”

Arnold Shapiro, a Biddeford resident who has been president of Congregation Etz Chaim for 29 years and was also a member of the Ritual Committee, said after members go through Hebrew School as youths, they often lose their knowledge of the language. That’s one reason he favored using more English in the services.

The membership was once large, said Shapiro, but had dwindled to about 20 members several decades ago. But, he said, with the help of Beth Strassler and her husband David, membership has grown to about 130 people.

The growth process has been a long one, he said, “but well worth it.”

“We’re trying to collect new members,” said Shapiro. He noted, however, “We don’t proselytize.”

“We’re convenient, we’re here, we invite everyone,” said Shapiro.

Rosh Hashanah means “head of the year” in Hebrew, and is the celebration of the Jewish new year, said Strassler. It’s the time of year when followers of the Jewish faith are supposed to reflect on the past year, she said, “on what you did well and what you did not so well.” Yom Kippur is the “day of atonement,” and is set aside to atone for sins of the year past.

Congregation Etz Chaim is located at 36 Bacon St. in Biddeford. Services for Rosh Hashanah will take place on Wednesday at 7 p.m., Thursday at 9:30 a.m., 11:30 a.m. and 7 p.m. and Friday at 9:30 a.m. For more information, call 967-5833 or visit the temple’s website at www.etzchaimme.org.

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Harold Shapiro, seen at the Etz Chaim Synagogue on Bacon Street in Biddeford Friday, promises a more contemporary celebration of the Jewish High Holidays, which begin this week with Rosh Hashanah. (JEFF LAGASSE/Journal Tribune)

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