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Praying to His Strength

In the East Village, the 'Jazz Rabbi' Prepares for Yom Kippur

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Mustafah Abdulaziz for The Wall Street Journal
Saxophonist Greg Wall at the Sixth Street Community Synagogue, where he has been the rabbi since 2009.

Synagogues around the world will be packed with repentant (and hungry) Jews from Friday sundown to Saturday night for the annual observance of Yom Kippur. Rabbi Greg Wall's Sixth Street Community Synagogue, located in the East Village between First and Second avenues, is no different.

"I was telling my congregants the other day, if they were going to pick two days to come they could have picked better," Rabbi Wall pointed out with a laugh. "Why not Purim and Hanukkah? These are fun and festive days where we dance in the streets. Yom Kippur is a really heavy day. Some people get so freaked out by it that we don't see them until next year."

While the rabbi has a sense of humor about his less observant followers, those attending his synagogue more regularly have a chance to take in a wealth of new arts and educational programming under a new initiative called the Center for Jewish Arts and Literacy (Mercaz Harayah).

Combining art and religion is nothing new for Rabbi Wall. The self-proclaimed "Jazz Rabbi" made a splash in 2009 when he took over the Sixth Street congregation. Thrice ordained, he is also a working saxophonist who has led various jazz and Jewish music-influenced bands during the last 30 years.

Rabbi Moshe Silver, who received smicha (rabbinic ordination) with Mr. Wall in 2006, said, "the kind of

discipline that it takes to rise to the level that he's risen to as a musician is the same as the dedication he has for his torah studies. Having seen him on the pulpit, his flair for improvisation really comes through in the way he handles himself and conducts services, and in his interaction with people."

Not surprisingly, Mr. Wall presides over a supremely musical congregation: There's klezmer music on Tuesdays, music from the Radical Jewish Culture wing of John Zorn's Tzadik record label on Wednesdays, and the Jazz Rabbi Invitational, which features one of his many bands on Thursdays. The modest admission price even includes a glass of wine or beer. There are also readings and lectures, films and other visual-arts presentations grappling with Jewish themes by artists from the area.

"The synagogue is a modern Orthodox Synagogue, but I don't teach Orthodoxy," explained Rabbi Wall, who is 51 years old. "I teach literacy. I'm not marketing myself to Orthodox Jews, I'm marketing myself to everybody: Jews not feeling at home anywhere else or non-Jews who want to be in a spiritual environment or hear great music or see great art."

It's a far cry from typical Jewish Community Center fare, but right in keeping with a neighborhood steeped both in Jewish and musical history. Moving forward, Rabbi Wall hopes to commission contemporary composers to create music for his services. As part of the literacy program, the *shul* is also presenting a number of classes, including one taught by the rabbi called "Art of Judaism."

"I encourage people to look at the practice of Judaism as an art form, just like painting or making music," he said. "There is room for individual expression and individual relationships with the creator. Also, anything that you want to develop takes practice, whether it's practicing Catholicism or music."

Rabbi Wall wasn't always an unorthodox Orthodox Jew. Raised in a Reform Jewish family outside Boston, he studied and had a bar mitzvah that was, he said, "more bar than mitzvah." He set religious studies aside in favor of music, eventually graduating from the New England Conservatory of Music.

Ironically, it was the liner notes to John Coltrane's 1964 jazz masterpiece and spiritual manifesto "A Love Supreme" that pointed him back toward spiritualism. "In Coltrane's letter to the listener there is the exact text to the Jewish call to prayer," the rabbi recalled. "I had a bar mitzvah so I could recognize that much. I never took it seriously, but here was my hero saying the same thing. So he sort of made it cool for me to check out Judaism."

After moving to New York in the early 1980s, Rabbi Wall found regular saxophone work with musicians like Frank London—the two started the Jewish-music collective Hasidic New Wave—and landed a gig playing with the Piamentas, a pair of Israeli rock-star brothers who found God and became Hasidim. As he started his own family and encouraged his children to study, Rabbi Wall took the burden upon himself, too, to study the faith, eventually spending equal time on music and Torah and attracting recognition for his nonmusical work.

"There's 12 tribes of Jews," said the noted Rabbi Daniel Channen, from whom Rabbi Wall received his first smicha. "Every person in each tribe is different, and Greg being who he is, he's going to attract a certain group of people that he can lead. People who want to sit in Yeshiva may not want to listen to Greg, but other people will. You'll be surprised how many lives he'll turn around."