

# VilnaScribe

## THE VILNA SHUL

Boston's Center  
for Jewish Culture  
18 Philips Street  
Boston, MA  
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www.vilnashul.org

*Me'ah In Focus: The American Jewish Experience* will be held at the Vilna Shul Thursday evenings, from 7:30 to 9:00 PM, November 5, 2009 through April 8, 2010.

A partnership between Hebrew College and the Vilna Shul will give adults living in Boston and commuters to the city an opportunity to expand their knowledge of their American Jewish History and Culture in an exciting new Me'ah course, The American Jewish Experience. For sixteen Thursday evening sessions, a group of noted academic experts from local universities will lead lectures and discussions exploring the subject from a wide range of disciplines.

The team of experts will lead the group on an exciting and unusual exploration of Jewish life and culture in America. Taught and designed collaboratively by four leading scholars, this multidisciplinary course includes history, politics, the family, feminism, popular music, comedy, film, fiction, and autobiography in order to ask fundamental questions about the changing experience of Jews in America. The expertise and enthusiasm of the instructors, the inviting material, and the provocative questions promise to draw students into a lively, enriching, and personally compelling conversation.

The course will be taught by:

- Joyce Antler, Professor of American Jewish History and Culture, and Women's and Gender Studies, Brandeis University

- Sylvia Barack Fishman, Chair, Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies and Professor of Contemporary Jewry and American Jewish Sociology, Brandeis University
- Sharon Rivo, Professor of Jewish Film, Brandeis University
- Stephen Whitfield, Professor of American Studies, Brandeis University

Me'ah in Focus is an exciting new program designed both for students who have taken Me'ah and for those who have not, but who want to experience the growth and engagement that sophisticated adult Jewish education can offer. This new program offers students an opportunity, literally, to "focus" on particular areas of contemporary interest that might have been only briefly touched on in a survey course.

The traditional Me'ah program is an intensive two year adult Jewish education program that seeks to inspire and inform adults in the community who may not have experienced formal Jewish education in many years. The program takes students on a journey through Jewish culture and civilization through invigorating discussion, vibrant teachers and essential texts. Since beginning in Boston in 1994, Me'ah has had over 2,500 graduates across the country. Me'ah was begun by Rabbi David Starr, PhD, Vice President of Community Education at Hebrew College and 2009 recipient of the Vilna Shul's Zvi R. Cohen Leadership and Legacy Award.

Tuition: \$360 with \$180 subsidized by CJP for Young Professionals.

For more information, please contact Jacob Meskin at [jmeskin@hebrewcollege.edu](mailto:jmeskin@hebrewcollege.edu)



Havurah on the Hill  
Shofar blowing workshop

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Steven M. Greenberg

**J**ust beneath the surface of the beige paint that covers the historic Vilna Shul sanctuary lies three mural schemes that no one remembers seeing, painting or even hearing about. Mel Getz, who was Bar Mitzvahed here in 1942, recently visited the Vilna Shul with his daughter and remembered many details about his childhood at the Vilna, but nothing about painted walls.

Right after the Jewish High Holidays, architectural and paint conservators will undertake the restoration of one and perhaps two walls in the women's gallery in order to expose what lies just beneath the surface here at the Vilna Shul. "Just beneath the surface" is quickly becoming the theme here at the Vilna Shul, as visitors coming to see an old synagogue find themselves uncovering the history of the many communities that flourished here on the north slope of Beacon Hill. In our conversations, we expose the history beneath the surface of the buildings and streetscapes we see today on Beacon Hill. We expose the histories of Jewish and other immigrant communities in the 19th and 20th centuries, and before that community, the African American community that flourished here in the 19th century.

Visitors are fascinated to learn that Beacon Hill is the first neighborhood in America where an African American house of worship was sold to a Jewish congregation for use as a place of worship. In 1899, as the African American community moved to the South End and Roxbury, the African Meeting House, the oldest standing African American church in the United States, was sold to Samuel Tarplin for \$11,000. Samuel Tarplin owned the building until 1903, renting it to Anshe Stonier and then to Anshe Zytomir, both Eastern European Jewish congregations. Unfortunately, the North End Savings Bank reported that Tarplin defaulted on his mortgage, and the building was sold at auction to Charles Barry. He immediately transferred the property to Max Solomon of Malden and Barnard Weinberg of Boston, for a nominal fee. By the summer of 1904, Solomon and Weinberg had sold the property to David Stern, who, in turn, sold the building to Simon Dobkin, a carpenter. Finally, in November of 1904, Dobkin sold the African Meeting House to Congregation Anshei Lehavitz, a congregation that previously worshiped in the North End at 188 Hanover Street. City directories also list this congregation as "Adath Jesura Nusach Ari." Congregation Anshei Lehavitz owned and stewarded the historic building until 1972. They made many repairs and upgrades, including: installing electric lighting, in 1908; repairing the roof, plumbing, sidewalk, sewage system, flooring, fence, and windows, from 1908-1912; and upholstering the old church pews in the summer and installing steam heat in the fall of 1923. (Information courtesy of Alex Goldfeld, historian and writer)

Learning about that which is just beneath the surface is very much in keeping with Jewish tradition. Torah and Talmud study are both based on looking beneath the surface of the words to understand a deeper meaning. It is for his gift for teaching others to look beneath the surface, and to strive to understand and extract deeper meaning, that we honored this year's Zvi R. Cohen Leadership and Legacy Award recipient, Rabbi David Starr, PhD, at the Legacy of Learning Gala. Dr. Starr is the founding dean of the Me'ah program, an exciting hundred hour, two-year, adult Jewish learning program founded here in Boston. Through this national model of adult Jewish education, the legacy of Jewish learning has become more accessible than ever before. Thousands of students have discovered a new way to explore Jewish culture and history. Here at the Vilna Shul, where thousands are exposed each year to Boston's Jewish history, we share Dr. Starr's passion for Jewish learning. While Boston's Jewish history took place throughout the city, Jewish migration has all but erased the visible, on-the-surface signs of the Jewish community of the past. The Vilna Shul, Boston's only Jewish historic site, remains a place where Jewish Boston is not only visible, but actively engaged in continuing a legacy of Jewish learning for all who enter.

Thanks in part to your interest and support, the historic preservation community of Boston has recognized the Vilna Shul as an important part of Boston's past. Tourists have searched us out all summer long, looking for Boston's historic Jewish site, and we are receiving requests from organizations around New England to schedule tours. We love the attention and being able to tell our visitors what lies just beneath the surface of this wonderful old building, the neighborhood it is part of and most importantly, the culture and traditions that created the Vilna Shul.

We wish you all a Happy and a Healthy Year—La Shana Tova to you and yours.



Steven M. Greenberg, Executive Director



*Rachel Cyllus, Steven Greenberg and Jack Swartz at kickoff of the Partners in Preservation program.*



*Steven Greenberg receiving congratulations from Partners in Preservation officials.*



*Brian Powell, architectural conservator speaking to the Boston Preservation Alliance.*

## DEAR SUPPORTERS OF THE VILNA SHUL

I would like to thank all of you who joined us to honor Dr. David B. Starr with the Zvi R. Cohen Leadership and Legacy Award at our Gala on September 13, 2009. The theme of the program, Legacy of Learning, was appropriate. Dr. Starr has accomplished so much as the founding dean of the Me'ah program, a national adult education and leadership program, just as we have worked to make the Vilna Shul into a place of learning.

The timing of our first annual Gala at the Vilna Shul could not have been better. We will soon begin restoring the wall mural in the rear of the woman's section of the sanctuary, thanks to a Partners in Preservation Program grant from American Express and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. We are proud to note that this is the first time Partners in Preservation has awarded a grant to a Jewish organization. The grant helps us validate the historical significance of restoring this building, Boston's only Jewish historical site, and the representative art hidden just beneath the surface. Restoring the Vilna will create a rare visual bridge between us and our past.

Now that the National Trust has discovered and validated the Vilna Shul, I look forward to the day when more local Jewish groups and individuals will also recognize the importance of preserving this jewel of a building. It is by preserving this place, that we can preserve our Jewish American heritage. Outside of the Vilna it can be hard to find traces of Boston's Jewish immigrant past. My own great grandparents' shuls are now churches, apartment buildings or parking lots. Mine, like most families, didn't attend the Vilna Shul, but visiting the Vilna is as close as I will ever come to understanding the struggles they faced trying to be a part of American culture while still maintaining their identities and their connections to the past.

As my life has changed, it is difficult to look back at my modest beginnings, living in a triple decker in Dorchester, just as I am sure it was difficult for my grandparents to look back at their lives of struggle and persecution in Poland and Russia. I now realize it is important to preserve this past for my son as well as future generations. As the last remaining immigrant era synagogue in Boston, the Vilna Shul is where we can connect the story of thousands of years of tradition and struggles of the Jewish people.

My goal is not just a restored and thriving Vilna Shul but a place where future generations can learn the stories of the people that built a Jewish life in America. With your help, we can restore the Vilna to its former humble elegance and preserve the past for generations we can not yet even imagine.

Thank you again for your continued support of the Vilna Shul, Boston's Center for Jewish Culture and L'Shana Tova.



Jack Swartz

President, the Vilna Shul, Boston's Center for Jewish Culture



*"Vote for Vilna"* was our battle cry this past spring as 25 historic sites across Greater Boston, including the Vilna Shul, Boston's Center for Jewish Culture, competed for preservation funding through the Partners in Preservation online voting competition. American Express and the National Trust for Historic Preservation gave away \$1 million to Boston sites through the program. Thanks to the support of friends, members and supporters, the Vilna Shul received the 7th most online votes and was awarded a grant for \$90,800. Considering that the Vilna was in competition with several well known institutions such as the Paul Revere House, the Aquarium and Old North Church, this is quite an accomplishment.

The grant will allow us to uncover and restore the murals on the rear wall of the women's section, a space measuring 30' wide by 10' in height. The entire Vilna Shul was painted in the style of Eastern European synagogues when it was built in 1919. Two subsequent layers of murals were painted in the next few decades, and by 1940, the entire building interior was painted beige with the exception of an alcove on the first floor. In 1998, with a grant from the Amelia Peabody Foundation, patches of beige were removed to learn more about the murals underneath. As there are no photographs or drawings of the original murals, this grant will allow us to see a full wall of murals for the first time in over seventy years. A fanciful design depicting the interior of Solomon's Temple overlooking the Jerusalem landscape through the temple columns has been determined to be the most significant layer and is the one that will be preserved and displayed.

The mural restoration team consists of Brian Powell, an architectural conservator with the New England office of Building Conservation Associates, and Gianfranco Pocobene, a paint conservator with Gianfranco Pocobene Studio, Inc. The uncovering process begins with over-paint removal, whereby the beige over-paint followed by the last and middle generations of decorative murals are removed to reveal the first generation paint scheme. This will be accomplished using solvents and solvent gel formulations. The top and middle murals will be documented using high resolution digital photography. In-painting will be used in places where the first mural scheme has losses or abrasions. The restored mural will be covered in a stable and reversible varnish layer to protect it.

The mural restoration process will begin after the High Holidays this fall. The sanctuary will remain open throughout the project, and we invite visitors to watch as we reveal an unseen layer of Boston's Jewish history.

This past winter, I researched the Vilna Shul's property history from Boston's settlement in 1630 to the present. Fortunately, two others had previously researched the property and I found their title/deed research notes. Samuel Chester Clough researched all of Boston's Shawmut peninsula's property history including the Vilna's from 1630 to 1798; and Land Court title examiner Moses Lourie researched the Vilna property from 1917 back 100+ years to 1800. I also found tax records, census data, photographs and biographical sketches of some of the owners.

The West End was the last neighborhood on the Shawmut peninsula, the area on which Boston was founded, to become thickly settled. Through the 1600s and into the 1700s, the West End was a patchwork of 3 and 4 acre pastures and farms. In the 1690s, Reverend James Allen of Boston's First Church bought most of the West End farms and pastures including the future Vilna property. By his marriage to the widow of John Endicott, the son of the governor, Reverend Allen also briefly owned the Rebecca Nourse Homestead in Danvers. Reverend Allen's North Slope property was inherited by his son Colonial Treasurer Jeremiah Allen who in 1728, divided up the property into streets and eighty-seven mostly 40x100-foot house lots.

Thomas and Ephraim Craft bought the two lots on which the future Vilna would be built and moved four houses, total, onto the two lots, selling them in 1730. About 1810, Josiah Nottage, who owned the lot and two houses on which the Vilna's porch and ark are now located, bought the house and back 42 feet of the neighboring lot on which the women's/overflow section is now located, giving the property its familiar L shape. Nottage was a house builder and public works contractor engaged in sewer construction and building the first Cambridge Street bridge and Newark NJ's first Bridge Street bridge.

In 1855, property owner Joshua Bennett of Billerica demolished all of the buildings on the property and built three tenement buildings with 15-20 units, total. The families of five Civil War soldiers, all Irish, lived in the Bennett buildings. One soldier died in the Confederate's Andersonville, Georgia prison camp. According to the U.S. census and city tax records, many "colored" and "mulattos" also lived in the Bennett tenement buildings.

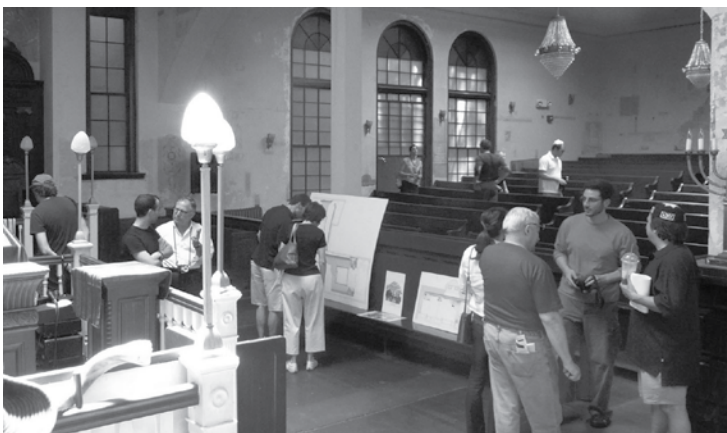
Joshua Bennett, his widow Eleanor (picture is of Eleanor Bennett, circa 1880; from *The History of Billerica* by Allen Hazen), and his two daughters Ellen and Rebecca amassed a sizable real estate business owning 50 properties in Boston and 20 properties in Lowell. When Rebecca passed in 1916, the Bennett property holdings were liquidated and the proceeds inherited by Joshua's eight great-grandchildren. Great-grandson and Rebecca's estate executor U S Representative George Holden Tinkam, presumably with the consent of his two sisters and five cousins, gave the soon to be Vilna property to Gertrude Ryan, his secretary, as an employment bonus for \$1. She then sold the property to the Vilner Congregation for \$9,550. They demolished the Bennett tenement buildings and built the present synagogue building.

Until recently, the neighborhood has been known as an interesting place to visit. Nearby was the John Coburn gaming house, "a private place for gentleman." A 1775 British military map labels Beacon Hill's westernmost peak, the one that was above the Vilna Shul property, as "Mount Whoredom." A late-1800's tax record note for the property "occupied by women" indicates that the trade occurred in that apartment on this property. And older visitors to the Vilna who lived in the neighborhood have told us about nearby brothels and other interesting neighborhood activities. This is very likely the reason why Nathaniel Hawthorne had his adulterous fictional *Scarlet Letter* Hester Prynne living in the West End.

Nearly 100 people have owned or have had a direct financial interest in the Vilna property. One thousand people have lived on the property. And many thousands have worshipped here. Rachel, Steve, myself, and the other Vilna docents would enjoy sharing some of their stories and invite you to do so as well!



*The Boston Art Walk inside the Vilna Shul sanctuary.*



*The Boston Walks Tour outside the Vilna Shul.*



# Havurah on the Hill

Havurah on the Hill had an exciting spring, beginning in April with guest speaker Nancy Falchuk, National President of Hadassah, who discussed America's largest volunteer women's organization and its determination to stay true to its original values and goals. Before Ms. Falchuk addressed the audience of the young and young-at-heart, Roberta Lane from the National Trust for Historic Preservation spoke briefly about the Vilna Shul's participation in the Partners in Preservation competition and urged attendees to vote for the Vilna to receive funding.

In May, Bill Novak, co-author of *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*, entertained us with his favorite Jewish jokes.

Haim Cohen, manager of the popular, local Israeli restaurant, Rami's, spoke at Havurah on the Hill in June. Haim shared interesting facts about Rami's history and explained how he ended up taking over the restaurant from his father while he was still in college.

In July, Ary Rotman, President of the Russian Jewish Community Foundation, talked about his experiences as a Refusenik and an immigrant to Boston as a young adult in the 1970s. He discussed the efforts of Boston's Russian Jews to use their own successes in America to help other communities, particularly their efforts to send funds to Sderot, Israel.

Ben Gordon spoke at Havurah on the Hill on August 28th. Ben is one of the top young Jewish philanthropists in America. While he was at Harvard Business School, he conceived and then launched GesherCity - a non-profit entrepreneurial venture connecting young adults, primarily in their early 20's and 30's, to the Jewish community - as a side project while running a multi-million dollar start-up.

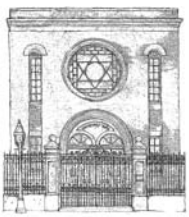
Havurah on the Hill is a non-denominational, lay led group that organizes monthly Kabbalat Shabbat Events and other Jewish programs for young adults and the young-at-heart. Services are followed by an engaging speaker and a kosher buffet dinner. To register to attend a Havurah on the Hill event or to sign up for our upcoming High Holiday services, visit [www.vilnashul.org](http://www.vilnashul.org).

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