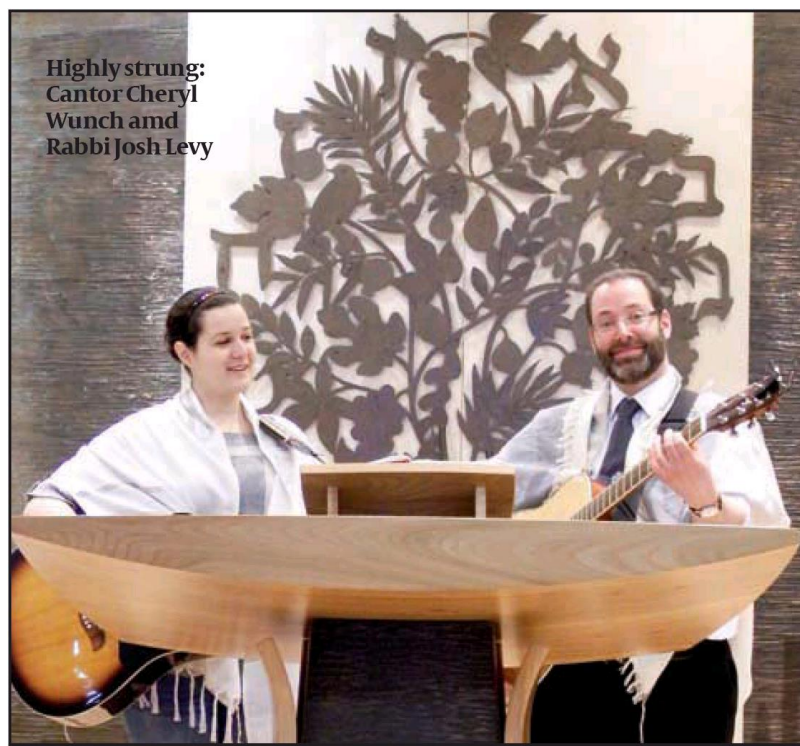


Highly strung:
Cantor Cheryl
Wunch and
Rabbi Josh Levy



Alyth's Friday Night fever is a crowd-puller

BY SIMON ROCKER

► SOME SYNAGOGUES struggle to muster a Friday night minyan. But not Alyth — the North Western Reform Synagogue in Golders Green — which has doubled attendances over the past year or so.

"We've always had a big Friday night service with 100 to 150 people," said Rabbi Mark Goldsmith. "But now we are getting 300 to 350 people most weeks — and without detracting from Saturday morning."

In his view, the secrets to its success were tunes that congregants could join in with, a topical dvar Torah and a duration of no more than 50 minutes.

His colleague, Rabbi Josh Levy, had "worked hard on making sure the music is very participatory and our cantor, Cheryl Wunch, who joined a year ago, has been bringing aspects of American repertoire, which gets the whole community singing together. We use guitar in most services rather than piano or organ."

Alyth had a long tradition of a children's choir to lead the music and it also held preparatory bar-and batmitzvah classes after school on Fridays. "That helps, too."

Moreover, "the dvar Torah at the service very much links with issues going on around us," Rabbi Goldsmith explained. "They are not up in the clouds. A couple of weeks ago

Rabbi Mark Goldsmith



it was about the indefinite detention of migrants. A member of our congregation who was detained as a child on the Isle of Man for two years during the Second World War spoke alongside a man from Guinea who had been held in one of the immigration detention centres recently. It was very moving."

Another recent dvar Torah had been delivered by a member of Age UK Camden "who was looking at the experience of elderly gay people and what it meant to hide as a Jew and as a gay man".

Congregants were also attracted by the Friday night dinners organised every few weeks by the community's welfare director, Lynette Sunderland. "They are for anyone who wants to stay afterwards," Rabbi Goldsmith said. "It's a place to come to if you'd like to be with other people for a Shabbat experience."

Rabbi Levy said the shul had instituted "a thoughtful, purposeful" process of change. "We have taken a lead from the States, where they are ahead in thinking how to make services work. In this country, they were taken for granted a little bit."

Over the past few years, Alyth has developed alternative minyanim alongside the regular Shabbat morning service — for example, the Big Bang service for young families.

"We have a thriving, praying community. A few years ago, people were genuinely worried whether there was a future for prayer. But the success of Finchley Reform or the Assif [minyan] at New North London shows young people do want that experience."