

## After Fire, Temple Rises

By SOPHIA HOLLANDER



*Natalie Keyssar for The Wall Street Journal*

*Rabbi Peter Rubinstein inside the Central Synagogue in Manhattan.*

When congregants at Central Synagogue, a historic temple on the Upper East Side, learned that their overflow services for the high holy days would be held at Avery Fisher Hall, an outcry erupted.

"You're taking us to the West Side—it's the wilderness!" was the sentiment that Senior Cantor Angela Warnick Buchdahl recalled hearing from members.

But renting the 2,700-seat hall became necessary for the first time this year because of an unusual problem: This weekend, more than 7,000 members are expected to attend Yom Kippur services. And that doesn't include the hundreds of families who are on a wait list to join the synagogue and can expect to linger there for as long as three years.

The explosion in popularity—supported by a robust infrastructure that includes nearly 100 full-time employees, 80,000 square feet of space spread across multiple buildings, a well-regarded nursery school, and an endowment exceeding \$30 million—has earned it an affectionate reputation as the city's first "Megashul" (shul is a Yiddish word for a Jewish house of worship).



*Natalie Keyssar for The Wall Street Journal*

*The exterior of the Central Synagogue on the Upper East Side, which has a long wait list to get in.*

It's a remarkable turnaround. Only 20 years ago, the Reform congregation had fewer than half the members it has now.

It was the oldest continually operated synagogue in New York City. But when Rabbi Peter Rubinstein accepted his position in 1991, he had a blunt message for the board: "We had to change to survive," Rabbi Rubinstein, 67 years old, remembered telling them. "I meant survival of the Jewish people in this country."

Then, only seven years after he began a painstaking process of rethinking everything from the experience of worship, to the structure of the Hebrew school, to the use of yarmulkes during services, a devastating fire tore through the building, which opened in 1872.

The congregation spent the next three years as a wandering people, holding high holiday services in the Park Avenue Armory. They met in their own community center and in neighboring churches and wrestled with what to do next.

"Sadly, the fire enabled us—this is not the way we would have chosen it—but enabled us to really catapult forward," said Rabbi Rubinstein. "I think what the fire did for us is it allowed me, allowed us, to understand that a synagogue is not its building. A synagogue is really its members, its congregation, its community. So being out of the building allowed us to proceed and define ourselves as something other than this shrine."

The restored building, which cost \$40 million, opened on Sept. 9, 2001. Two days later, it welcomed a stream of devastated New Yorkers through its doors.

The rebuilt synagogue retained the original Moorish-inspired architecture—including a stone exterior studded with stained glass and cresting into copper-clad towers, intricately patterned walls in saturated colors, tiled floors and rising columns—that provokes gasps upon entering. But subtle tweaks in the design signaled changes ahead.

Microphones now dangle discretely over the pews, so the congregation can hear each other sing; the bema, or stage, has been lowered and the front rows made movable, so that the clergy can feel closer to the congregation.



*Natalie Keyssar for The Wall Street Journal  
The Central Synagogue*

They added full-time teachers to the Hebrew school, overhauled the musical portion of the services—including adding more instruments and an associate cantor—and expanded the synagogue's mission to include nothing short of rejuvenating Judaism across America.

Central officials are exploring outreach programs to unaffiliated Jews in their 20s and 30s who live in TriBeCa and Astoria, Queens, and collaborating with Jewish institutions in the south to share resources, including rabbis, with struggling congregations.

Still, not every idea has been a success.

When Cantor Buchdahl first broached the possibility of adding instruments, she was told, "We just want you to know we had a bongo experiment and it was very bad."

She cautiously added a clarinetist and then, over the next several years, an upright bass, percussionist, and violin. Someone donated a grand piano, and she also now plays her guitar.

"Now, people really miss it when it's gone," laughed Cantor Buchdahl, the first Asian-American cantor or rabbi ordained by Hebrew Union College (she is both).

Only one idea has been too outlandish to try, officials said.

As part of the Yom Kippur service, "there was a scapegoat in a text and we thought of bringing in a goat right down the aisle," said Janet Walton, a nun and professor of worship at Union Theological Seminary who consults with the synagogue on how to improve its services.

"We wanted to get people to feel in their bones the power of a particular section of the liturgy," she said. "It was funny and foolish but it was one of those things that helps you to get to somewhere else."

It ultimately morphed into another unusual idea: to invite every congregant to approach the ark and have a private moment in front of the Torah during the service.

"Everyone said it was crazy when we decided to do it," said Cantor Buchdahl.

But they persisted.

"We wanted to make it clear that this Torah is theirs," she said. "It doesn't belong to the rabbis it belongs to them."

That sense of connection attracted Lauren Albert and her family, who waited on the list for two years before finally being admitted this past July.

"It was a joyful moment," she said.

Ms. Albert said she had explored several synagogues before wandering into Central Synagogue for a Friday night service. She said she was astonished to see hundreds of people packed into the pews when most synagogues struggle to scrape together 100.

As Cantor Buchdahl began to sing, "tears started running down my face," she said.

From that moment on, "Central was our dream," she said.

She is not alone. Last month, 6,000 people from 15 countries live-streamed the Rosh Hashanah services on their computers and more than 100 others listened in by phone.

Its congregation includes prominent New Yorkers, such as members of the Tisch family, Jerry Speyer and Ronald Lauder. The wait list once included Annie Leibovitz. Posters on [urbanbaby.com](http://urbanbaby.com) inquire eagerly about enrollment possibilities in its nursery school.

In the past year, the waiting list has expanded "exponentially," said Senior Director Livia Thompson. "It's going a little viral."

But the three-year wait time has also sparked debates about the values of inclusion versus intimacy. Limiting membership at all remains as fraught as it is flattering, officials said.

When a visitor cheekily suggested that they consider renting out Madison Square Garden for the high holy day services, Rabbi Rubinstein grinned, and gazed off.

"Backup to the Knicks, wouldn't that be great?" He shook himself back. "Yeah, we have to figure this out," he said. "Luckily, we're good at figuring things out."