

In Wal-Mart's Home, Synagogue Signals Growth

By MICHAEL BARBARO



Spencer Tirey for The New York Times

Members of Etz Chaim established their synagogue in a former Assembly of God church in Arkansas. There are about 100 members.

BENTONVILLE, Ark. — Residents of Benton County, in the northwest corner of Arkansas, are proud citizens of the Bible Belt. At last count, they filled 39 Baptist, 27 United Methodist and 20 Assembly of God churches. For decades, a local hospital has begun meetings with a reading from the New Testament and the library has featured an elaborate Christmas display.

Then the Wal-Mart Jews arrived.

Recruited from around the country as workers for Wal-Mart or one of its suppliers, hundreds of which have opened offices near the retailer's headquarters here, a growing number of Jewish families have become increasingly vocal proponents of religious neutrality in the county. They have asked school principals to rename Christmas vacation as winter break (many have) and lobbied the mayor's office to put a menorah on the town square (it did).

Wal-Mart has transformed small towns across America, but perhaps its greatest impact has been on Bentonville, where the migration of executives from cities like New York, Boston and Atlanta has turned this sedate rural community into a teeming mini-metropolis populated by Hindus, Muslims and Jews.

It is the Jews of Benton County, however, who have asserted themselves most. Two years ago, they opened the county's first synagogue and, ever since, its roughly 100 members have become eager spokesmen and women for a religion that remains a mystery to most people here.

When the synagogue celebrated its first bar mitzvah, the boy's father — Scott Winchester, whose company sells propane tanks to Wal-Mart — invited two local radio

D.J.'s, who broadcast the event across the county, even though, by their own admission, they had only a vague idea of what a bar mitzvah was.

Andrew Winchester, hatless at center, had the first bar mitzvah in the synagogue. Several branches of Judaism are represented at Etz Chaim



Courtesy of the Winchester Family

"Jesus was Jewish," one D.J. noted in a dispatch from the reception at a local hotel. The other remarked, "I love Seinfeld."

Shortly after he moved to the area, Tom Douglass, a member of the synagogue who works in Wal-Mart's logistics department, made a presentation about Hanukkah to his son's kindergarten class. The lesson, complete with an explanation of how to play with a spinning dreidel and compete for chocolate coins, imported from New York, proved so popular that the school's librarian taped it for future

classes.

Then there is Ron Haberman, a doctor and synagogue member, who has introduced Jewish cuisine to the county. His new restaurant, Eat This, next door to a new 140,000-square-foot glass-enclosed Baptist church, serves knishes, matzo ball soup and latkes. To guide the uninitiated, the menu explains that it is pronounced "LOT-kuz."

Not everyone is ordering the knishes, but Christians throughout Benton County are slowly learning the complexities of Jewish life. Gary Compton, the superintendent of schools in Bentonville and a member of a Methodist church in town, has learned not to schedule PTA meetings the night before Jewish holidays, which begin at sundown, and has encouraged the high school choir to incorporate Jewish songs into a largely Christian lineup.

"We need to get better at some things," he said. "You just don't go from being noninclusive to being inclusive overnight."

Surrounded by Christian neighbors, Bible study groups, 100-foot-tall crucifixes and free copies of the book "The Truth About Mary Magdalene" left in the seating area of the Bentonville IHOP, the Jews of Benton County say they have become more observant in — and protective of — their faith than ever before.

Marcy Winchester, the mother of the synagogue's first bar mitzvah, said, "You have to try harder to be Jewish down here."

Which may explain why what began as a dozen families, almost all of them tied to Wal-Mart and almost all of them sharing only a passing familiarity with one another, managed

to create a free-standing synagogue in just under a year. Tired of being asked which church they attended, they decided to build the answer.

For several years, many of them had attended a small synagogue attached to the University of Arkansas about 30 miles south of Bentonville. But the drive was long and the university temple, a converted fraternity house, never felt like home.

So in 2004, the families — most of them like-minded transplants from big cities largely in their 30's — decided it was time to create a permanent Jewish community in Benton County. They bought a former Hispanic Assembly of God church a few blocks from the first five-and-dime store operated by Sam Walton, Wal-Mart's founder, and renamed it Congregation Etz Chaim, or Tree of Life.

A dozen families quickly turned into 20 families, then 40.

There were, for example, Betsy and Marc Rosen, who moved to Benton County from Chicago in 2000 after Mr. Rosen was offered a job in Wal-Mart's technology department. The family did not attend a synagogue in Chicago because, Mrs. Rosen said, "you didn't need a synagogue to have a Jewish identity." There were Jewish neighbors, Jewish friends, Jewish family.

But not in Bentonville, where her daughter brought home from day care a picture of Jesus to color in. Suddenly, a synagogue did not seem like a luxury anymore, but a necessity to preserve her family's Jewish heritage.

The Jewish community here is a demographic anomaly. For decades, the Jewish population has plunged in small Southern towns like Bentonville, as young Jews have been lured to big cities like Atlanta and Houston. The Jewish population in Arkansas was 1,700 in 2001, down from 6,500 in 1937, according to the most recent numbers available from the American Jewish Yearbook, forcing synagogues in towns like Blytheville and Helena to close their doors.

"Bentonville is the exception," said Stuart Rockoff, a historian at the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, a nonprofit group that supports synagogues like Etz Chaim.

But as Etz Chaim nears its second anniversary, Benton County's only synagogue — and by extension, its fledgling Jewish community — faces several unexpected challenges.

The members of the congregation come from observant religious families in Connecticut, reform synagogues in Kansas City, Mo., and everything in between. Though they agreed to share one roof, they are struggling to reconcile varied backgrounds and traditions, which has made for hours-long debates over, among other things, whether congregants can take photos inside the synagogue on the Sabbath. (The answer is yes, but only with the flash turned off.)

Then there is the pressure from the outside. Eager to gain a foothold in what they consider a fast-growing Jewish community, several major Jewish movements have begun wooing the synagogue. In the last year, representatives from the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist movements have all visited the temple.

After learning there was a sizable Jewish population in the area, a rabbi from the strictly observant Chabad-Lubavitch movement moved to town, creating a potential competitor to Etz Chaim. The rabbi has had some success offering residents prayer services in his home — which has its own Torah — and a hard-to-find amenity in these parts: a kosher meal.

Members of the synagogue's board said they were in no rush to pick a religious affiliation but conceded the decision was inevitable.

Turnover has also proved to be a problem. Wal-Mart's suppliers like Procter & Gamble and Walt Disney, which set up satellite offices to be closer to their largest retail client, replace their Wal-Mart teams every few years, so Etz Chaim has already lost some founding members.

David Hoodis, the synagogue's president and an executive in Wal-Mart's operations department, said he expected to lose two to three families a year, forcing the temple to recruit aggressively. Members of the congregation are encouraged to invite new Wal-Mart employees over for dinner on the Sabbath to talk to them about Etz Chaim. And, to build the congregation, the synagogue has created associate memberships, with lower dues, for businesspeople who make frequent overnight trips here to visit Wal-Mart.

"I still think we are fragile," Mr. Hoodis said.

But the synagogue's roots are deepening. It recently celebrated its first renewal-of-wedding-vows ceremony. It received a Torah from a temple seven hours away in El Dorado, Ark., that closed because of a dwindling congregation. And after relying on borrowed rabbis, it has hired one of its own, a member of a Conservative temple, who travels to Bentonville once a month from Tulsa, Okla., with his wife, a singer who serves as Etz Chaim's cantor.

With its purple carpet and orange pews, both vestiges of the Assembly of God church it once was, Etz Chaim is not the synagogue that all of its members envisioned growing old in. But in a short time it has become the center of the Jewish community here — and has begun to weave its way into this overwhelmingly Christian community.

This year a prominent local faith-based charity, consisting exclusively of churches, invited Etz Chaim to join. The charity promptly reworded its mission statement, replacing "churches" with "congregations."