


# faith & religion

SATURDAY, JULY 1, 2006


**Independent Tribune**


PHOTOS BY GREG KAHN / INDEPENDENT TRIBUNE

Jackie Kessler, left, and Allison Cutler, 7, slap each other 10 as they play soccer at Dorton Park during a picnic for the local Jewish congregation Havurat Olam.

## SHARING SHALOM

### Local Jewish group drawing a crowd

By Josh McCann  
jmccann@independenttribune.com

#### CONCORD

Accompanied by the voices of three young girls, Barbara Thiede started strumming her guitar and singing in Hebrew.

As husband Ralf tapped lightly on a drum, the children's parents steadily joined in.

"Shalom means 'hi, how do you do?'" came the growing chorus, which had assembled under a picnic shelter at Dorton Park to celebrate the Jewish holiday of Shavuot.

The joyful noise echoing through the air, generated by the members of the Jewish group Havurat Olam, was evidence of a rising tide of religious diversity in Cabarrus County.

Thiede, 47, a rabbinic intern who leads the congregation's services, and Brian Cutler, 45, its current president, founded the group in 2003.

Thiede, who has lived in Cabarrus County since 1992, said she grew tired of traveling to Charlotte for services. There she met Cutler, who arrived in 2002, and the two realized they longed for a sense of like-minded community a little closer to home.

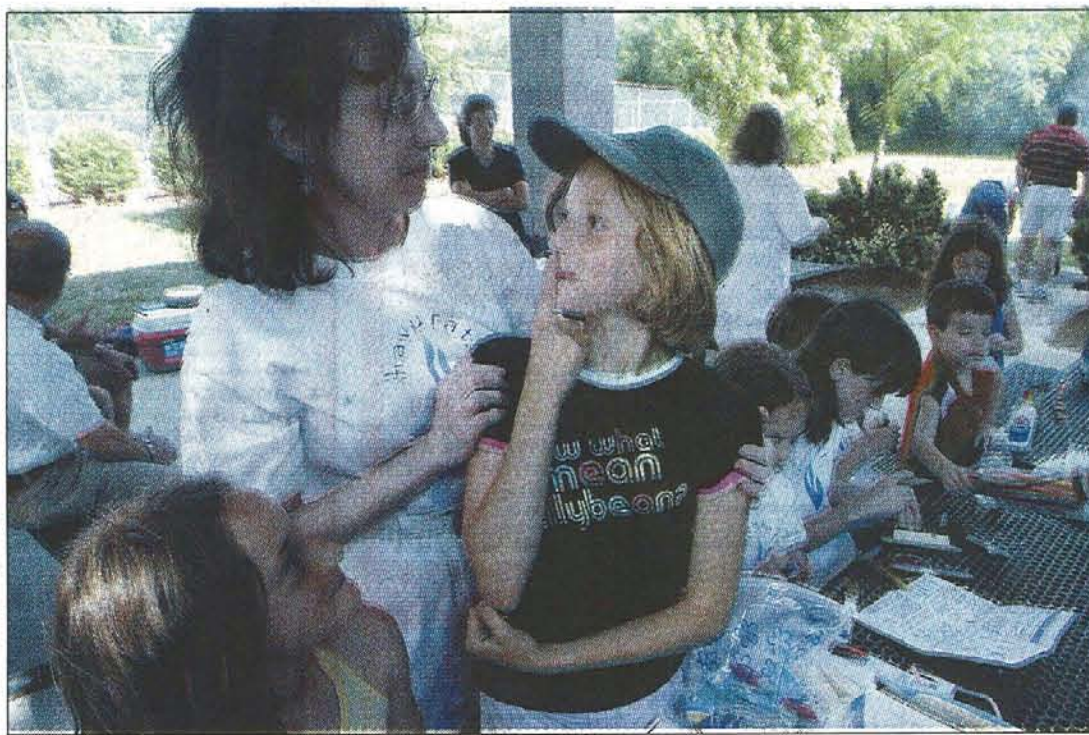
"It came down from our need to affiliate with others," Cutler said. "It's part of our identities."

Thiede and Cutler soon discovered there were far more fellow Jews around than they had ever realized. In large part because Jews learned to adapt through centuries of persecution, Thiede says, much of the religion's ritual takes place privately in the home.

"We've had a culture for 2,000 years that can survive in that way," Thiede said. "You can come here and be Jewish and no one really knows."

But once word began to spread, Thiede and Cutler said they were overwhelmed by the outpouring of interest they received.

Comprised of 25 families, Havurat — which loosely translates to "friends for the world" in Hebrew — gathers regularly at McGill Baptist Church for energetic, kid-friendly, song- and payer-filled worship on Friday nights once



ABOVE: Barbara Thiede jokes with Emma Labovitz, 10, as the children of Havurat Olam create wooden Mezuzah cases, containers for a parchment or other scroll.

RIGHT: Even Barbara Thiede's earrings are a symbol of her Jewish faith.



a month, with additional holiday services.

Most are transplants who moved away from Jewish families elsewhere and decided to pick up their faith anew upon arrival, but a few are converts. The group has seven board members — Sandy Feibelman-Coppola, Jackie Kessler, Raymond Keasler, Lynn Farrell and Sam Leder, all of Cabarrus, are the others — and three belong to interfaith families.

According to the Jackson, Miss.-based Institute for Southern Jewish Life, Jews have inhabited the South since

the 17th century. So even though they account for less than 1 percent of the general Southern population and less than 5 percent of the United States' Jewish population, Southern Jews are increasingly following the same demographic trends that have been attracting people to the region for decades.

Overall, he said, states such as North Carolina are experiencing a surge in the growth of Judaism. Citing figures from the American Jewish Yearbook, Rockoff estimates there were 10,300 Jews in the state in

1960. By 2001, that figure had more than doubled to 26,500.

"What's pushing the growth in Jewish areas of the South is largely Jews from other areas of the country moving to the South for largely economic reasons," Rockoff says.

Once newcomers arrive in places like Cabarrus County, the church-centric nature of Southern culture often spurs a phenomenon Rockoff calls "founder's syndrome," in which Jews feel an urge to take on greater responsibility as representatives of a largely foreign faith.

#### If you go

**What:** Jewish congregation Havurat Olam

**When:** Third Friday of each month. Children's service at 6:30 p.m., regular service at 7 p.m.

**Where:** McGill Baptist Church at 5300 Poplar Tent Road in Concord

For more information or to get involved: [www.havuratolam.org](http://www.havuratolam.org), e-mail [info@havuratolam.org](mailto:info@havuratolam.org) or call rabbinic intern Barbara Thiede at 704-786-4616.

"Their Jewishness becomes almost more important because they're forced to take on that role and they sort of embrace it," Rockoff said.

Judaism and Christianity hail from similar roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition, said Rockoff, as the Torah is the first five books of the New Testament in Hebrew. The primary distinction is that Jews don't believe in the view of Jesus as the Messiah, but Rockoff said Judaism has steadily gained acceptance over the past several decades. Said Thiede: "There are many more similarities than there are differences."

Through a mix of on site and teleconference coursework, Thiede says she'll likely become certified as a rabbi through the ALEPH Alliance for Jewish Renewal within five years. Havurat already possesses its own Torah, which the group painstakingly restored after inheriting it from a small Jewish community near the coast that had to close its doors.

Within 10 years, Thiede predicts, Havurat will eventually require a building of its own. Thiede said she has undergone a remarkable personal transformation along with the group, which she orchestrated in song, soccer games and crafts projects throughout most of the sunny summer afternoon.

"You see a responsibility and you have a dream and that dream is so powerful that you can't do anything but reach for it," said Thiede, who also gives Hebrew lessons out of her home. "Every service we have is another confirmation."

• Contact Josh McCann at [jmccann@independenttribune.com](mailto:jmccann@independenttribune.com) or at 704-789-9152