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Alix Railton moved from New York City to this tranquil aspen-coated hamlet 18 years ago for the same reason that millions of tourists visit each year: She loved to ski. Just about the last thing on the 32-year-old jeweler's mind was being part of a Jewish community and, accordingly, she soon married a Roman Catholic real-estate appraiser and stayed far away from the synagogue in Salt Lake City – not difficult at a distance of 50-odd kilometers.

It was still far from her mind 12 years later, in 2002, when she attended an "evening for the disenfranchised," a get-together to introduce locals who hadn't been part of the town's slowly growing Reform congregation to its first rabbi, Josh Aaronson, and see if they could find a comfortable place in a religious setting. Railton, who describes her attitude toward Judaism at that point as "turned off," had gone only because the host was a friend and she wanted to be supportive.

Yet what she found was a Jewish community like no other she had experienced, one where she felt welcomed despite her lack of knowledge and observance; one that didn't deduct points because her husband wasn't Jewish; one that so wanted to accommodate members it moved Sunday school to Wednesday so it wouldn't compete with weekend skiing.

"I had kind of dragged my heels and thought, 'What do I need this for?'" Railton recalls. "We felt very warmly embraced the minute we walked into the building, and we walked out of there fully ready to be part of this community."

So ready that she and her husband, Sean, joined the congregation and enrolled their son and daughter in Hebrew school. They have since had a bar and bat mitzva. And though he has never converted, Sean goes to services and is a member of the synagogue's board.

They are just one example of Park City Jews who have crawled out of the woodwork – or more precisely, out of the woods – to swell Temple Har Shalom's ranks from a few dozen families to more than 300. That bounty enabled the congregation to construct its first building this summer, a striking new multimillion dollar facility complete with sanctuary, classrooms and a spacious function hall.

At a time of soaring intermarriage and waning affiliation, a blossoming congregation in the most unlikely of places – a spot known for the Sundance Film Festival and outsize Mormon population it hosts – sees itself as a model for the future of Jewish life in America, a template for drawing Jews in rather than turning them away.

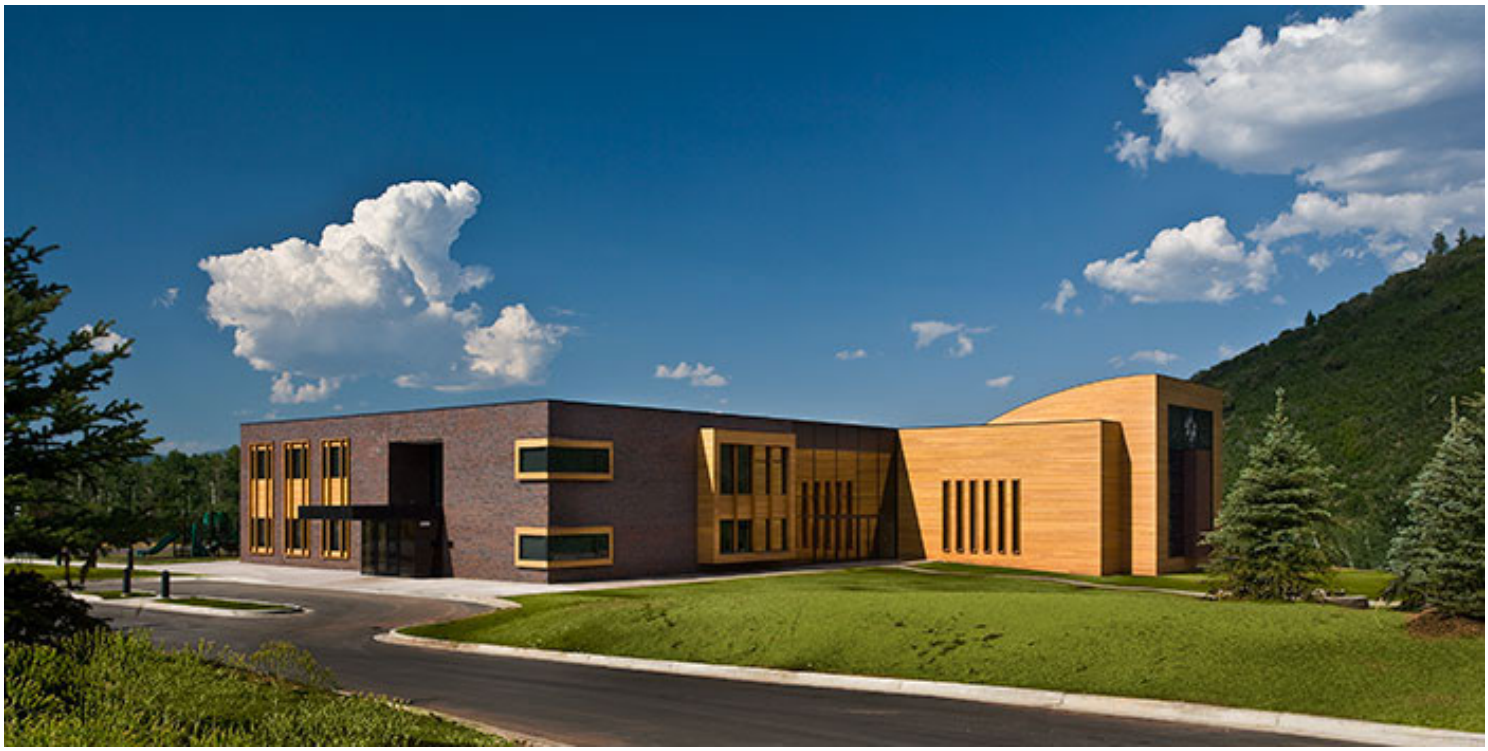
They call themselves "mountain Jews." Not because they're descendents of the rugged Jews of the Caucasus who have traditionally claimed that moniker, but because they have made their home here, where the snow-

capped peaks of the Wasatch mountains define the way of life – Jewish life included.

“We have the only ski-in/ski-out shul in the world,” according to Paul Zane Pilzer, who used to lead services until Aaronson arrived. “People want to ski here on Friday and Saturday. So we do takeout.”

During the winter, at 3 p.m. on Fridays in a cabin of the Deer Valley resort, Aaronson hosts Kabbalat Shabbat, talks a little Torah and performs Kiddush over halla and wine. (All in all, “ski shul” never goes more than 30 minutes so parents can pick up their kids from ski school before the lodge closes.)

During the rest of the year, congregants can now gather in a sleek modern synagogue nestled in those same mountains. The maple-hued wood and granite-colored brick structure includes floor-to-ceiling windows in its entrance foyer and function room providing sweeping views of blue-green hills dotted with ski resorts and vacation estates, like that of erstwhile GOP presidential contender Mitt Romney, just visible in the distance.



Indeed, adherents of Romney’s Mormon faith are much more the norm in these parts than Jews. Utah, after all, was settled in the mid-1800s by Mormon pioneers who were escaping religious persecution and chose the barren area as a place they could worship freely.

Robert Sacks saw himself as something of a visionary pioneer as well when he relocated to Park City from California 15 years ago and decided to start a synagogue. The move alone raised lots of eyebrows. “How can you be a Jew and go to Utah?” he was asked.

But Sacks wanted to move to the “recreational paradise” for the common Jewish reason of seeking a better place to raise his children – somewhere safe, with clear air, excellent schools and quiet streets. And once he got there, he realized that a Jewish community, which had never been a big focus of his life, was also something important to provide for his kids.

“It was ingrained within my soul, which I don’t think I realized as much then as when I arrived here, how important it was that I not break the link with my Jewish heritage,” he says.

And part of that realization may have stemmed from being in a place where there weren't many overt signs of Judaism – by noticing what was missing, by recognizing that some people had moved there to get away from traditional Jewish communities and by discovering that some people had felt they should hide that background.

So he and a few like-minded souls called on them to come out via a newspaper ad published in 1994.

"The time has come," it said. And come they did. Some 100 people showed up at the first meeting. They formed a Jewish community group, started holding Friday night services and gradually evolved into Temple Har Shalom.

Sacks himself is a manifestation of the trend which allowed such an improbable dream to become reality. Old-timers estimate there had been only a few dozen Jews some years earlier, when the town population as a whole was a mere 2,500. Ski operators had recently begun their slow rescue of sleepy Park City from the national registry of ghost towns, a designation earned once the local mine closed in the early 1960s.

But starting in the mid-'90s, urban congestion made increasing numbers of white-collar workers look to rural environments for a better quality of life. As Aaronson, himself lured in part because he and his wife enjoy skiing, puts it, "Twenty to 30 years ago, people said, 'I want a lifestyle change. I'm going to move to Seattle.' Now people are saying, 'I want a lifestyle change. I'm going to move from Seattle to Park City.'"

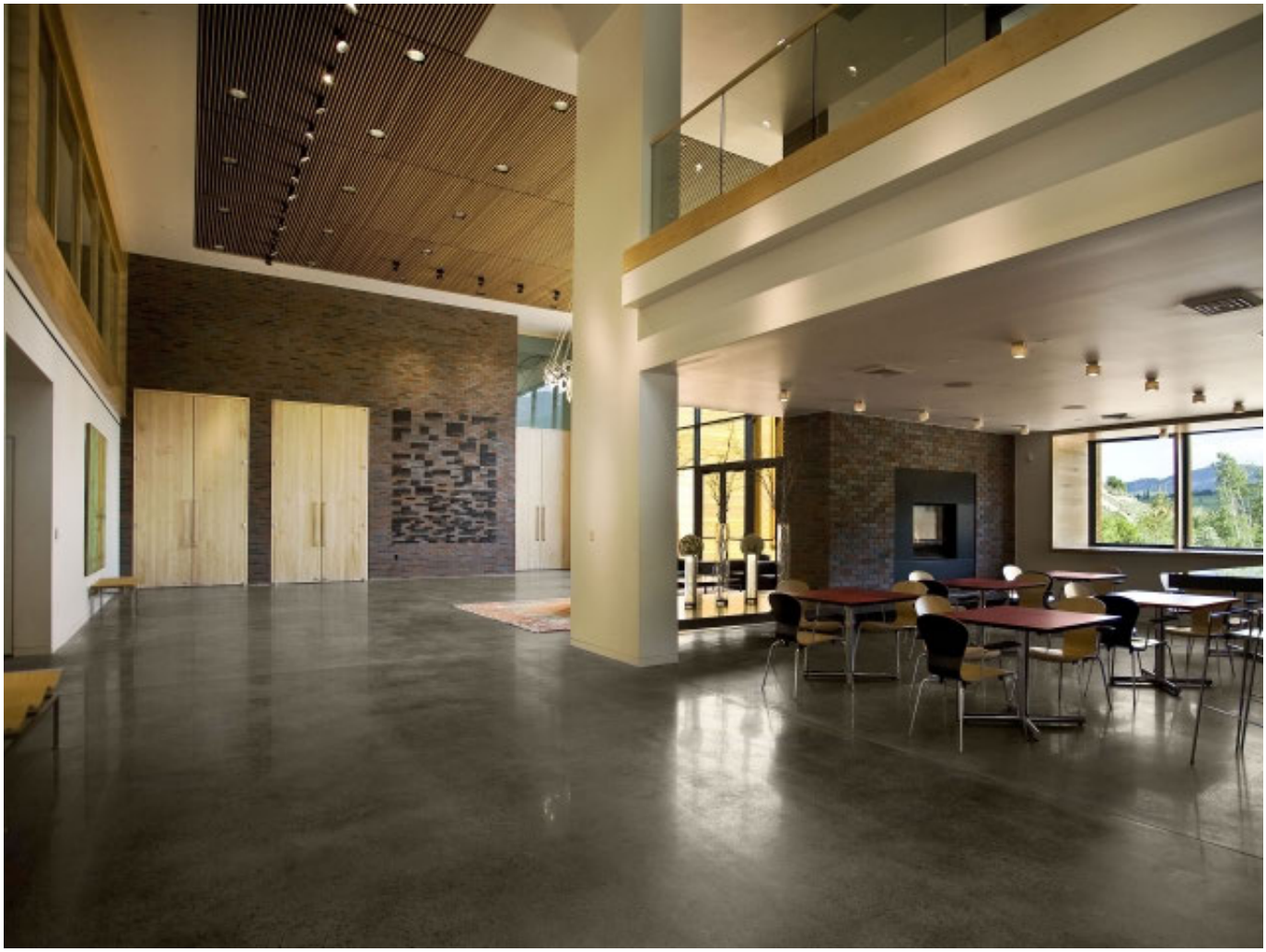
At the same time, technology began to enable them to move to remote places like Park City without quitting their day jobs. Sacks, for instance, runs a private lending company from his home. "Everything I do is cellphone and computers."

The town's Jewish contingent is heavily represented by affluent professionals who telecommute, or whose jobs require tremendous amounts of travel so they might as well make Park City their home base. ("It's like a CEO mecca," in the words of Pilzer, who runs a health insurance company.) The pace really picked up following the Salt Lake City Olympics in 2002, which magnified the visibility of Park City when some of the events were held there.

Sacks, 59, also represents another recent trend. He calls himself "semi-retired," an increasingly common condition. And as people live longer and stay in better shape, retiring partially or entirely, they have more time and ability to continue intense physical recreation. Park City is an ideal place for such people, and Aaronson notes the community features an older constituency.

The total population has now climbed to around 28,000 (if you measure it by the school district; the municipal boundary of Park City contains 7,000 people). There are no firm numbers on Park City's current Jewish population, but it's estimated to be a significantly higher proportion than the 2 percent of Jews in the general US population. Whatever it is, the number grows substantially during tourist seasons. According to Aaronson, around 40 percent of the congregation are second-home owners, and he calculates that as many as half of the people at any given Shabbat service are just passing through.

They are welcome at Temple Har Shalom, as is everyone. That's because founders like Sacks and Pilzer didn't want to simply grow their community by letting everyone in, but to establish a community principle of openness.



“We open the doors. We let people in,” declares Adam Bronfman, scion of the influential Bronfman clan and one of the major forces behind Temple Har Shalom. “People self-experiment, self-select, and they’re taking their Judaism very seriously.”

The experiment, he says, is to create “an authentic Judaism that opens the doors completely, that doesn’t have a threshold, a litmus test, a bar which one must step over to come in the door,” elaborating that interested participants of any denomination, observance level, sexual orientation, socio-economic level and not necessarily Jewish background are invited in.

Bronfman, who became involved with the community in the mid-’90s, is something of a poster child for that approach.

The son of mega-philanthropist Edgar Bronfman, Adam Bronfman, now 45, didn’t receive much in the way of a Jewish education growing up in a non-observant home. He married a non-Jew, and it was only later, as they started to raise their children, that he began a process of drawing closer to Judaism. His wife, Cindy, converted two years ago.

Bronfman has since made Jewish philanthropy the focus of his professional life, now serving as the managing director of the Samuel Bronfman Foundation. He studies Jewish texts regularly and taught at the Temple Har Shalom Hebrew school when his four kids were younger. He is also a major financial backer for the synagogue, having put up the seed money for the new building and endowed the rabbinical chair.

The endowing of that rabbinical chair in 2002 was a turning point for the congregation.

Suddenly there was someone working full-time at creating a community, building an institution and reconnecting Jews to their heritage. And that someone was a rabbi who understood the attitude of the community, what it wanted and didn't want.

Aaronson describes that attitude as "relaxed," whether it has to do with practice – non-Jews, for example, are occasionally given an aliya – or clothing. Shabbat wear for many is jeans and hiking boots.

Aaronson exudes that vibe (he tells everyone to call him Josh, since "rabbi's kind of formal") and it's one that fits with his congregants and potential congregants. His explanation for the synagogue's considerable growth under his tenure: "I think it was done in large part because of an extremely charismatic rabbi."

He might have made the comment in jest, but you won't hear any argument from Alix Railton, who gives him high points for creating the welcoming environment that drew her family in.

"Josh electrified us. He's a fascinating speaker. He's a warm and interesting man," she gushes. "He really grasped how to make the religious aspect of the community work for the community."

Resident Bari Nan Cohen recounts how she and her family visited Park City in 2001 and "fell in love with the place." So they looked in the phone book under synagogue, saw the listing for Temple Har Shalom, and said, "Okay, we can move here!"

Aaronson says he gets calls every month from people interested in relocating to Park City but want to be assured of a Jewish community first.

AND TEMPLE Har Shalom doesn't want to stop with locals. The community hopes to become a destination for Jewish groups to hold retreats and conferences during the fall and spring off seasons now that it has a communal structure to host events surrounded by scores of lodges with discounted rates – and beautifully contemplative panoramas.

"It's the perfect place to have retreats and Jewish learning," asserts Pilzer. "Prominent Jews need a place to meet and eat, and Park City is one of the best cities to meet because it's gorgeous."

Standing in front of one such stunning backdrop in late June, the verdant landscape littered only with idle snowmakers, Adam Bronfman welcomed just such a retreat-conference hybrid to Park City two days after the synagogue's dedication.

Through the Samuel Bronfman Foundation, he brought 22 leading Jewish scholars, politicians, journalists and organizational leaders to grapple with issues of Jewish identity, peoplehood and continuity.

"We're at Park City to get together, to learn together, to discuss, and I wanted to do this in Park City mostly because I believed to do it in an outlying region of the Jewish world, to do in some place that is so beautiful, to have everyone get the opportunity to spend some time in the mountains would be wonderful," he said, then added a final reason for the location: "I think most of the places we could go to in the world right now are hot and humid, and it's not hot and humid here."

Later, sprawling on a chair in the synagogue's reception room, wearing his sunglasses like a headband, a good-luck symbol around his neck and scruffy auburn beard on his chin, he returned to the same theme.

"We have a tendency to stay in our roles and not look at ourselves, so I figured in a place like this people could take their ties off, figuratively and literally, and change in a way they couldn't have somewhere else."

Arnie Eisen, for one, left the tie far behind. The chancellor of the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary, who wore a baseball hat for the occasion, thinks the Jewish world needs more retreats and that Park City is a natural choice in all senses.

"You just can't do this in your normal buildings surrounded by bagels and cream cheese," he argues. "It's not just the beauty of the environment, but that we're away. We were taken away from our own community so we became our own community."

And that, he says, allows for a "more communal" experience, where people talk to each other at greater depth. As he told the group, "One of the reasons I love being Jewish is because of these conversations."

These conversations being wide-ranging discussions on "Judaism as Civilizations: Belonging in an Age of Multiple Identities." It was the Bronfmans' second annual Why Be Jewish Gathering, and it explored how Jewish identity is perceived and experienced in the Diaspora, how and why Jewish meaning is created and how to balance Jewish distinctiveness with modern society.

In many ways, the point was to have the conversations rather than anything more concrete.

"When people are saying they came away from this conference with more questions than they had when they got here, it really warms my heart," Bronfman told the group at its conclusion.

So while Bronfman's Park City gathering might not have demanded or even aimed to answer the challenges of how to keep Judaism relevant and how to look forward to the future, it came up with one anyway: Park City itself.

"We have created a significant Jewish community and I really want to showcase that, because we are at a crossroads here," he says. "We're [literally] on the continental divide, but also figuratively, here we're at the forefront of where Judaism might be going."

Eisen buys that. "We have to bring Jews closer however we can," he says. "They're keeping tradition alive. They're keeping the Jewish people alive. I don't judge them. I don't reject them. I embrace them. I think it's wonderful."

Though he notes the Conservative movement has different "norms" – for starters, a non-Jew wouldn't be given an aliya and it's preferred that non-Jewish spouses convert – Eisen appreciates that the Park City community has found an approach that works for it. "I don't think they could have done it any other way and I'm a pluralist about these things."

He stresses that this is one model rather than the model – and that only time will tell if it truly succeeds. He adds that some might knock the Temple Har Shalom congregation for its deep pockets – and the outsize advantage its wealth gives it as a new community – or laissez-faire attitude toward intermarriage. But he thinks that a flourishing community shouldn't be dismissed, particularly in this day and age. "We need this growth in the US. Intermarriage is a fact and we need to not give up on these Jews and non-Jews."

The acceptance of that fact is itself revolutionary to Rabbi Benny Lau. The identity struggles and intermarriage rates of Diaspora Jewry covered at the forum were new to the nephew of Tel Aviv Chief Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau. Genial and reflective, Lau was also a guest of the Bronfmans for the three-day conference.

He notes that several participants referred to situations where half of the children in Hebrew schools or Jewish student groups have only one Jewish parent. "They don't speak about changing the numbers. They speak about changing the identity in accordance with that fact. It shocked me."

But even Lau, who represents a Modern Orthodox establishment in Israel that opposes the Bronfman approach, doesn't automatically reject it. He disagrees with the haredi perspective that "we will lose 60 percent to 70% of the Jewish people, but the people [who remain] will keep the tradition."

In contrast, he says, "I grew up with a responsibility to the people of Israel. To think that 70% of the Jewish people will be lost… It is my responsibility to keep them in the fold."

He acknowledges that in Park City and scores of similar locations, "the Orthodox system will never succeed in this place, because people want to have a regular life," so when he looks at Temple Har Shalom, he sees something good.

"They found 300 families that were lost. They found them. It's a miracle. Of course it's positive. But I disagree with the process, that they didn't go through one," he says, arguing for a middle path. "For me, intermarriage is a tragedy because I believe that to be a Jew is a privilege – and for that you have to pay something. To be a son of Abraham, you always have to pay taxes, to say, I'm a bit different. You can't eat your cake and have it too."

Aaronson agrees that the Jewish people shouldn't be willing to let go of those Jews, but he rejects Lau's contention that Judaism is a club with entry requirements – or that it even should be.

"Many people need to wake up to a cold, hard fact," he declares. "Every day we wake up and there are fewer and fewer Jews. If we believe that Judaism has value, then we should believe that there's a value in getting more people to embrace this. The way we get more Jews is not by being more closed and more cliquish and setting higher boundaries to the community."

He acknowledges a certain cost to this approach, the erosion of some elements that others might chose to mourn. "I understand those who lament the loss of what was. I need to focus on what will be."

And what will be, he believes, is survival as long as Jews continue to change and adapt. He notes that Judaism once revolved around animal sacrifice at the Temple in Jerusalem, and that Judaism risked annihilation once the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE. But rabbinic Judaism arose in its place and allowed the tradition to continue, even if dramatically changed.

"We never go back. We always go forward. That's what Judaism has done," he says, pointing to the community he helped build as what the future holds.

Or as Robert Sacks sees it, hope.

"There's always talk about how the Jewish [population] is dwindling. All of a sudden, you see something like this pop out of a small town called Park City, and people say, 'Wow, there's hope.' And that's really what this synagogue represents – hope for the future," he says. "If we can do it here in Park City, it can be done in other small towns in America, to survive. It's the living proof that it can be done."

Railton's two children are a case in point. Before joining the synagogue they had a minimal exposure to Judaism. But they both chose to go to Hebrew school, have a bar and bat mitzva and continue to be confirmed.

"We were not headed in that direction whatsoever, so they both had to play some catch up," she acknowledges. "Now it's part of their daily lives."

And they aren't the only ones who have been changed by the experience. "I always felt I was Jewish but that's

as far as it went. It's much more now at the forefront of who I am," Railton says. "I've always wanted to be a good person. Now I want to be a good Jew."