

POSTS

Adventures in Buenos Aires (Day 5)

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By [David Shneer](#) / March 26, 2007

On Friday night, we went to Belgrano—Buenos Aires' answer to the Upper West Side—for Kabbalat Shabbat services at Comunitad Bet El. How geeky Jewish is that! I wanted to visit the place that revolutionized Friday evening services at synagogues throughout the Americas, and even in Israel. Yes, for once, Jewish cultural capital flowed in the other direction, and Buenos Aires taught New York a thing or two about Jewish life. 

So far, all of my Jewish experiences here have been about culture brought to Buenos Aires—the Moorish synagogues, whose architectural model was imported from Europe; the gay Jewish organizer, who received his training in community organizing in the States; the Israeli embassy, which represents a foreign country; and so on.

But Comunitad Bet El, founded in 1962 by [Rabbi Marshall Meyer](#), exported its version and vision of Jewish life back to the States. In so doing, it forever altered what Friday night services are supposed to be—at least among Conservative and (to a lesser extent) Reform synagogues.

Marshall Meyer moved to Argentina in 1959 to take a position as a young rabbi and soon found himself one of the key builders of Jewish life in Buenos Aires. His two most important contributions to Jewish life were Bet El and the first Conservative rabbinic seminary in Latin America. The seminary has been training rabbis for forty years, and many of them have ended up leading congregations in the States.

In its early days Bet El prided itself on raucous use of sound and energy to revive moribund Kabbalat Shabbat services in Conservative synagogues. No more simple call and response, and more threateningly, no more banning of musical instruments from the Conservative synagogue.

Meyer moved back to the States in the 1980s to take a position at a dying congregation on the Upper West Side called [Bnei Jeshurun](#), importing what he had done at Bet El back to the States. For those in the know, the rest is history. Bnei Jeshurun became *the* place for young urban upper-middle-class New Yorkers to gather and flirt on a Friday night. Its style of engaged, musically oriented davening transformed Friday night services throughout the country. So in Buenos Aires I went to the original.

Belgrano neighborhood is the very wealthy part of Buenos Aires, and—based on what I've seen and heard—it's very, very Jewish. As we walked the streets, we couldn't help notice the big houses set back from the street, each surrounded by a fence suggesting wealth and power. We arrived a few minutes late to services (bad Jews, although hey, we were going to services on our vacation, so I think that more than offsets our lateness), had our passports checked by security, then joined a crowd of maybe 250.

In some ways, the synagogue was like any slightly hip Conservative or Reform synagogues in the States. I could bop along to many of the tunes, the service was primarily sung in Hebrew, and the musical extravaganza had a certain "Hollywood show tune" affect with overly harmonized, overly synthesized music. (Sorry Debbie Friedman and Craig Taubman lovers.)

But Bet El was different from a similar congregation in the States in that it was full of young people. There were toddlers wandering up and down the aisles, and a huge teenage crowd in the corner. And there were twenty- and thirty- something couples, though it was clearly not a meat market like Bnei Jeshurun, because Belgrano is a wealthy "family-oriented" suburb.

And then there was also this: the junior rabbi leading services, a strikingly attractive woman with long black hair and deep black eyes, was wearing a tight tank top dayglo green shirt and similarly tight pants. Of course, women have been leading services in the States for years, but most of them dress in as conservative and frumpy style as their male counterparts. No offense to rabbis, but style is not one of the required courses at American rabbinic seminaries. In Buenos Aires, women at the bimah dress less like their male counterparts and more like urban women in Buenos Aires. We're talking about some stylish, sexy female rabbis.

The senior male rabbi's sermon was *exactly* what one might expect from a suburban Conservative shul—as much as I understood, anyway, since it was in Spanish. An obligatory read of the week's portion, somehow connecting the **mishkan** to memory, and then a clunky segue into a contemporary issue—in this case, the fact that it was the **15th anniversary** of the 1992 Israeli embassy bombing.

Earlier in the day, Gregg and I had passed through the security and metal detectors that cordoned off the streets around the commemoration of the bombing. Thank god we were accompanied by a Spanish speaking friend. Without her, this whole entry about a great synagogue visit might have instead been **"David's run-in with the police who thought he might be an anti-semitic terrorist,"** part 2. Instead, we heard numerous speeches by politicians (with plenty of saber-rattling about Iran), as well as a moving speech by a bombing survivor who lost his wife. It was to this last speech that the rabbi referred in his sermon about memory.

At the conclusion of services, Gregg and I hopped in a cab (Jewish crowds do not linger and chat on the streets in front of synagogues for security reasons. Once you leave the building, you immediately leave the area) and went back to the hipper part of town, Palermo Viejo, for dinner and drinks among our other people...gay people, that is. All I need to say is bad drag and strong cocktails and I think you get the point.

A week of searching for things Jewish had left us both physically and emotionally drained. Our guides to Buenos Aires Jewish life, one of whom wanted to remain nameless for privacy and security reasons, helped us find queer Jewish life, Yiddish culture, and a synagogue that once revolutionized Jewish religious culture.. And on my last morning in Buenos Aires, I returned to **the place I started**, to the Recoleta Cemetery, to take in the Sunday chiming of the church bells and the masses of tourists paying homage to the celebrity of Evita. And much to my surprise, **not an Israeli tourist in sight**.

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