

# Congregation B'nai Avraham

# The BABIMAH

THE MEZUZAH ISSUE

News, People, Events, Information and Jewish Life in Brooklyn Heights



DECEMBER 2010 • KISLEV 5771

## 28 FLOORS OF SIGNPOSTS

*The Mezuzahs of Court Street*

by JULIE SCHWARTZMAN

One recent Sunday afternoon I decided to explore my deserted office building and investigate the building's mezuzahs. My office is on the 26th floor of one of Court Street's skyscrapers. I was curious to see how the lawyers in my building—at least the Jewish ones—felt about their commitment to “write [the words that I command you today] on the doorposts of your house and upon your gates.”



It's strange to focus intensely on an object one passes by every day. I had never noticed these doorway occupants before, much less stopped to meet them one by one on all 28 floors.

The building was silent as I started my journey. I began on the 28th floor and went through the empty building floor by floor. I took the fire stairs between floors, peering around corners as if I were spying; then I stopped at every doorway.

I started off looking for patterns. I thought there would be many different

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## MEET RABBI DAHAN

BA BIMAH INTERVIEW

We caught up with Rabbi Daniel Dahan, the official sofer of Congregation B'nai Avraham. A sofer is a scribe. He has been a sofer for 25 years, but he has been our sofer “since Mendy [Raskin] was born.” Rabbi Dahan, whose first language was French, was born in Algeria. He received smicha (rabbinic ordination) from the chief rabbi of Jerusalem, Rabbi Shalom Massass, in 1985.

BAB: I heard a hilarious story that when Akiva Free told you on the phone that he was African American, you told him you were African American also.

*“You go to the mikvah 21 times before you write the head tefillin and 21 times for the hand tefillin.”*

DAHAN: Yes, it's true. What's so funny about it? I wanted him to feel comfortable. Algeria is in Africa.

BAB: How long does it take you to make a set of tefillin?

DAHAN: I can make one set of tefillin a week.

BAB: Why only one set per week?

DAHAN: It's very draining. You have to have the right spiritual frame of mind. You have to go the mikvah before you write G-d's name. You go to the mikvah 21 times before you write the head tefillin and 21 times for the hand tefillin.



BAB: You have to live near a mikvah.

DAHAN: And you go through a lot of towels.

BAB: Is Rabbi Raskin's mezuzah the biggest one you ever made?

DAHAN: No, no, I made one almost twice that size. It was not for a big rabbi or a synagogue. It was for a simple Jew in Cleveland.

BAB: Who was the biggest honcho you ever wrote for?

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# THE MEZUZAH AS A SPIRITUAL ELEVATION OF OUR PHYSICAL HOME.

By BRACHA  
(no last name- it's like "Cher" only Jewish)



Physicists and kabbalists agree there are 10 dimensions, or sfirot, in this world. We live in the lowest dimension, malchut. And our "job" is to elevate this sfirah. We elevate every part of our daily existence by trying to make something holy out of it.

How? We elevate our money, or cleanse it, by tithing. We give away 10%, and this allows us to grow spiritually. Because that 10% isn't ours anyway- if we don't give it away, it will poison the other 90%. Similarly, we elevate our workplace by putting a pushka on our desk and dropping in a few coins every day. We elevate our food by keeping kosher. We elevate our time by keeping Shabbat. We elevate ourselves, and reveal light in the world, by taking on the self-imposed restrictions which are the 613 mitzvot. And our home? We elevate, and cleanse, our home, by affixing a mezuzah on our doorway. Wherever we pass, we see the physical reminder of our job in this world, and we literally elevate the space, the vessel, by the mere presence of the mezuzah. Happy affixing! ●

## Save the Date

**SUNDAY, MAR. 1**

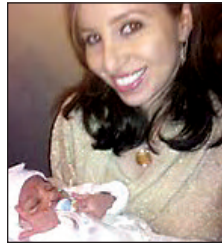
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SHUL DINNER**

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Jewish Heritage  
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# COMINGS & GOINGS

*A Round-up of News from Congregation Benia Avraham*

We extend condolences to Sarah Schmerler on the passing of her mother, Miriam Schmerler. Mazel tov to Eric Lebovic and Jennifer Marcus on their marriage. Mazel tov to Matthew Rosenberg and Meg Wolf on their marriage.



Mazel tov to Stephanie and Scott Harris on the birth of their baby girl Lila. Mazel tov to Arye and Levana Kremer on birth and bris milah of their son Binyomin

Levy on October 29, 2010.

*Above: Levana Kremer and Binyomin*



*Above: Eric Lebovic and Jennifer Marcus*

*Below: Dinorah Frias escorted to the Chupah by Ayelet and Yitzhak Mor.*



Mazel tov to Dinorah Frias and Stuart Minkoff on their marriage October 17, 2010. Farewell to Uri and Emma Horowitz who are moving to Riverdale. Mazel tov to Brian Inker on his bar mitzvah. Condolences to Madelyn Mydlo on the passing of her father, Moshe Mydlo. Further condolences to Dora Rubinchik and family on the passing of her husband Felix.

*Below: Beth, Mitchell, and Yosef Garbow with Brian, Steven, Amy, and Ariel Inker.*



Mazel tov to Yosef Garbow on his upcoming bar mitzvah.



Mazel tov to Matthew Brown and Rachel Ravitz on the release of their beautiful new CD, My Love, My Friend. Here's the link: <http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/rachelmatti>

Mazel tov to Annaelle Elhadad and family on her upcoming bat mitzvah.

Did you know? That all of the siddurs and chumashim are falling apart? Yasher koach to Mitch Garbow who cracked the whip, knocked some heads together and made morning shacharis start on time. It's really working. 7:45, be there or be square. Our own Rabbi Simcha was the keynote speaker at the Bikur Cholim conference at the UJA on November 14th. As usual he brought the house down. (This is theatre lingo for "was highly entertaining and well received.")

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# NEW KOSHER RESTAURANT OPENS TO RAVE REVIEWS

By ANNE APPARU

*Shul member Anne Apparu is a professional caterer, and runs a "pop-up restaurant" called The 18th Restaurant*

It was to my great excitement that the news of Pardes' opening came through our shul's newsletter. Being a food lover, I have dedicated most of my time to eating and cooking, putting a great emphasis on ingredients, healthy nutrition and conviviality. Hence my delight, walking into Pardes at 497 Atlantic Avenue, where chef



*Anne Apparu at work*

Moishe Wendel and his wife Shana have created a hearty atmosphere and an inspired menu. I was joined by a foodie friend, Batya, who exclaimed at the possibilities of savoring exotic American cuisine.

The staff was welcoming and attentive. Upon questioning, Moishe was insightful about the meanings behind the name Pardes and the possibilities in kosher cookery: he stipulated that the restaurant was now at a "Pshat" or simple level, but would hopefully rise to "Yessod" or secret level. We found in the food-basis, simple ingredients, flavored with secret sublime hints.

We selected, with great difficulty, a few dishes to share paired with some very

good Rioja. The adventure began with the beef tartare, fresh and tasty, with a hint of smoke, served with warm garlic toast and herb pesto. Then the home made bouquerones, which are oil-cured anchovies, served on a seasonal salad dressed with just enough sweet and tangy lemon dressing.

Onward we surged to the aroncini di riso. This Italian-inspired rice ball stuffed with duck ragout (stew) flavored with orange and spice, with some pumpkin sauce on the plate, was possibly my favorite. I love fried food!

But then, the main dish arrived, a home made pasta, called tagliardi, with short rib and liver Bolognese! Wow! Unfortunately, I looked at the clock and had to rush out to a show and could not stay for dessert. But I will be back to pick a dessert from a very nice looking selection. Our meal for two (before tip, and absent dessert, but including a bottle of wine) was about \$75.

As Moishe said when I asked for suggestions on the menu, "They are like children, they are all good." Yes indeed, I

will have to go back to finish trying everything on the menu; and the menu will change with the seasons, so you might see me there at any given time. Enjoy and L"Chaim. ●

**B'nai Avraham's  
Chanukah Party**  
**Date: Sunday, Dec 5**  
**Time: 7 - 9 pm**



## STAFF

Michael M. Bast  
Editor

Julie Schwartzman  
Art Department

Elke Sudin  
Illustrator

Bracha Plusscar  
Anne Apparu  
Contributing Writers

Contact us and send your  
news and stories  
[michaelmbast@gmail.com](mailto:michaelmbast@gmail.com)

## Shabbaton

FRI, DEC. 10TH  
**BOARDWALK  
STORIES**

Roslyn Bernstein

In *Boardwalk Stories*, Ms. Bernstein tells fourteen linked tales spanning the decades 1950-1970, and invites us into the private lives of the colorful denizens of communities like Coney Island, Long Beach, the Jersey shore, and the California beach towns.

**Where:** B'nai Avraham  
**When:** Friday, Dec 10th  
**Services:** 4:15 pm  
**Dinner & Lecture:** 5:30 pm  
**For Reservations:**  
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**PAMELA S. ROTH**

Attorney at Law

26 Court Street  
Suite 810  
Brooklyn, New York 11242  
Phone: (718) 802-9025  
Fax: (718) 802-0707  
Cell: (917) 586-9220

CONT' FROM PAGE 1

# 28 FLOORS OF SIGNPOSTS

## The Mezuzahs of Court Street

mezuzah cover designs, but there were really only a few. The most common style was the kind made of white plastic with various inscriptions. Most of these had a Hebrew letter shin, a shin dalet yud, (both standing for G-d's name) or a Star of David. They looked like a relic of the 1950s with fading gold trim.

Another popular type was the clear lucite mezuzah with a gold "Shin", through which you could see the scroll. And many doorways had nothing more than a mezuzah with a simple metal cover of gold or silver.

"The white ones are the cheapest ones," explained Rabbi Raskin. "I like the clear ones better. The clear ones show people that the real thing is inside."

Besides these basics, there were several ornate, handcrafted mezuzahs—the kind made of different color woods or painted glass, though none of them was as extravagant as the novelty covers one sees nowadays—the Batman or Yankee-themed Mezuzah covers. It was, after all, an office building.

But the story here was not in the mezuzahs themselves; rather, it lay in the mezuzah's place in the doorway, or lack of it, for some were simply missing, leaving just a paint mark behind. Some mezuzahs lurked in the shadows at the end of a hallway, lit up by a sliver of light shining through a window on the other side of a glass door. Some were modern and had a

big city look that matched the busy deco building, announcing their presence in the doorway. Others were held in place by pieces of scotch tape.

I noticed that the smaller offices on the higher floors often had a clean, new mezuzah. Maybe this reflected the optimism and hopefulness of a small business or a start-up. The bigger offices—the ones that took up a half or whole floor—often didn't have one at all. The names on these doors were clearly Jewish. Most of these firms, with their shiny black glass doors and brushed metal signs had no room for a signpost on their door, as if they had simply out grown this artifact. Perhaps they felt like religion was a private matter, better kept for interior doorways.

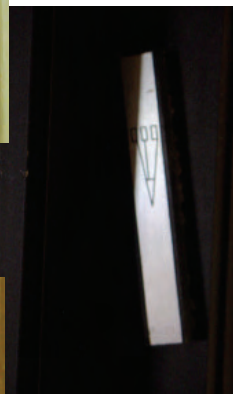
Other doorways told a story of a mezuzah that had been and was now removed with only the outline of its form remaining. Most of these marks had been sanded away.

In the entire building, I was surprised to find only one painted-over cover. I had seen this many times in buildings in the city: an old mezuzah buried under layers of paint, telling of a long gone occupant. It's always sad to see this because it's so obviously about a distant past. The one painted-over mezuzah I found on Court Street was so small, it was almost gone. The layers of paint had almost swallowed it up. It made me think of time and history, and of my grandparents; a whole world that would soon be gone and forgotten, with only a painted-over symbol left behind.

I took as many pictures as I could. The journey became more and more interesting as I went along, more engrossing, and I traveled down the empty, gray fire stairs until I arrived at the lobby. Then I was done. More than I expected, the mezuzah had revealed itself to me as a powerful identifying icon, a storyteller recounting the history of a people and their choices. ●



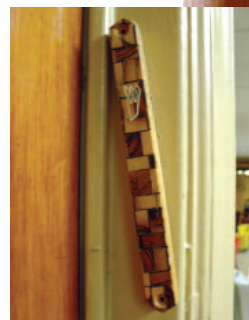
Above: Some mezuzahs held in place by tape. others left only an outline behind.



Left; Many of the newer covers were clear lucite or white plastic, (below.)



Below: A few mezuzahs were hand-crafted.



Steve Cohn tapes another battered prayer book.

# THE GREY ZONE

*Stuck with the refrigerator door in a permanent state of openness.*

Dear Grey Zone,

We try to be Shomer Shabbos in our home, which means we tape the lightbulb button in our refrigerator to keep it from activating. Of course one cannot turn a light on or off on Shabbos, and must take pains to avoid doing so, even by accident.

One Friday night I was rummaging around for a late night snack and the tape popped off and the light came on. I stood there with the refrigerator door open for ten minutes, analyzing deeper and deeper. What to do? If I closed the door, I would commit one avaira, one sin. But certainly others in my house would later open the refrigerator door, thus adding a second, third and fourth sin, when they opened it, and of course they must then, inevitably, close the door again adding a fifth, sixth and/or seventh avaira. (Math question: Must it be an odd number? Every opening and closing, plus the one time I closed it. The popping off of the tape was not a sin. It did that by itself.)

What about leaving the refrigerator door open until the Sabbath ends? This unpleasant option would result in massive food destruction and the extreme likelihood that someone less observant than I will close the door, and be furious as well. There also is the possibility that someone will eat the spoiled food and come to physical harm.

What about getting some help from the non-Jewish neighbors? ("Fritz! Can you hear me! Wake up! It's me, the Jew next door! Yes, I'm both shouting and whispering at the same time! No, it's not a fire! Yes, it's about midnight! Fritz! No, no, no, don't go back to bed! Oh, is that your baby crying? Listen, I need you to do something! It won't take but a minute! Close my refrigerator door! But tape it first, so I can have a little half-and-half with my coffee in the morning!")

I don't think I could do this. But if I did, wouldn't this be a Chillul Hashem (a desecration of G-d's name) and put the



Illustration by Elke Reva Sudin / [www.elkerevasudin.com](http://www.elkerevasudin.com)

Jewish people in a poor light (excuse the pun) before the non-Jewish neighbors? And might the neighbors be so angry about being summoned for something so seemingly trivial that they might actually kill me, that the avoidance of this scenario might qualify for the Sabbath exemption of pituach nefesh, saving a life?

Of course it is also permissible to extinguish a flame so a sick person can sleep. But who in my house is sick? Would that be me?

So, eventually I decided to re-tape the light. I took one sin upon myself to avoid several others. Was this right?

Signed,  
**In a Pickle.**

Dear Pickled:

The correct answer was (D) "pray fervently for the imminent arrival of the Moshiach." When the messiah comes, all impossible and embarrassing questions will be answered. Truly, this is the kind of thing you must keep to yourself. Don't ask, and don't tell. You were totally doomed and there was no solution. However, here is some advice for the future: vigorously tape the light yourself before next Shabbos, and don't rely on others for this extremely important task. ●

CONT' FROM COVER

## MEET RABBI DAHAN

DAHAN: I had the merit to write an entire sefer torah scroll for the Lubavitcher Rebbe. I did it in five months, whereas a job like this normally takes nine months to a year. This was a big "chef d'oeuvre."\*

BAB: Are your hands insured by Lloyd's of London?

DAHAN: No, but perhaps I should. And my eyes too.

BAB: What's the biggest mistake a sofer can make?

DAHAN: Not knowing he made a mistake. That would be the biggest mistake. ●

\*masterpiece

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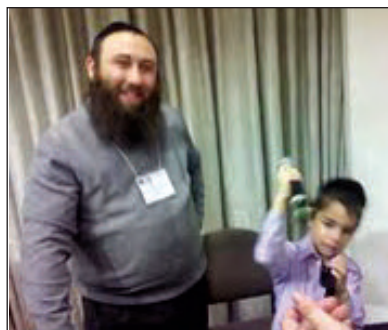
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## COMINGS & GOINGS

CONT' FROM PAGE 3

Yasher koach to Yfat Schulsinger who spotted Klein's cholov Yisroel ice pops being sold on Sundays at Fulton Landing at the bottom of Columbia Heights, near the dog run. Good eye, Yfat!



*Rabbi Simcha and Son*

Thanks to all who sponsored kiddushes between the last issue of BA Bimah and this one, including the Goldens, the Weinbergers, the Rosenberg and Wolf families, the Harris family, the Cohns, Minkoffs and Ehrenbergs, the Gallstons and Benders, the Roths, the Frost and Bernstein family, the Pugachevskys, the Rubinchiks, the Formans, the Perls, the Foxes, the Itkowitzes, the Makarov and Schinder family, the Basts, the Leboviches, the Raskins, Pam Young, Helen Ketzner, Sam Winicoff, Reuven Sutin, the other Benders, the Licht family, the Weintrobs, the Brennans, the Trilling Shaffers and the Lerner. ●



*The Minkoffs share some cake.*

(My apologies for any omissions! –ed.)



## The BA GALLERY



*Yosef and Brian*



*Annaelle and friend*



*Celia speaking at the Mikveh Dinner in Prospect Park*



*Helene and Debra at the Mikveh Dinner*



**Michael M. Bast, Attorney at Law**

**Silverstein & Bast**

**217 Broadway, New York, NY 10007**

**(212) 608-4040 • mbast@silversteinbast.com**