

Rabbi Zeldin's Return a Healthy Sign

BY ARI L. NOONAN
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AT 77 YEARS old, the best known and most enduring rabbi in the community, Shai Zeldin, four months removed from a heart attack, reported for work last week at Stephen S. Wise Temple, right on promised schedule, muscular and barrel-chested, the picture of long life.

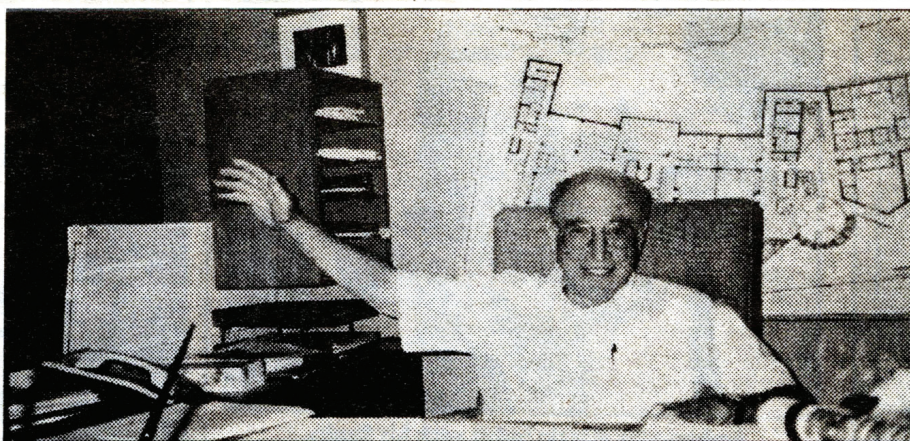
It is fitting that the most ambitious and most accomplished rabbi in Los Angeles should build the largest known synagogue community atop the city's highest hill, where it's illegal to feel pessimistic.

He has more "firsts," "mosts" and "largests" tied to his name than any rabbi in the history of L.A.

He is king of even more than he can survey from the huge bay window of his office that affords a panoramic view of approximately half of the San Fernando Valley.

This remarkable empire of synagogue and schools — like Disneyland, never finished — has rewritten the Book of Conventional Wisdom for Reform Judaism. Rabbi Zeldin built a vast day school system that is a national model for Liberal Jews, with 1,600 students. Milken Community High School, across the Sepulveda Pass, is starting its seventh year with a new boast, the largest Jewish high school in the country, 560 students.

The self-contained world of Stephen S. Wise, so far, sprawls across 39 lushly landscaped acres — 16 buildings, 458 employees, \$18 million budget — just the way Rabbi Zeldin envisioned



Rabbi Shai Zeldin

in 1965 when he climbed a mountain and dreamed of flinging open state-of-the-art doors to Jews seldom or never exposed to what he calls the beautiful side of Judaism.

There's more greenery on Mt. Zeldin than at the U.S. Mints, cumulatively. "Judaism has to be attractively presented," he says.

He's accomplished all of this with overwhelming financial and emotional support from his congregation, which essentially said, whatever-you-want-we'll-do, says Rabbi Zeldin. Why? "They know I'm honest, that I live modestly, that I've never profited, and that I am content with a salary in the middle."

He knocked off two rounds of golf the other morning in Palm Springs, and his still-smooth game happily is in the low 40s.

When he hasn't been meeting for

physical therapy with recuperating Rabbis Harold Schulweis and Bert Woythaler — the Sunshine Boys in yarmulkes — Rabbi Zeldin has been indulging his passions for chess and reading. He still brags about beating the New York collegiate chess champion three straight times two years ago ("I try to think three moves ahead").

He inhaled some "fat" biographies this summer, of former Soviet official Dubrinyan, Walter Cronkite, and his favorite, the Rev. Billy Graham. (Two reactions on Rev. Graham: "I found his theology extremely naive, and I wonder how the masses can buy such simplistic theology. But he's a good person who's favorably disposed toward Jews.")

Eli Herscher, entering his 23rd year on the mountaintop, has been senior rabbi for the last five years, but for most of the 10,000 members of Stephen Wise, The Only Leader is Rabbi Zeldin.