

Community

Celebrating Zeldin and Rembaum

Honoring "The Builder"

Marking the rabbi's jubilee

By Naomi Pfefferman, Senior Writer



tended a protest march against Nazism led by Wise and a Unitarian minister. "I decided that I would follow in Stephen Wise's footsteps, that I would become a rabbi and that I would always get favorable non-Jews to participate in my work," he said.

Because his father had practiced an "enlightened" Orthodoxy, Zeldin attended the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College and graduated at the top of his rabbinical class. He came to Los Angeles in 1953 as regional director of the Reform movement and dean of what became HUC's L.A. branch and served as rabbi at Temple Emanuel in Beverly Hills before breaking away, with 35 families, to begin Stephen S. Wise Temple in 1964.

When many of his founding members wanted to buy property on the Westside, Zeldin staunchly disagreed. "I couldn't see our synagogue confined because of the prohibitive cost of land in Westwood," said the rabbi, who also "wanted people to experience the serenity of Judaism" on the peaceful hilltop. By the mid-1970's, a unique parenting center — the first at any L.A. temple to offer Lamaze classes — was drawing families even before they thought of joining a shul.

Along the way, Zeldin earned the reputation of being a trailblazer, a builder, a doer. "Many times he gambled and took chances," recalled Temple Schools Education Director Metuka Benjamin, "but always his calculations were correct."

As the construction of brick buildings continued at SS-WT, so did Zeldin's bridge-building with politicians and Israeli officials who met with him or spoke from his pulpit. The rabbi-as-civic-leader points to photos of himself with Presidents Bush and Clinton, Henry Kissinger and Yitzhak Shamir. Moreover, many City Council candidates speak here at election time, given the influence and affluence of Zeldin's 2,900-family congregation.

Nevertheless, the rabbi is not always what he appears, politically speaking. Though he has earned a reputation as a right-winger where Israel is concerned, Zeldin says he's actually a "centrist" (by Israeli standards) who favors the Labor Party. "Whoever wins the election gets my support," says Zeldin, who has lambasted American Jews for pub-

licly criticizing the policies of the Israeli Government. However, the rabbi believes that Americans do have the right to publicly criticize the country's religious policies, "since there is no freedom of religion for Reform and Conservative Jews in Israel."

But ask Zeldin about the "legacy" he will leave Los Angeles, and he quickly points to models of the \$20 million high school that will be built across the Sepulveda Pass.

Zeldin has always been a maverick when it comes to Jewish education: In 1977, he began one of the first Reform elementary schools in the country, even as liberal Jewish circles charged that he was abandoning public education. Before long, the Jew-

ish elementary school would become a crucial part of the L.A. landscape. But the rabbi wanted to go further.

When Zeldin decided to launch his Jewish high school, born of three liberal Jewish schools that did not survive, the project seemed the greatest risk of his career. In fact, the shul put up \$1.25 million over three years for the project: "We borrowed up to our capacity, and there was one month we didn't know if we could meet our salaries," said Zeldin, who all the while stood firm. "I believe that secondary education is so crucial to the future of Jewish life in Los Angeles and in America," he explained, "so that if it meant jeopardizing the financial security of this congregation, I was willing to

chance it."

It was yet another risk that paid off for Zeldin. The high school is running solidly in the black this year and has increased both curriculum and enrollment for next semester.

And while Stephen Wise, like most L.A. synagogues, has lost members to recession and riot and earthquake, Zeldin is drawing numbers back with a variety of innovative spiritual programs. Most notable is a Saturday "Mountaintop Minyan," which has helped pioneer the return to more traditional worship within the Reform movement.

But ask Zeldin if he plans to retire, and the septuagenarian shakes his head. "Right now, I've got a high school to build," he said. ■

Thirty-one years ago, Rabbi Isaiah Zeldin scrambled on his hands and knees to the top of a remote hill in the Sepulveda Pass, where there was nary a road nor a path in the dirt. This very spot, demographics had told him, was the center of Jewish life in California, where a synagogue could draw from the heavily Jewish populations of the Valley and the Westside.

So here Zeldin would build Stephen S. Wise Temple, though even he could not envision the virtual city that would grow up on the hill. Since that day, 16 buildings have emerged on an 18-acre complex that serves 18,000 people each year, with an operating budget of \$18 million, 380 full-time employees, one of the first Reform Jewish elementary schools in the country and, as of September, the largest Reform-Conservative middle/high school in America.

In short, Stephen S. Wise serves more people than any other synagogue in the world, and this week, congregants are honoring the risk-taker who made it all happen. There will be a May 19 Shabbat service and a May 21 dinner at the Regent Beverly Wilshire Hotel honoring Rabbi Zeldin, recognizing his 50 years as a rabbi and his 75th birthday (which is actually on July 11).

For Zeldin, who looks a decade younger than his years, the occasion was a chance to reflect upon his work. His Orthodox immigrant father was the principal of a Talmud Torah and the Brooklyn director of the United Palestine Appeal; his was a Zionist, Hebrew-speaking household, where guests included the great Zionist/Reform leader and Zeldin's shul's own namesake, Stephen S. Wise.

For Zeldin, the seminal moment came at age 13, when he at-