

EAST BAY

Berkeley Bayit reunion celebrates Jewish success

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While some Jewish leaders bemoan the lack of affiliation and high rate of intermarriage among Jews, one small group is celebrating Jewish commitment and success.

Alumni of the Berkeley Bayit held a reunion at the Jewish student residence at 19 Hillside Court last month and discovered their experience had profoundly affected the rest of their lives.

"The bayit [house] touched me in ways that I don't think one ever expects," first-year resident Barry Cohn reflected.

For one thing, he met his future wife there; today Barry and Debbie Trubowitch Cohn are the parents of 2-year-old Sarah.

The Cohens are among 12 alumni who found their future mates at the bayit. It was their idea, together with alumna Karen Goldberg, to hold the reunion.

In addition to renewing old friendships and remembering their student days, the 43 former bayit residents who assembled from all over the country compared notes on how their lives have developed.

Of the 112 people who have lived at the bayit since its founding in 1980, three became rabbis and one is a rabbinic student, four became Jewish communal workers, two became Jewish educators, eight immigrated to Israel and 40 have lived in the Jewish state for six months or more.

Alumni also are involved in a long list of Jewish organizations.



Leonard Cohen, president of Berkeley Bayit, Inc., reviews bayit's history during last month's reunion.

Trubowitch Cohn, for example, is associate director of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and her husband is secretary-treasurer of the Jewish Public Affairs Committee (JPAC), a state version of AIPAC.

"It was just astounding to us to see the commitment people have

to the Jewish community and to Israel and to the group of people they lived with," Trubowitch Cohn said.

Estimating current Jewish affiliation at 100 percent, she added, "A lot of people actually became committed [to Jewish life] while in the bayit."

Although a Jewish student residence can be expected to attract activists, Trubowitch Cohn said that alumni were "equally divided between those [who had come] with a strong Jewish background and those with very little."

"If you read the evaluations we had people fill out, for a lot of people this was a turning point," she said. "It was the first time they'd expressed their Judaism in such an outgoing and activist fashion."

Barry Cohn said when he was there, bayit residents had served on U.C. Berkeley's Jewish Student Board and its various affiliates, edited the Jewish student newspaper *He Eifer*, and organized for Soviet Jewish emigration rights.

That tradition continues with today's residents, he added.

According to Trubowitch Cohn, "For a lot of people [the bayit experience] was the first time they'd explored their Judaism from a religious-observance perspective."

Looking back, she said, "I learned the meaning of cooperation and community and flexibility [and] I explored aspects of Judaism I'd never explored before, such as *kashrut*."

In fact, each year the residents decided to continue to observe the dietary laws.

"That was a big statement for a group of Reform Jews who hadn't been brought up in that tradition," Trubowitch Cohn noted. But "the philosophy was that the bayit should be a place where any Jew can feel comfortable."

As a result, "a lot of the people who lived in the bayit have longer beards now, who I don't think would have before."

Another important lasting contribution to their lives, both Cohens agree, has been the sense of community that was forged at the residence.

"When you're removed from it, it's a memory, but when you go back and everyone's together and you're serving blintzes and everyone's running around getting

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everything ready, the magic returns," Cohn said. "I think that's a lot of the reason we have a special place for the bayit in our hearts, and that's why people want back — to keep it alive."

The Berkeley Bayit remains alive with a new crop of students starting this fall.

And the alumni plan to keep in touch not only through donations to preserve the independent residence for future generations, but through a newsletter that will inform them about one another no matter how far they roam.