



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact:

David Polonsky, Director of Communications
David.Polonsky@adasisrael.org · (202) 362-4433, ex 133

A BREAK WITH TRADITION - OVER 1,200 HIGH HOLIDAY VISITORS FLOOD THE OUTDOOR, MUSICAL WORSHIP EXPERIENCE AT ADAS ISRAEL

(Washington, DC) **Over 1,200 eager Jewish High Holiday visitors descended on the outdoor plaza at Adas Israel Congregation, the oldest and largest conservative synagogue in Washington, DC, to experience an innovative and free Kol Nidre (Yom Kippur evening) service this past Friday.** It was led entirely by Adas clergy-member Rabbi Lauren Holtzblatt – an increasingly popular and dynamic young woman Rabbi. Accompanied by a professional live band, this unique High Holiday service boasted reflective eastern music, a pattern of dancing lights in the plaza trees, a fully-lit moon, and over a thousand voices singing and chanting reflectively in unison. This alternative Yom Kippur service drew both synagogue members and non-members alike, and was particularly well attended by DC area Young Professionals, as well as unaffiliated Jews seeking a “less conventional” worship experience for the Jewish High Holidays.

The service reflected a major break with the more traditional High Holiday services most have come to expect from the Conservative Jewish movement – which traditionally charges a great deal of money for High Holiday tickets and wouldn't permit musical instruments to play on Sabbaths and Holidays. The many guest and visitors (which included **Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg** and **Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren**, among others), as well as synagogue members described it as one of the most unique and powerful evenings in the life of the 144 year old synagogue.

Adas Israel Congregation, a historically traditional American synagogue, has just completed a major synagogue renovation and rejuvenation project known as the **Vision of Renewal**. This **Renewal Initiative** included the fifteen million dollar renovation of the synagogue's building and facilities – the major premise of which was to change the “feeling” in the building by creating warm, welcoming, natural worship and gathering spaces flooded by natural light. The initiative also includes the creation of new and innovative programs and learning opportunities designed to meet the needs of an ever-evolving 21st century religious landscape.

Senior Rabbi Gil Steinlauf says “innovative new programs and worship experiences like this exciting new Kol Nidre service are exactly the tools we need to change the way we experience ‘synagogue.’ By meeting people right where they're at spiritually, as well as creating an open-minded, non-judgmental atmosphere that is open to everyone, regardless of their relationship to God, we are confidently meeting an ongoing “Customer Service Problem” many American churches, synagogues and other religious institutions are facing today.”

-Continued-

A BREAK WITH TRADITION... – PAGE 2

Adas Israel billed this enormous outdoor worship gathering as "**Return Again to Kol Nidre**," and it was co-sponsored by the **Jewish Mindfulness Center of Washington at Adas Israel**, which offers programs and workshops designed to help deepen the Jewish experience of the "spiritual" through Jewish meditation, yoga, chanting, mindful learning, and spirited Shabbat & Holiday programs, all within a uniquely Jewish context. The synagogue also offered a more "traditional" Yom Kippur service inside its new newly renovated Charles E. Smith Sanctuary, which also drew close to 1500 members and families.

Shortly before the service began, **Rabbi Lauren Holtzblatt** announced to the growing crowd as they eagerly anticipated the start of the music and chanting, "Let this be a sacred space, a safe space, a space of dynamism and welcome. Let this be a space where we can all raise our voices in prayer and song before the sky, before the earth, before God, and before each other."

Despite uneasiness from the more traditional sects of Conservative Judaism, the clergy and leadership at Adas Israel are confident that these new approaches to Jewish life and ritual are exactly the ingredients needed to revitalize the increasingly dwindling movement. Through these renewal initiatives, Adas is betting future generations of Jews – **who aren't Orthodox, and therefore not bound to show up at a synagogue – but are genuinely interested in embracing modern Judaism**, are free to meet and explore their innermost beliefs and ideas.

Rabbi Steinlauf says, "Today's Jews are looking to meet other like-minded people and find an authentic Jewish identity. They are open to sharing new ideas, and they want 'the real thing.'"

This wildly successful, alternative High Holiday experience represents the next step in the ongoing evolution of this traditional American synagogue, which has played host to the likes of **Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**, Israeli prime ministers, US presidents and vice-presidents, and more recently, the **Dalai Lama**.

Rabbi Lauren Holtzblatt, creator of the "**Return Again**" service, says, "After experiencing this past Yom Kippur service, I don't believe it's an overstatement to say it may well represent the next step in reviving the Conservative movement of Judaism and synagogue life as a whole."

###