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Street level in Toronto

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Shul disturber

Reform, Orthodox, agnostics, and those just in it for the bagels: They're all welcome at Makom, a Jewish community group in Kensington Market.

As the sun set on a Friday evening at the edge of Kensington, pedestrians hustling along College Street paused ever so slightly to catch a few notes of ecstatic song coming from the open door of Rochelle Rubinstein's art studio. At quarter to seven, those commuters would have heard Rabbi Aaron Levy leading some 45 congregants in a singing, wordless prayer—"It's like scatting," he said—to a tune written by Shlomo Carlebach, better known as The Singing Rabbi. Disproving the rumour that a vegan diet causes lowered energy levels, the 37-year-old Levy spent much of the night vigorously beating rhythms on the cover of his Siddur (a prayer book) and on the table beside him.

Dubbed Makom, after the Hebrew word for "place," the group is described by Levy as a "rabbi-led, emergent Jewish community," though this volunteer-based, synagogue-less Judaism has been sprouting up across North America for the past decade and is also referred to as an independent minyan. (A minyan is the quorum of Jews necessary to begin a service.) Ruth Matthews, a human-resources manager who sits on the board of Makom, represents one typical part of its membership. Growing up Reform in Thornhill, Matthews was a self-described "super-Jew." When she left the city to attend university in Montreal, however, she stopped practicing. Upon returning in the late '90s, Matthews wanted to reconnect with her faith, but the kind of Jewish community she and her friends sought didn't exist here. So they created it themselves. "There was a movement of young, funky communities of Jews who wanted something different," she said. "They didn't want their parents' synagogue experience. They wanted it more DIY, more involved, and more musical."

Levy and his wife moved from New York to Toronto in 2006 when the rabbi took a post at University of Toronto's Hillel organization; three years later, he started Makom. According to his studies of Toronto's Jewish demographics—the Maryland native's interest comes from a "convert's zeal" for the city—the bigger picture is what could be called a reverse exodus. Back in the 1950s, the large Jewish population that had settled in Kensington after the turn of the century decamped for the northern reaches of the city, but the past two decades have seen the return of their grandkids downtown. A

report Levy acquired from the United Israel Appeal of Canada estimated that the Jewish population south of St. Clair was more than 21,000 in 2011, a 41 per cent increase in just 20 years.

Not satisfied to simply serve that influx, Levy is a bit of a shul disturber. Although a modern Orthodox Jew himself, he welcomes all types. "You could have a non-Jewish partner of a Reform Jew sitting next to an Orthodox Jew sitting next to a Jewish atheist," he said of his services. Reform members must put up with Makom's separate seating for men and women, while traditionalists have to sacrifice their definition of a minyan as 10 men; at Makom, 10 of each gender must be present. "It's not possible to make everybody comfortable in a consciously diverse community, so I'd rather make everybody a little uncomfortable," Levy said.

Catering to what he says is a more politically progressive population, Levy is also unafraid to trot out one of the community's larger elephants: Israeli foreign policy. In 2009, Rabbi Arik Ascherman, the general secretary for Rabbis for Human Rights (known for standing in front of bulldozers to prevent the destruction of Palestinian homes), spoke at a Makom Shabbat. "Many folks have told me that they haven't felt comfortable sharing their thoughts, particularly regarding Israel and Palestine, in other segments of Toronto's Jewish community," Levy said. "Makom is a community where people can talk without fear of being ostracized."

It's clear that something has been working. As membership in established synagogues declines, Makom's has slowly grown. Four years after its launch, the organization now also runs an after-school Hebrew-immersion class, guided meditations, a women's group, and educational programming. In his home once a week, Levy, a father of two, even coaches a small group of teenagers on ethical responsibility, which he does through a study of ancient Jewish property laws. "Like, what happens if my ox gores your ox to death?"

Thankfully for Levy, though, from Friday to Saturday night, the many items on his kosher plate get put on hold. Even a very busy rabbi deserves a day of rest.