

Jewish Community Voice

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Restored shul, now the Azeez Museum, has faithful following for Rosh Hashanah

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Voice shore correspondent



Michael Azeez restored the Brotherhood Synagogue and named it in memory of his father Sam.

Nearly 100 people came together at Stockton University's Sam Azeez Museum in [Woodbine](#) to celebrate Rosh Hashanah last month. The services, which are fully subsidized by the Sam Azeez Foundation (rather than Stockton), are an annual tradition for the museum, which began as a thriving Orthodox congregation known as the Brotherhood Synagogue in 1896. The museum has retained and restored the synagogue's original sanctuary.

"We have a very loyal following from communities like Cape May, Avalon, Stone Harbor and Sea Isle City," said Jane Stark, the Azeez Museum's executive director. In addition, about a third of worshippers came

from [Atlantic County](#). "Some of those people have roots in [Woodbine](#), some are nonaffiliated people looking for spiritual enrichment, and others are just fascinated by the history here," she noted.

Rabbi Susan Schein, a Reconstructionist rabbi who is the Hillel director at Connecticut College, has led the free, egalitarian services (including the first and second days of Rosh Hashanah and Tashlich) for the past 5 years. “She has a following. People really love her,” said Stark.

The Azeez Museum also has a following. According to Stark, approximately 5,000 people come here annually from all over the country to learn about the rich history of the American- Jewish immigrant community that thrived in **Woodbine** during the late 19th and early 20th century.

The public can view the museum’s ten permanent exhibits, with the guidance of a trained docent, on Mondays, Fridays and Sundays, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The museum also serves as a teaching center for the New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education, providing onsite and in-classroom programming to students in Cape May County in 5th through 12th grades.

Numerous artifacts and photographs throughout the museum vividly recall the life stories of the Jewish immigrants who made a home for themselves in **Woodbine**. That community, said Stark, was “an agricultural experiment” in which German philanthropist Baron Maurice De Hirsch brought in Russian Jewish immigrants to establish a farming community in what was then a sparsely populated area of Southern New Jersey.

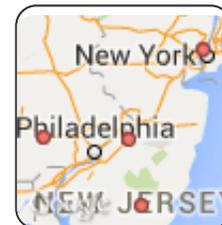
As a result, **Woodbine** eventually became known as “Little Jerusalem”—even by some immigration officials at **Ellis Island**, said Stark. “In 1915, every teenage boy in Woodbine was Jewish,” she noted.

One of those teenage boys was Gregory Pincus, a son of Polish immigrants who was an early pioneer of in-vitro fertilization and a creator of the birth control pill. He received the American Medical Association’s Scientific Achievement Award in 1967.

An exhibit entitled “Woodbine Success Stories” features Pincus and many other



Where's the story?



4 Points Mentioned

The Brotherhood Synagogue’s sanctuary has been preserved in the Azeez Museum, which offers Rosh Hashanah services there every year.

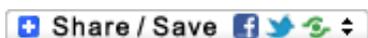
American-Jewish immigrants from **Woodbine** who rose to prominence. Among those is Sam Azeez, the man for whom the museum is named. After coming to Woodbine as a child in the 1930s, Azeez went on to revolutionize the stock market by helping to develop a real-time computer quotation system.

By the time Azeez passed away in 2000, **Woodbine's** demographics had shifted dramatically. Few Jewish people remained in the area, and the Brotherhood synagogue—which had been the largest of four local synagogues—struggled to remain open. In 2003, Sam Azeez's son, Michael, restored the building and turned it into a Jewish heritage museum named for his father. The younger Azeez later gifted the museum to Stockton with the stipulation that services would still be held in the sanctuary, said Stark.

In addition to the annual Rosh Hashanah services, the Azeez Museum also holds services on other occasions. "In past years, we have done Sukkot and Yom Kippur," said Stark, who also oversees funerals for those being buried in the **Brotherhood Cemetery**, located two miles away from the museum in Bell Plain. "People are still buying Yahrzeit plaques" to put up in the building, she added. And this year, "We have a Bat Mitzvah scheduled for the day after Christmas."

But more than anything, the old synagogue now serves as a repository of the memories and artifacts of the Jewish community that once thrived in **Woodbine**. "I have people calling me to see artifacts or to hear stories every day," said Stark. "I'm becoming the Margaret Meade of the area—I'm like a local anthropologist!" .

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