Gospel choir graces synagogue stage

BY RYNA SPIRO
SENIOR WRITER

Sixty white-robed members of a gospel choir entered the sanctuary of Miami's Beth Shira Congregation, filing in from both the left and the right. They took their places on the bima, beneath the representation of the Ten Commandments in Hebrew. The choir ordinarily sings at the First Baptist Church Pinney Grove in Fort Lauderdale. But this was different. It was an appearance by the choir members in a synagogue.

The choir was accompanied by its director, Donald Chisolm, on piano, and by the Klezmer Company ensemble, directed by Aaron Kula. Kula's brother, Mark, also sang at Beth Shira, as well as on the program.

Steven Eisenberg and two of his children were in the audience, tapping their feet to the rousing music. "It's great," he commented afterwards. "You can't help but to join in." There is no CD yet, but the idea is definitely under consideration, said Aaron Kula, who is also a resident scholar in music at Florida Atlantic University. "Kula is the creator of the Klezmer Does the Blues program."

"It's about vibrations," he said after the concert. "When the choir sang, I was shaking. It's like a musical massage." The merging of sounds — jazz, blues, cantorial — and the blending of voices and instruments resulted in a show that aimed to entertain and move the audience in a spiritual way.

"Today's concert reflects the greatness of America," said Bill Burre, the synagogue's vice president of programming. The people on stage reflected some of America's diversity, united in song. "It's all about a universal language."

A feature of the show was the rendition of "Let My People Go, Go Down Moses," with soprano Eddie Ruth Monroe and the choir, with Chisolm directing. "Let them go," sang the choir, "let them go."

Gloria Brown leads the gospel choir in song at Beth Shira Congregation.

The biblical story of slavery recounted by the song is an experience that is common to both Jews and blacks, as is the struggle against discrimination in modern times.

"There's so much commonality in our traditions and in our music," said Beth Shira's Rabbi David Auerbach, who also attended the concert. In addition to the choir, the Klezmer Company shared its own pieces. Randi Fishenfeld on violin and Dan Salmasis on clarinet performed "A Bissele Competition."