

# JEWISH COMMUNITY NEWS

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## **CONGREGATION SHAAREI TORAH NEWS:**

### ***From Hebrew School Brat to Bimah-Bocher, Mike Sirota's Journey Leads Him To Arcadia And Congregation Shaarei Torah***

By Linda Parker Horowitz

The week has been a hectic one – too many frigid soccer practices, tight deadlines, and rain wreaking havoc on the already insane LA traffic, escalating the ordinary stresses of managing family life. We're all exhausted, but the monthly musical Shabbat led by Mike Sirota to celebrate our synagogue *simchas* draws us to Congregation Shaarei Torah. Though I have worked diligently to get everyone fed, into Shabbat clothes, and out the door, we are late yet again and I unintentionally become the Shabbat Bride, entering the chapel just at the moment congregants face the door. My face turns red.

We grab the *siddur* Mike and Rabbi



**Mike Sirota**

Michael Beals developed specifically for his Shabbat Together service, and settle in. Immediately, my family and I are wrapped in the warmth and *ruach* created by Mike's special blend of the traditional, contemporary, and spiritual – his gentle voice and sweet guitar embrace and fill the chapel; we join everyone in prayer and song. A deep breath and the craziness of the week disappears — I understand the true meaning of Shabbat, to rest, to begin again, to renew physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

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Mike has a deep connection to music, to his Jewish roots, its heritage and liturgy. He enlightens us as to the meaning of a prayer or passage, in between melodies we've known since childhood along with those of Debbie Friedman and even Joni Mitchell.

In the short time since Mike's arrival at Shaarei Torah to lead Friday night services once per month, Mike intuitively learned our traditions and has come to understand our community. He is now a welcome addition to the Kiddush, noshing and schmoozing as if he'd been with the congregation since its beginning as the Foothill Jewish Temple and Community Center.

"I do it because I love to, and I get paid just enough to make it worthwhile. But I always have my day job," says Mike genuinely in his affable, personable manner that puts you immediately at ease when you meet him.

The smile in his voice comes through even over a mobile phone driving through the canyons. "It is my way to give to the community and to help with community development." Though new to Shaarei Torah and not a resident of the San Gabriel Valley, Mike's comment provides the insight to why he accepted driving so far east to lead a service – it is a core value of his that appears as a theme throughout his life — we are all one Jewish community. Mike is committed to nurturing it and helping it grow where ever it leads him and in whatever way he can.

This theme along with his generosity of time and spirit are the keys to his long and successful career in fundraising as well, beginning as the Director of Resource Development for the Jewish Big Brothers Association/Camp Max Straus, where he more than tripled fundraising revenue during his six-year tenure. As a fundraiser, Mike also worked with United Cerebral Palsy, the Jewish Federation, and with Sinai Temple as its Director of Development.



Westchester. Mike led his musical service in the social hall. Soon, Mike's regulars swelled to more than 40 congregants. The congregation's spiritual leader, Rabbi Michael Beals, an observant Jew, requested the service end by 7:00 PM, as this type of service was a contradiction to his formal observance. Yet Rabbi Beals, an introspective and wise man, noted the crowd leaving as he was entering the synagogue, and sought council on how to reconcile his strict constructionist views and a musical service. He took to heart that he should not separate himself from his community and embraced Mike's brand of service, making one request – that Mike not tune his guitar or fix a string once it started — easy. And so Rabbi Beals accepted the less formal structure and went on to co-author the *siddur*, adding short, poignant teachings as transitions to the standard prayers.

The success of Light Up Shabbat grew and became Shabbat Together, the service Mike shares with other congregations. Shaarei Torah has Alice Shulman, a long-time member, to thank for Mike's monthly visits. Alice loved Light Up Shabbat when she experienced it at B'nai Tikvah. Because of her dogged persistence to find Mike two years later and her initial sponsorship, Mike now comes to Shaarei Torah. Congregants enjoyed his first service so much, many requested that Mike be a regular and offered to personally sponsor a musical Shabbat.

Should you want to experience Mike's musical talents in a more secular setting, he is a member of The Folk Collection, a three-part-harmony folk trio who pay tribute to songs made famous by The Kingston Trio, The Limelites, Peter Paul & Mary, and other great artists of the folk era. The shows are nostalgic entertainment and family-friendly, blending humor with their music, including an audience sing-along. Go to [www.TheFolkCollection.com](http://www.TheFolkCollection.com) for dates and venues as well as to hear some extraordinary harmonies!

Mike's current "day job" draws upon his

extensive network within the greater LA community, helping sell and manage a printing and architectural signage business. But go to his website, [www.msirota.com](http://www.msirota.com) and even there, his connection to the Jewish community can be seen in the photo of the signage for Cedars-Sinai Medical Center his company produced.

Mike lights up Shaarei Torah the third Friday of the month. In truth, he brings light and music where ever he goes.

***Everyone is invited to experience Mike Sirota's Shabbat Together service at Congregation Shaarei Torah beginning at 7:30 p.m. Check the listings in the Jewish Community News for exact dates or call 626-445-0810.***



**Sirota, second from right, with his singing group, The Folk Collection.**