

Play puts new spin on book of Ruth

By VICKIE BECK
of The Tampa Tribune

ST. PETERSBURG — Each generation continues to find its own ways to retell the stories of the Bible.

On Sunday, Congregation B'nai Israel will present the Florida premiere of "Your People Are Mine," a musical based on the book of Ruth.

The play was written by the Conservative synagogue's cantor, Shimon Gewirtz, and his sister, Gladys Hedaya, in the mid-1970s. Gewirtz, who lived in New York at the time, wrote the libretto and lyrics; Hedaya composed the music from her home in Israel. They corresponded by mail; the project took more than a year to complete.

When the play was finished, it was performed for several years in New York and in Jerusalem. The St. Petersburg performance will be the first since 1985.

The book of Ruth is read in the synagogue on holiday of Shavout, which, according to tradition, is the time God delivered the Ten Commandments. The connection between the two is Ruth's acceptance of the laws of Moses and her acceptance of the life of an Israelite, Gewirtz said.

In the story, Elimelech takes his wife, Naomi, and his two sons to Moab to escape the famine in Judah. The sons fall in love and marry the Moabite princesses Ruth and Orpah. The father and two sons eventually die, and Naomi prepares to return to Judah. Ruth returns with her, saying, "Your people are my people." Ruth eventually converts to Judaism and marries Boaz, explained Gewirtz.

"It's the first and only holy book that celebrates a woman's love and devotion. Acceptance is shown on several levels — Ruth's acceptance of her new way of life, and the people's acceptance of a



MARK GUSS/Tribune photo

Members of the Congregation B'nai Israel rehearse "Your People Are Mine," a musical that will be presented Sunday.

convert. It's the first time we have this," Gewirtz said.

The story is also one of the devotion between Naomi and Ruth, and the love between a man and woman. The story's universality can be felt by people of any religion, Gewirtz said.

"We tried to humanize and flesh out the characters in the book of Ruth, most of whom were only given a few lines in the Bible. What my sister and I tried to do is expand on the story with a variety of musical styles. The play is a cross between 'Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat' and 'Fiddler on the Roof,'" Gewirtz said.

Joy Katzen-Guthrie, cantorial soloist for Temple B'nai Israel in Clearwater, plays Naomi in the production.

"It's a really neat play with an

uplifting feeling about it. They've made the story a 'midrash' — a modern retelling of an ancient story — by adding more to it. Jewish scholars have often interpreted what might have been," Katzen-Guthrie said.

Music in the play covers an eclectic range of styles, including ballads, ensembles, comedy and some slightly rock numbers, without departing from a Biblical essence, Gewirtz said.

"People who love musical theater and comedy will enjoy it," he said.

The program will be presented in the new sanctuary of Congregation B'nai Israel, 300 58th St. N., at 7:45 p.m. Sunday. Tickets are \$15. For more information, call 381-4900.

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