

City Weekly

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Boston Neighborhoods

BEACON HILL

Going back to shul

By Jeff Adler

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Jonathan Kraft stepped up to the altar, and the crowd gathered at the old Vilna Shul fell silent. Those who knew the history of the place were eager to hear a grandson coming home.

Kraft, vice chairman of the New England Patriots, was speaking to Havurah on The Hill, a group of young Jewish professionals who recently started holding monthly "learning services" in Boston's only synagogue on the National Registry of Historic Places. Kraft's topic: how he integrates his Jewish values with managing a professional football team.

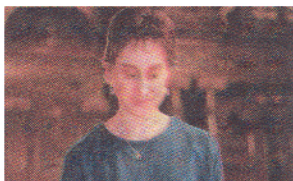
Old Testament teachings of perseverance have served him well, said Kraft, who keeps a kosher diet, especially when grappling with lo-

from the wrecking ball, and now Havurah on the Hill is infusing the aging temple with new life. Kraft's speech drew about 200 people, the most to walk through its doors for a service in almost two decades.

Havurah on The Hill began when two 27-year-

mail invitations circulated, and soon more than 100 people were praying and breaking bread in the synagogue.

To maintain a wide appeal, the organizers run what they call learning services, which they say are not exclusive to



'When you come in here, you immediately feel like you're a part of Jewish history. I think it's a way to connect to Judaism that's very tangible.'

AARON MANDELL, a founding member of Havurah on The Hill

Time dissolved those congregations, and the houses of worship were transformed into theaters and parking lots — except for Vilna Shul, which stands quietly among the red brick townhouses and gas lamps of Phillips Street.

Still, the old temple slowly deteriorated. For reasons no one now recalls, lavish decorations were whitewashed. Members drifted away, leaving behind broken windows and peeling paint.

The windows have been restored, and the building has a new roof and skylights. Yet there are holes in the walls, and the uneven floors sag. Mandell said he hopes Havurah on The Hill can raise some of the \$2 million needed to help the Boston Center for Jewish Heritage complete the restoration.

The young crowd that came to