

# Rabbi pilots school for problem teens

SUSAN BULBA

Norman Geller is a unique rabbi who has started a unique Jewish school in Maine.

Geller, known as the "flying rabbi," for many years piloted a small plane around Maine and northern New Hampshire, performing rabbinical functions for Jews in isolated communities.

This past fall, Geller launched Franklin Academy, a kosher residential school for teens with learning and emotional problems. The school opened in September with four students, and now has 12: nine boys and three girls, ranging in age from 11 to 18. A majority, but not all, are Jewish. They come from Maine, New Hampshire, New York, Baltimore, California—and two are from the North Shore. Geller expects to have 30 students enrolling by September.

"We try to provide an atmosphere that stimulates *menschlichkeit*," asserts Geller, a large man with an expansive personality reminiscent of Ernie Kovacs. "We're not a residential treatment center."

The school tries to reach students academically and emotionally through a warm, family-like atmosphere, taking advantage of the school's small size and the commitment of Geller and his wife Roz, who have a parenting relationship to the students.

There are six licensed teachers, and four part-time counselors on staff, along with a consultant psychiatrist, psychologist and social worker. There's also a constant flow of animals—dogs of every size, several ducks, geese, a rooster, a sheep and a pig, which are tended by the students.

The students live and learn in a large white building (converted from a former convent) in the tiny hamlet of Sabattus, Maine, between Lewiston and Lisbon Falls. Rabbi Geller's congregation, Beth Abraham, is located in nearby Auburn, and students who wish, attend Shab-

**Norman Geller—  
Head of Franklin Academy is farmer, zookeeper, pilot, rabbi, cantor, author, speech therapist, educator, policeman, dad, and more**



bat services there. The rabbi conducts a twice weekly "Humanities" discussion course through which he encourages students to bring values to bear on events at the school and in the world.

The school's regular curriculum includes math, English, history, science, computers and physical education. Students are instructed in groups or individually, according to need. Field trips range from movies and shopping at the mall to skiing, the aquarium, and a theatrical performance of "The Diary of Anne Frank" with a talk by a holocaust survivor.

Geller was inspired to create Franklin through his work as a consultant in speech and language as well as grief counseling at a residential treatment center in Maine, where a third of the students, he discovered, were Jewish. He decided there was a need for a less restrictive residential school with a Jewish orientation and kosher food.

Geller approached several potential investors, and found his "angel" in Lewis Arcidy of Manchester, N. H., owner of an electrical component firm. "Arcidy

liked the idea. He hopes it eventually will be profitable, but he wanted to do something to help kids."

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## The flying rabbi

Norman Geller has a background that is unusual even for a "flying rabbi."

Geller, 53, grew up in Boston, and trained as a speech therapist at Boston University and as a cantor. In 1966, he decided to leave, not only his South Shore cantor's post but all *Klei Kodesh*, holy work. However, he was persuaded to take a job just for the High Holidays at Congregation Beth Abraham in Auburn.

"For 21 years, Beth Abraham had had a rabbi who could sing," recalls Geller. When he came for the High Holidays, the congregation discovered that here "they had a cantor who could speak."

Geller moved his family, which includes two daughters and a son, to Maine, and stayed on as acting rabbi at Beth Abraham for four years. In 1970, he received his ordination at Yeshiva Chune David in Queens, "so they could call me a rabbi." He's been in Maine now for 21 years.

Along with speech therapy, flying and chazanut, Geller's accomplishments include the authorship of numerous children's books aimed at increasing understanding of spiritual issues. *Talk to God...I'll Get the Message*, the story of a boy whose grandfather dies, has been widely distributed by funeral homes as a tool for helping children understand death and dying. It comes in Protestant, Catholic and Jewish versions.

*I Don't Want to Visit Grandma Anymore* is designed to help children who have a grandparent in a nursing home. *It's Not the Jewish Christmas* helps Jewish and Christian children understand the differences in the nature of Christmas and Chanukah.

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located in nearby Auburn, and students who wish, attend Shabbat services in Manchester, N. H., owner of an electrical component firm. "Arcidy

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# 'Flying Rabbi' Straight from Maine

By Lawrence Harmon  
Advocate Staff

Rabbi Norman Geller of Congregation Beth Abraham in Auburn, Maine covers a lot of territory, literally and professionally. Geller, 50, is a spiritual leader, author, speech therapist and deputy sheriff with a penchant for white tuxedos and seaplanes, utilizing the latter to drop in on his far-flung congregants in the backwaters of the Pine Tree State.

Geller, who grew up in Dorchester, is now a confirmed 'country rabbi' who maintains a traditional Jewish environment for 325 families in the sister cities of Lewiston-Auburn and points beyond. "It's like being a rebbe back in the old days," says Geller who with his wife Rosamond headed north 19 years ago.

"We practice religion hands on," states the Rabbi. "There are things I'm called on to do up there that I'd never have done had I stayed in Massachusetts for six lifetimes."

No issue is too grand, or too menial, for the spiritual leader of Beth Abraham. The Gellers share in the most intimate details of their congregants' lives, from problem pregnancies or kids in trouble with the law, down to failed drivers' tests. Celebrations, like setbacks, are shared by the entire community.

Rosamond, a Mattapan native, explains that geographic limitations are unknown to her husband, who will pack up his pickup truck or rented seaplane with kosher food and utensils for distant congregants. "For a long time he operated on four hours sleep a night," she recalls.

Although Geller admits that his is one of only two families in the area which maintain strict dietary laws, he makes a special effort to ensure that all community-wide events and family celebrations in his domain are kosher. The commitment, he says, extends to entertainment. "I'll

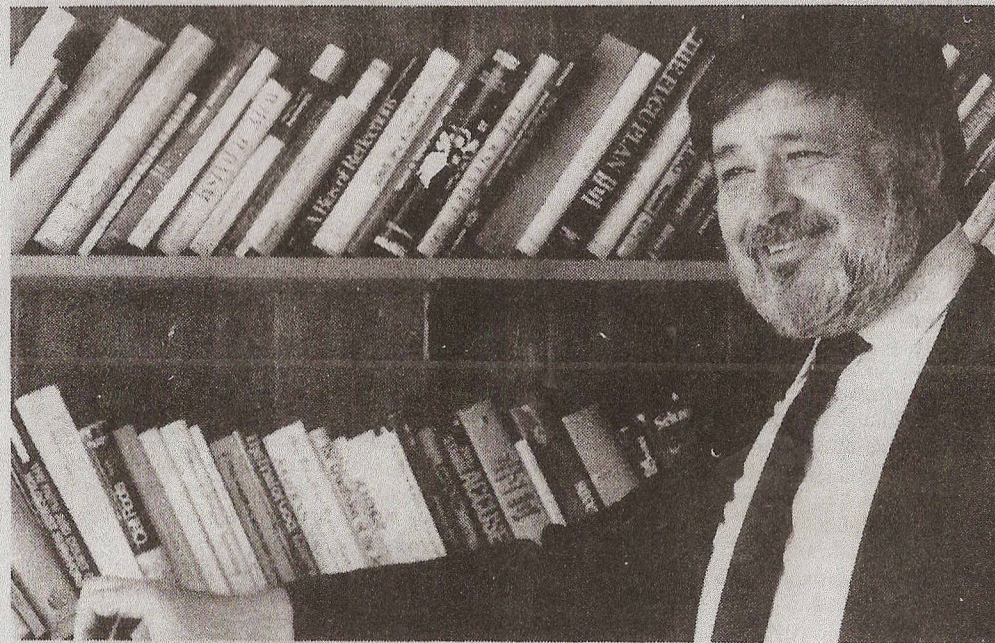
A former cantor at Temple Beth El in Quincy, Geller served his 'country' congregation for several years as 'unofficial rabbi' before receiving an Orthodox ordination in 1970. Services are, by and large, traditional, but the Geller touch is always apparent. "A few years ago I stopped wearing white robes at the High Holy Days," the Rabbi relates. "Now I rent a white tuxedo for *yom tov* and spend more time down on the floor with the people."

At Beth Abraham, the emphasis is on community-wide experiences, including group seders, winter carnivals and trips to Boston for plays and other cultural events. The congregation also maintains its own cemetery and chevra kadisha (burial society).

To dramatize his respect for his congregants, Rabbi Geller voluntarily cut his own salary for the last two years. "To me," he explains, "a rabbi is someone who serves *other* people." "I don't think you'll find a place like this anywhere else," adds Rosamond.

Upcountry Jews who are unable to come to the Auburn-Lewiston area might expect Rabbi Geller to literally drop in. Geller has been piloting light craft for a decade and utilizes planes for everything from bar mitzvah lessons to matchmaking. "It's pretty impressive when the rabbi comes flying in on a seaplane with his *sefer torah*," says Geller, whose 200-plus pounds distributed over his 6'2" frame makes him look more like a backwoods trapper than a clergyman. "I use the plane every chance I get," he adds. "It's my greatest source of therapy."

Rabbi Geller is convinced that there are many uncouneted Jews under Maine's forest canopy. 'Official' figures place the Pine Tree State's Jewish population at around 8,000. Geller, however, estimated the true figure may be as much as three



Rabbi Norman Geller of Auburn, Maine

Jews in Maine than anywhere I've seen," he states. Anti-Semitism, he adds, is negligible among the independent-minded citizens of Maine. "You'd have to look for it with a magnifying glass."

Geller, known locally as 'the flying rabbi', is both an accomplished author of children's books and practicing speech therapist. His books, including *David's Seder* and *Talk to God . . . I'll Get the Message*, which explains death and dying in children's terms, have sold almost 100,000 copies nation-wide. The book on death and dying was met with such acclaim, including an endorsement by the Funeral Directors of America, that it is now available in Jewish, Catholic and Protestant versions. His latest work, *This is Not the Jewish Christmas*, utilizes dialogue between children to ex-

Chanukah and Christmas.

Geller believes that he has the best pulpit of any rabbi in America. After suffering a heart attack last year, he examined his situation and determined that no other congregation could offer the sheer variety of experience and depth of feeling of Beth Abraham. The heart attack, says wife Roz, forced him to cut his work day back from 20 to 16 hours.

He admits, however, a fondness for his old Boston haunts, particularly now that his son David will be attending Brandeis in the fall. One daughter, Rachel, already works for the Newton school system and has been accepted at Harvard for graduate work. Daughter Anne is a music major at the University of New Hampshire.

"Some rabbis live with their bags packed," says the flying rabbi. "I've