Anyone who thinks Bob Dole is the only person with reason to worry about soccer moms should talk to Moshe Waldoks. The self-described Jewish gadfly from Newton worries about them, too.

What Waldoks frets about are the Jewish soccer moms -- and dads -- who take their children to play in youth games on Saturday mornings, the Jewish Sabbath, instead of to the synagogue.

"I often go out to groups and say, 'How many want your kids to be professional soccer players?' Of course, nobody raises their hand," says Waldoks. "Then I say, 'How many want them to be Jews at the end of the century?' Oh! Everyone raises their hand. So where's the investment? You're investing in soccer and you want your kids to be Jews? Something is wrong."

This is the kind of humor, along with a willingness to experiment, that the 47-year-old Waldoks has used for more than two decades in an effort to make Judaism accessible, to convert those he calls "unenthusiastic Jews" into enthusiastic ones.

He is co-editor, with writer William Novak, of "The Big Book of Jewish Humor," published in 1981 and now in its 19th printing. He leads a hugely popular Simchat Torah celebration at Temple Beth Shalom in Cambridge each fall. As many as 1,000 Jews come to dance in the street to celebrate the annual completion of the reading of the Five Books of Moses.

He lectures nationally on everything from Jewish humor to "the power of positive Judaism." He teaches every place from Northeastern University to private living rooms. He is a child of Holocaust survivors whose own quest -- and search for tools to reawaken Jewish spirituality -- led him everywhere from Jewish mysticism to Tibetan Buddhism.

He is a middle-aged New Age Jew. He spent his boyhood in Orthodox day schools in Brooklyn and years later found "a way to avoid becoming a rabbi" by earning a doctorate from Brandeis University in Eastern European Jewish intellectual history.

And now -- or, as some who know him would say, finally -- Moshe Waldoks has become a rabbi. Late last month, in a hall at Brandeis, before a crowd of 300 that one guest remarked contained "all the groovy Jews in Boston," Waldoks was ordained by three other rabbis who had served as his mentors.

Both the unconventional ceremony and the unconventional man are part of a wider search for personal and spiritual meaning within the ancient religion. The audience was diverse enough to include Combined Jewish Philanthropies chief Barry Shrage and Surya Das, the Jewish-born Tibetan Buddhist who teaches Lotus founder Mitchell Kapor. "What Moshe has," says Shrage, "is a compulsion to wake people up."
That compulsion drives Waldoks, at his Simchat Torah service, to sing traditional prayers to tunes like "Old Man River" and "Yankee Doodle Dandy." It drove him to be part of a group of eight Jewish rabbis and scholars invited to India by the Dalai Lama in 1990 to tell him how Judaism survived so many centuries in exile. It drives him, since his return from Dharamsala, to include deep breathing and other meditative exercises alongside the traditional holiday liturgy at the Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur services he leads at Newton's Temple Emanuel.

"It's a renewal for our whole generation who grew up with older rabbis and are looking for someone who can teach us Judaism and make us feel it in our hearts and souls," says Leonard Zakim, regional director of the Anti-Defamation League. "Moshe speaks with humor. He doesn't think meditation is strange. He really makes you feel."

"Moshe's approach," says Hebrew College president David Gordis, "may not be everybody's cup of tea, but I've never heard of anyone who doesn't like him. He's one of a kind. It wouldn't be wise to constrain him. He has to float free."

Waldoks, in his ideas about Judaism, may blend the traditional with the contemporary, but in appearance he is strictly Old World minus the black hat.

He has dark curly, slightly unkempt hair, a full beard, elfish eyes and a physique that suggests a scholar's, not an athlete's, life. He leavens his speech with Yiddish inflection and Yiddish words, and he uses his hands -- no, his arms -- to embellish what he says. His deep voice resonates when he raises it for emphasis or sings a service from the pulpit. He also speaks with a slight stutter. "If central casting were to order a rabbi, they'd call up Moshe Waldoks," says New York writer Shira Dicker, who reports on Jewish topics.

Mention Waldoks' name to anyone familiar with him and you will hear he is a funny guy. Whether he's telling an audience he's interested in the joys, not the "oys," of Judaism or regaling friends with his imitation of Sigmund Freud or, in a more solemn moment after visiting Auschwitz, standing on a table and telling jokes from the Jewish village life destroyed by the Nazis, Waldoks knows how to make people laugh.

Beyond the humor lies a mission to make Judaism inviting that is rooted in the idealism and rebellion of the 1960s. Waldoks is both product and messenger of a back-to-the-faith movement that comes from the left, not the right. He believes, for instance, that the inclusion of women in all aspects of the religion "is going to be as important to Judaism as the Talmud was."

"There's a tremendous thirst out there," Waldoks says. "It used to be we could talk about the alienated Jew. Back in the '50s. The Philip Roth, angst-ridden, mother-smothered Jews. We're so far from those ethnic stereotypical roots. Grandparents don't know anything. They don't speak with an accent. They don't speak Yiddish. So now it's not an issue of being alienated. It's an issue of being ill-informed."

After decades of wrestling with the idea of entering the rabbinate, Waldoks finally decided to become a rabbi after meeting the Dalai Lama. On the 20-hour flight home from New Delhi, his longtime mentor,
Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, charismatic leader of the so-called "Jewish renewal" movement, urged Waldoks to study with him for a private smicha, the Hebrew term for ordination.

"First I said, 'naw,' " Waldoks says. "What does it matter if I'm a rabbi?" Then I began to realize as part of the legacy of the trip that the job I have is not only to be an academic and a gadfly in Jewish life but also to connect with a lineage."

Waldoks considers himself a nondenominational Jew, neither Orthodox nor Conservative nor Reform. He is part of the Jewish renewal movement led by Schachter-Shalomi, once called the "zayde {grandfather} for the spiritually orphaned Jew." Like Schachter-Shalomi, who teaches at the Buddhist-founded Naropa Institute in Colorado, Waldoks explores elements of Eastern religion, music and dance, as well as Hasidism and mysticism, to infuse Jewish prayer with spirituality.

Waldoks has also been influenced by the populist havurah movement, a network of more than 1,000 informal worship groups around the country that began in Somerville in 1968 as an alternative to synagogues. The father of the havurah movement, Rabbi Arthur Green, now a Brandeis professor, is another of the rabbis who ordained Waldoks. From the third rabbi, Everett Gendler, retired chaplain of Phillips Academy in Andover, Waldoks explored the relationship between Judaism and ecology.

Waldoks brings to his rabbinate a personal journey that started in a displaced-persons camp in Germany and has wound through Brooklyn, Greenwich Village, Jerusalem and Dharamsala to Newton.

His parents, Polish immigrants who lost virtually their entire families to Auschwitz and the mobile death squads that preceded the Final Solution, met in the refugee camp after World War II. They came to the United States on July 4, 1949, and 13 days later -- a lucky number in Jewish numerology -- Waldoks was born. He lived in Toledo and St. Louis, then moved to New York at the age of 6.

At every Passover seder, Waldoks' mother wept for what she had lost. His father, a grocery store owner whose first wife and young daughter were among those killed in the Holocaust, was a bitter man given to yelling at Waldoks' mother about her homemaking and occasionally throwing things.

"It certainly was not Ward Cleaver's house," Waldoks says. "Whatever spirituality I have I attribute to my mother. She had a real sense of being here now, of enjoying the moment. She was a Buddhist in her own way."

In the Brooklyn school Waldoks attended as a child, most teachers, like his parents, were Holocaust survivors, and most classmates, like him, were children of survivors. It was an all-boys, Yiddish-speaking school where "the camaraderie was great" and where "we gave the rebbes trouble, but they really took us to heart." By high school, Waldoks was editing the yearbook and getting evicted from Talmud class for impertinence.

Then, in 1967, at 18, he had the "mind-altering experience" of riding five stops on the D train to Greenwich Village and New York University, where he studied for two years. It was Waldoks' first exposure to the secular world. He went to political demonstrations and "was introduced to mind expansion in many ways I won't go into." He became friends with an intermarried couple, a Catholic and
a Jew, and found himself "challenged that I had to accept them as people and not as caricatures." He took a course on the Jewish world of Jesus and was amazed to learn that "people could study text in a critical way."

Waldoks went to Jerusalem for his junior year abroad and confronted "the possibility of having Jewish identity without being Orthodox." He ended up staying three years and earned a bachelor's degree in Jewish thought from Hebrew University. He also dabbled in acting and considered a career in theater.

He moved to Boston in 1971 for graduate studies at Brandeis and in 1974, after another sojourn in Israel, became director of the Hillel chapter at Tufts University. There he met his wife, Anne, then a Tufts student. They now have three daughters.

Waldoks traces his own interest in the Hasidic elements of Jewish renewal to his drive to recover pieces of pre-war Polish Jewish culture and to "reconnect to the lives my parents had before the war." When he teaches courses on the Holocaust, his students inevitably grow impatient that it takes him so long to get to what he calls "the gruesome stuff."

"I was interested in looking for the life rather than looking at the Holocaust," he says. "It is very difficult to build anything on a process of destruction."

By the time Waldoks went to India he had already traveled far from the insular Jewish world of his childhood. He came back convinced that "the next step in Jewish life is the uncovering of Judaism as a path toward transformation." He finds himself davening, or praying, more often and taking on additional traditional practices.

"There's a beauty in a certain kind of routine one gets into," he says. "That's one thing I picked up in my exposure to Buddhism, where discipline is talked about with such great love. It's not seen as repression. It's seen as real liberation. There's a liberation in knowing what has to be done."

Waldoks has explored Jewish roots of meditation. He meditates, although his foot falls asleep when he attempts a lotus position, and he sits in a chair because he is not young or supple enough to sit on the floor. He expresses with a sigh what in Judaism is God's unpronounceable name. He spent an "absolutely profound" three days with 13 other rabbis in silent retreat at a Buddhist center in Barre, Vt. "Imagine," he says. "Rabbis not talking."

Waldoks also tries to build bridges back to Judaism for Jews who practice Buddhism.

"When people get spiritually awakened," he says, "it is easier to come to grips with the fact that maybe your tradition has value you didn't see when you only saw it as a manifestation of ethnic solidarity or family connection or, at worst, some burden that must be carried for the sake of not giving Hitler a posthumous victory. We have to strive for something higher."

If there is one thing Waldoks feels is crucial to Jewish revival, then it is the Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath that runs from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. Although Waldoks, unlike Orthodox Jews, will drive and use electricity on Shabbat, he doesn't shop or do laundry or cook or answer the telephone. He
may not be honoring the letter of Jewish law, he says, but he is honoring its spirit by making Shabbat a
day of rest, a time for prayer and reflection and family distinct from what he calls the "rat race" of
everyday life.

"Here we have this gift, this jewel," he says. "When we discussed Shabbat with the Dalai Lama, the
Buddhist teachers were knocked out. Wow! You have a 25-hour meditative period built into your
calendar? That's fantastic. We said, 'Well, we convinced you. Now we just have to convince the Jews.'

"Shabbat is a retreat in the best sense of the word. One retreats in order to re-energize. That's the
power of Shabbat. Without Shabbat I don't think we can be a Jewish community."

That, he says, is where youth soccer comes in. The challenge in a society where "Judaism has become a
leisure-time activity" is to "make synagogues so attractive they'd have a good chance against soccer."

Waldoks dreams of starting his own program of monthly Shabbat retreats. He would name it Nishmat
Hayyim, which means "breath of life" in Hebrew. It would be a place for Jews "to get a taste of the fact
that Shabbat can truly be a real departure."

Not surprisingly, the Shabbat service Waldoks plans to lead would differ radically from the norm, which,
in Conservative and Orthodox synagogues at least, is a Saturday-morning service that runs three hours
or more. To Waldoks, this feels like trying to "crowd everything in," so he has "this idea of elongating the
service throughout the entire day."

He would start, say, with half an hour of meditation, then do half an hour of chanting, of nigguns, which
are Jewish wordless tunes, and "deep voice stuff" with sounds that he calls "moving your vowels." When
he makes one short, traditional morning prayer last 10 minutes, Waldoks says, "You experience
something." The congregation would break to eat lunch together, then read and study the weekly Torah
portion in the afternoon.

"Moshe is on a different plane," says Lawrence Sternberg, associate director of Brandeis' Cohen Center
for Modern Jewish Studies. "In this New Age stuff he's way out ahead of the crowd. It's not about being
satisfied people come to Shabbat services. Something has to happen that's more magic than that."

Waldoks has tried some of his ideas in the urban Shabbat retreats he used to lead in Cambridge and at
the High Holiday services he conducts at the very mainstream Temple Emanuel, the largest Conservative
synagogue in New England.

In addition to leading breathing exercises as "a way to share the basic reality that you share with every
human being," Waldoks also encourages his congregants at Emanuel to stretch their arms heavenward
at a point in the service when tradition asks only for bouncing three times on tiptoes. Not everyone in
the room feels comfortable breathing along with Waldoks, but there's been no exodus and the service
remains oversubscribed.

"It is my style. What the Eastern religions know is, breathing and meditation really do free you up," says
Howard Cohn, who studies with Waldoks and is president of Beacon Residential Properties. "But there
are a lot of people who really feel they want to run out of the room. For some people it's like giving pork to the rabbi."

For centuries before the rise of the seminary in the mid-1800s, rabbis were ordained much the way Waldoks was last month, albeit not usually before 300 people. A rabbi would simply pass the title on to a student who had attained sufficient knowledge.

The moment of Waldoks' ordination came when the three rabbis, with Lawrence Kushner of Sudbury standing in for Schachter-Shalomi, wrapped Waldoks in a prayer shawl and placed their hands on his head. The audience recited in Hebrew the biblical verse in which Moses, at the command of God, the "source of the breath of all flesh," laid hands on Joshua.

Then Waldoks addressed the standing-room-only crowd. Jews, he said, are "obsessed with the Jewish past." They "worry about the Jewish future." Somewhere in all this anxiety, he said, "the Jewish now" is forgotten.

"I would like to dedicate the rest of my life to enthusiasm," he said. "Let's have fun together as Jews."

A rare way to be ordained

Although the practice of private ordination, of a rabbi granting what is called smicha to a pupil he deems ready, continues in some Orthodox Jewish communities, virtually all Reform and Conservative rabbis are now ordained in seminaries.

Two of the three rabbis who ordained Moshe Waldoks -- Rabbis Arthur Green and Everett Gendler -- have each ordained only one other private student. However, the third rabbi, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, has ordained nearly 60, including Tikkun magazine editor Michael Lerner, and has established a smicha program at the Aleph Center for Jewish Renewal in Philadelphia.

"The positives of private ordination are that we now have other options for Jews who have not found spiritual leadership from the major seminaries," says Jonathan Sarna, professor of American Jewish history at Brandeis University. "It's a negative in that it has the terrible potential of debasing the currency if anybody can basically find someone to ordain them."

Whatever hesitation some feel about private ordination in general, the audience at Waldoks' smicha included rabbis from synagogues in Newton, Brookline, Needham, Wayland, Sudbury, Revere and Everett as well as Barry Shrage, head of Boston's Combined Jewish Philanthropies.

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