

'A Wounded Congregation'

Beth Ami lets its rabbi go.

MICHAEL FREEDMAN STAFF WRITER

Although they praised his performance as a teacher and spiritual leader, the Beth Ami Congregation board of directors has decided not to renew Rabbi Lester Schwartz's contract.

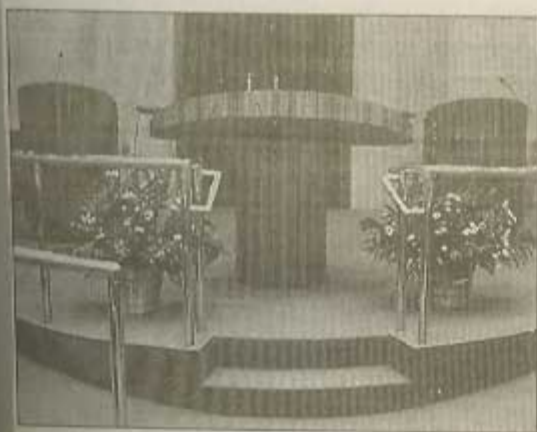
The decision was effective Jan. 16, but a replacement has not been found for the Boca Raton congregation, said Dr. Stanley Revesman, synagogue president.

Dr. Revesman declined to discuss the board's decision, but a draft of a letter to the congregation, dated Feb. 14, said the rabbi "appeared to avoid [some

Schwartz said, requires the board to give him a six-month notification if it intended not to renew. The rabbi claims he should receive compensation for that period.

The synagogue board contends it didn't offer a verbal contract and it doesn't owe the rabbi any money, said Kenneth Lipman, an attorney representing the synagogue.

"There was no contract made," said Mr. Lipman. "However, out of respect for him and appreciation for his service, it made what it believes to be an extremely gen-



Spiritual void: Beth Ami Congregation has decided not to renew its rabbi's contract.

congregants] during their times of trouble," and "the rabbi's relationship with our professional staff and lay leadership declined steadily over the years."

Rabbi Schwartz, who has served the 300-family Conservative synagogue since January 1994, said the accusations were unfounded and that he was surprised by the board's decision.

Rabbi Schwartz said he had been offered an oral agreement in July to renew the contract.

But in September he underwent an angioplasty and could not officiate at High Holy Day services. The congregation hired a substitute rabbi for those services, but worried about Rabbi Schwartz's health and the effect it would have on the synagogue, Rabbi Schwartz said.

"When I got back," he said, "things weren't the same any more."

In November, he said, a contractual question arose regarding disability insurance, but he thought it had been resolved. But on Dec. 3, he said, he was notified by the board that his contract would not be renewed.

The rabbi's health did not affect the board's decision, said board member Ben Kushner. "The board was well aware that he had been sick, but that was certainly not a factor in whether he was rehired or not."

The rabbi's contract, Rabbi

erous severance offer. Rabbi Schwartz has refused the offer."

Mr. Lipman declined to discuss the terms of the offer, but Rabbi Schwartz said the package is acceptable if it is given in one sum, rather than spreading it over six months as the board offered.

Rabbi Schwartz, who has no immediate professional plans, said he has received support from congregants, who were not consulted by the board during the decision-making process.

"When the board decided there was a need to remodel the sanctuary, they brought it to the membership at-large," said congregant Ivan Kenis, a former board member. "When the board decided there was an interest in egalitarian services they brought it to the membership at-large. When the board decided they didn't want to have the services of the rabbi, they did it without consulting the congregation."

But Sarah Sandler, a board member, said the board decided that "everything should remain on a very high level so that nobody would be hurt in the process."

The board's decision, however, caused a rift in the congregation, Rabbi Schwartz said. "It's a wounded congregation and a sad situation. It could've all been resolved easily. Unfortunately, too many people in that synagogue got hurt." □