

Final Service in old 249 Arch Street Building, February 2005
Rabbi Nina H. Mandel

In preparation for tonight, I spent several hours yesterday reading through the minutes of the Beth El Sisterhood from 1946-1961. In the early years, many of the names were unfamiliar to me: like Orkin, Shifkin and Simon, though one or two I recognized, Apfelbaum, Lev, Gedrich... As I kept reading, more familiar names began to emerge, people I never met but had certainly heard of: Markley, Fehr, Karniol, Steifel... and then as I ran out of things to read, the people I now think of as old friends made an appearance: Bernstein, Shane, Wolfberg, Weis. Reading through these 35 years of this congregation's history was such a sweet reminder of how strong the impulse is for Jews to come together and be a community.

So much has changed. I counted at least 10 rabbis: Rabbi Israelitin, Rabbi Griffil, Rabbi Vanderwalde (fixed up apartment for him), Rabbi Mond, Rabbi Harbater, Rabbi Intrator, Rabbi Weingarten, Rabbi Rackoff, and Rabbi Silverman

In Dec 1947: Mrs. Lev suggested that we appoint 4 women to help celebrate the Palestinian Victory.

1951 had trouble finding a new rabbi: most rabbis graduating from the seminary going into army as chaplains, couldn't send a new rabbi

1954: Table setting contest

Jan 10 1961: reported at board meeting that women now could have the right to vote in congregation.

Then again, some things were decidedly familiar: how to bolster attendance at services, how to raise more money, and concern about the condition of the kitchen.

But what struck me as the biggest difference was the role that synagogue life played for these women. This was their primary community and being part of sisterhood was a job for them. When someone got engaged, they hosted a party for her, they threw anniversary parties for members, they planted trees for people who died, sent packages to servicemen overseas and provided

free lifetime membership to sisterhood to any woman in the community who became a widow – at least until she remarried.

I often hear people say that these times thirty or 40 years ago in the synagogue were its heyday. I would suggest that it only felt that way because of the level of involvement people had – not because there were so many more members and certainly not because we had so much more money.

Today our members are committed to the synagogue and deeply involved in other committees, causes, and projects, not to mention working often more than full time, traveling to see children, parents or relatives on the other side of the country. We barely have time to remember our own anniversaries, no less those of our fellow congregants.

But I would say that the heyday of this community is right now. Despite all of the other distractions and demands on our time, we are still here tonight. Generations of Congregation Beth El members are represented: who had Bar/Bat mitzvah here? Married here? Named a child? Buried a loved one? Are raising children here? Expect to have a bar/bat mitzvah here?

Only a community in its heyday could embark on a Capital Campaign and can enter, with enthusiasm, the process of building a new building. We are about to do something that the folks in 1919 or 1946 or 1972 might never imagined: we are about to build dedicated Jewish space, from the ground up, in the Central Susquehanna Valley. As congregations around us have to close their doors, we are planting the seeds for new generations.

Give people the opportunity to share some of their memories about Congregation Beth El:

Believe it or not, the Torah portion this week, Terumah, is about the command to the Israelites to build a portable sanctuary to house the ten commandments during the time they are in the wilderness. The Torah offers minute details, which I'll pass on to our architects, on not only the dimensions of the sanctuary but what kinds of fabrics to use, which furs, how many golden rings and jeweled threads, and just how to construct the menorah and the cherubim that are essential parts of the sanctuary. All of this is, of course, portable, so that the Israelites will always have sacred space within their community.

So, if you think about it, we've got it good, the Israelites had to shlepp their sanctuary around in the wilderness for 40 years, we're only really looking at about 18 months (though so were they at first...)

But it is in the midst of all the details about HOW to build the sanctuary that we get the WHY: God says: Let them make me a sanctuary so that I may dwell within them.

The purpose of the sanctuary, the structure itself, is to have a tangible reminder of the covenant with God. The dwelling place of God is not in the building, but in the people. This is reiterated in the Haftarah for this week from I Kings which describes King Solomon building the Temple in Jerusalem. The portion ends with God saying to Solomon: With regard to this house you are building, if you follow my laws and observe my rules and faithfully keep my commandments, I will fulfill for you the promise that I gave to your father David: I will dwell among the children of Israel and I will never forsake my people Israel.

As Jews, we build sacred space in many ways, but we do it not to have a physical home, but to have a spiritual home – so that God may dwell among us. For almost 90 years, this building has been the tangible reminder for the members of Congregation Beth El of our covenant with God, and just as importantly, our covenant to the Jewish people. That does not end when this building comes down. It doesn't go into storage along with the bimahs and Torahs. Our connection to the covenant, to the people of Israel, and to God lives among us, as long as we come together as a community, wherever in the wilderness that might be.

May the One who bestows blessings upon us, continue to bless and keep us.
Chazak Chazak v'nitchazek.