

Key note address at the dedication of Temple Shalom, Naples, Fl, March 1, 1992, by Corbin A. Wyant, president and publisher of the Naples Daily News

When Irving Berzon invited me to take part in today's dedication, my thoughts turned to a dedication many years ago by a Jewish congregation that was to be very influential in my life. My home town is Kittanning, PA, northeast of Pittsburgh, and we lived on a street overlooking the Allegheny River just two doors from the Synagogue.

The Jewish congregation was typical of its time 50 years ago in small towns in the Northeast. Its members were prominent in the retail economy of the town, in the professions of the community, and in all the arts and cultural activities that a small town could support. Many of its sons were serving in the military during those years of World War II.

When materials were finally available after the war, the prosperous congregation built and dedicated a beautiful new Synagogue on the same site, and the instructional and recreational activities provided for Jewish youth at what we called Schul rivaled those of any house of worship in town.

The men and women of that congregation, many of them parents of my friends, were to play an important role in my career when after, college and military service, I returned to the staff of my father's newspaper in that community. Many of their businesses were counted among our major advertisers, and I understate the fact when I describe those men and women as my mentors, both in business and in community service.

Perhaps my most poignant memory of the congregation, however, goes back to the close of the war when they sponsored and brought to Kittanning from a concentration camp Rudy Rose, a young German Jew who was to become my friend of many years.

The son of a prosperous meat packing family in Hamburg, Rudy loved classical music, and he would tell me of skiing at the Zugschpitz, an experience I was finally to enjoy in recent years. Rudy told me about Kristallnacht when his families' stores were destroyed and then of the Gestapo coming to his home. They came first for his uncle, then for his father and finally for Rudy. Only Rudy survived.

Rudy didn't live long enough to know that a contemporary German politician in the 1980's has openly denied that the Holocaust ever happened nor to know that in the 1990's this distorted historical viewpoint has been held by a serious gubernatorial candidate in one of our own United States.

Rudy's death came too early for my children to remember him, but, at the first opportunity after the Berlin wall came down, I took my son to Auschwitz and Birkenau, concentration camps fastidiously preserved by the Poles. There, on the walls of a barracks in which thousands of Jews like Rudy lived briefly and died, my son read the prophetic words of the philosopher Santayana: "Those who forget history are bound to repeat it." My son will not soon forget.

I heard in recent years that membership in the Jewish Synagogue near my boyhood home had declined precipitously, that they no longer had a Rabbi and that, in fact, few Jews remained in the community. In driving into the town last year we were excited to see men building a booth in front of the Synagogue for a local folk festival, only to learn that the Methodist Church had purchased the building as a fellowship hall from the four remaining Jewish families in the congregation, and that it is now called Covenant Hall. Gratefully, the Torah still remains in the arc on the bima for the remnant, those heirs of the congregation who might return someday to worship there.

Perhaps the economic decline of that community only mirrors what has happened in a thousand communities like it in the northeastern rust belt where heavy industry has virtually died. I believe, however, that the lack of young Jewish leadership to replace those old families has much to do with the malaise that has impacted the community of my boyhood in its business and cultural life.

Another phenomenon eroded our Kittanning congregation. Few mixed marriages seemed to have occurred in the preceding generations, but co-mingling was largely complete by the end of the war. Neither Christians nor Jews would have it any other way then or now, but the outcome was inevitable. Fewer of my Jewish

friends married Jews. The philosophy toward family faith in mixed Jewish/Christian marriages seemed to be: "Let our children be exposed to both faiths, and when the time is right, let them choose."

I hope the experience in your family has been better than what I have observed. I have found that children reared without a strong commitment to either faith, Hebrew or Christian, rarely become adults with a deep commitment to either.

What's more, I find that this pattern has been repeated all over the nation and especially in the northeast. Young Jewish families have tended to leave small communities in favor of major metropolitan areas with the greater business, professional and cultural opportunities they offer.

As I considered this issue, I came across the words of Dr. Herbert March, a member of this congregation, writing in the Naples Daily News September. 23, 1973. The Jewish community was preparing to observe its new year, the most Holy of the Jewish Holidays, in the Hebrew calendar year of 5734.

"Jews are primarily an urban people," Dr. March wrote. "Originally they were farmers and nomadic shepherds. During the times when they were dispossessed from the Holy Land by invaders, they scattered throughout the world. Since they were forbidden to own land of their own, they grouped together in towns and cities for protection, for comfort, and to worship."

"So it has been in Naples," Dr. March went on to say. "When Naples grew from a small fishing village into a winter vacation resort and eventually into a year-round community, it then attracted the attention of the first Jewish family whose daughter, Susan Freschel, you heard from this afternoon. In time they were followed by other coreligionists, and a Jewish community had its beginning."

Perhaps our observation of the relationship of Jews to the community is best addressed in a reference in the Talmud that says that where Jews are active in the community, both they and the community will thrive. It reads: "Pray for the welfare of the community in

which you live, for in the peace thereof will you find peace."

"Pray for," from a Talmudic perspective, is an active admonition that means to pray for as well as to work for the peace and the welfare of the community. I believe the members of this Temple have been faithful in doing so for more than 27 years, and both you and the community have thrived and flourished. What a mutual blessing that has been for us as a small city in contrast to what has happened to so many small cities in the north.

To reflect on how it all came about, I dug into the morgue, the file of old copies of the Naples Daily News. William Freschell, from whose daughter we heard a few minutes ago, Gabriel Luff, and Joseph Gilman arrived in the 1950's, Freschell and Gilman opening what was known as the Old Trail Tavern in the 300 block of the trail, later known as the Anchor. Morris Keller, also among the early Jewish residents, opened a restaurant at the four corners. Evidently they followed the admonition of the Talmud to pray and work for the community, because the community prospered and grew. By the early '60's Jewish services were being held at the Golden Gate Country Club, later shifting to the Remuda Ranch and to the Citizens National Bank before moving to the Coast Federal Building.

Garson Dinaburg was the first president of the congregation after its charter was issued in 1965 and regularly led services. Other charter members in addition to the three already mentioned were: Ronald Adler, Jay Cohen, Joseph Glasser, Steven Kaufman, Bernard Prokjo, James Rasking, Julius Roberts, Arnold Rosen and Samuel Wiokur.

Irving Berzon, the youngest of these old timers, remembers thinking, on his arrival, that a congregation worshiping in a bank must surely be prosperous. What he didn't know was that the only cost involved was the \$25 fee for cleanup.

In February, 1973, the congregation under the leadership of president Joseph Weinfeld encountered resistance from neighborhood residents to a proposed

Jewish Community Center location on Diana Ave. near Naples High School. The objecting petitioners said they feared not the center, itself, but possible parking problems in the already congested area.

In July, 1973, the growing congregation of 59 families purchased the site on Pine Ridge Road for the future temple, a location that, at the time, must have seemed quite remote to Naples residents. When the center was completed in 1975, the congregation numbered 63 families.

Rabbi Abe Shusterman of Baltimore was driving through Naples in 1977, saw the Jewish Community Center sign, and decided to visit the facility. The visit was providential; he went on to serve the congregation as rabbi for six years.

It was a time of transition from the past to the present and to the future. It was a congregation mostly of retirees that was becoming a congregation of families and of children. It was a congregation by this time heavily rooted in the leadership of our community in the professions, in business, in the arts and in politics and government.

The admonition to pray and work for our community was carried to the extreme by members of this congregation who served with distinction in public office. Incumbent county commissioner Burt Saunders provides strong leadership on the commission and recently retired city councilmen Bill Barnett has dedicated seemingly limitless energy as a council member and as a volunteer serving the youth of this community. And who can ever forget Councilman Harry Rothchild who served honorably, loved a good controversy and kept things stirred up. Harry, wherever you are up in Heaven, regardless of what we said about you in those editorials, we still miss you.

And Irving Berzon, one of the pillars of this congregation, served Collier County with distinction for 12 years as county engineer, utilities manager and public works director.

On Rabbi Shusterman's retirement in 1983, Rabbi Mark Golub was called to service, followed by Rabbi Alan

Tuffs. Rabbi Seth Phillips was called by the congregation in 1989. Today, membership is 370 families that include 70 children enrolled in the religious school

And therein lies the challenge of this congregation.

What are you to do as Jews to secure for your children and grandchildren the faith of your fathers, the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? What will this temple mean to the future of our community? Will this congregation pray and work for the peace and welfare of the community and in that peace will its members find peace?

In part you have already answered those questions. Consider that many of you have probably already built temples back north during your working careers. You hardly needed the challenge to do so again. The old center might even have been adequate to serve the needs of the retired members of this congregation.

What you have built, on the other hand, will serve younger families who need more now and will need more in the future from this Temple. You have looked ahead for 25 years and have said: "we are going to make you participating members of this congregation."

But bricks and mortar are only the start. As you dedicate this temple today, let there be resolve that the religious life of this congregation be rededicated to serving God and to bringing the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to the children of this congregation.

You have followed well the precepts of Jeremiah who said in a letter to the Jews in Babylon in Chapter 29 of the Torah: "Build ye houses, settle down and be good citizens."

To you I say thank you, congratulations and Shalom.