

Beth Israel Center

It seems like 2 years ago that Jack Weiss called and suggested the possibility of a Jewish center here. Jim Weisberg reminded me recently that he was in my office as a patient in 1958 and he needed a shot. With the syringe in his arm, I asked, "Do you think we need a Jewish center here in the South Hills?" Jim replied that he was hardly in a position to disagree.

This House of Israel officially was chartered in February-March of 1959. The ground was purchased in the fall of 1960. Ground was broken for this house of Israel on June 3, 1962. Pictures of the ground breaking are available here today. You may find familiar faces.

This house of Israel, this home for all of us who have been members evokes many memories. The earliest days were memorable for the services at a church or churches and I believe, a Pleasant Hills firehall. Sunday school resided briefly at the YMCA in Pleasant Hills. We were certainly ecumenical from the beginning.

John Duker's cantorial voice resounded through those early years and for many years afterwards and was deeply appreciated.

In the meantime - mitten drinen - much discussion was held regarding by-laws, land purchase, building construction, and I'm sure, recruiting of members. Long nocturnal hours were spent on by-laws, hours and days were spent on discussion of what kind of building should we construct? a Butler building?, conventional stone? brick? cement block? Of course, being Jewish, there were few disagreements, and only a few opinions.

The early days were difficult, as were the many years to come. However, the difficulties were and are neutralized by the simcha of having our own home. We had an era of our very own rabbis. Enough said about that subject!

The histrionics of the rabbinical era could provide fuel and fodder for a novel, a non-fiction one that might not be believed. The members of our congregation who served on the religious committees, and who conducted services year after year deserve medals of Jewish honor and thanks from all of us.

Originally, we thought that the Pleasant Hills, Jefferson, Whitehall, Baldwin, South Park areas would fill with Jewish residents as other parts of the Pittsburgh area have. BIG we did not become. GOOD, we did become. We were an outpost for Judaism in an area rather devoid of a Jewish presence. We grew into an institution of liberal conservatism and pluralism.

This house of Israel has been a home for Jeannie, me and our children, and our extended family. Even though our children were exposed to and were part of other congregations this is where they felt at home.

Beth Israel Center is an important part of our house. We have the same relationship to this house of Israel as you all have had. We have ranged from happy occasions to deeply sad ones here at Beth Israel Center.

Jeannie and I have spent 40 of our 51 married years here. Sunday school was here for the children, Judy and David, as were a Bat Mitzvah and a Bar Mitzvah, too soon followed by confirmation and exodus into the adult years for Judy and David. Judy had the experience of having her Bat Mitzvah service piped over the telephone to a hospitalized rabbi. Our members stepped in to conduct the service and we had a memorable Bat Mitzvah. You all know the names of the wonderful people who kept our services vibrant through the years.

The joys at Beth Israel were abundant. The personal tragedies and sadness were equally present. The memorial plaques for our son David, Jeannie's parents and sisters, my parents and brother reside here. When our son, David died a distinguished memorial service was held here, organized by Joe Markowitz and many others. Estelle Weisberg spoke comfortingly to us. Ronna Rosenberg gave a loving eulogy as did our daughter, Judy and niece, Marjorie. The mist of psychic trauma and almost 7 years prevent me from offering other graphic details, but we knew that this congregational family and this house of Israel was giving us the emotional and religious support that we needed so desperately at that time.

I am from Jeannette, PA. When my parents died in 1970 and 1973, this House of Israel came first to my mother's home, then later to my brother's home to provide a minyan. In 1970 the rabbi coerced me, suddenly, to conduct the minyan service in my parents' home. This was a very interesting way to distract me from my own personal loss. Deja vu! It was like being a "chader bocher" again and the deep sadness lessened for a while.

Recently we the congregation had a mutual significant loss. Joe Markowitz was a real bona fide friend to me and many others. Among many other activities, Joe was also a charter member. I shall miss his company, intelligence and leadership. He honored me on the pulpit each Kol Nidre service by requesting that I hold his "torah" which was his honor for many years. Harvey Rosenberg at the same time usually managed to give me a torah cover or ornament that was dedicated to our parents and son. HOW NICE? HOW SATISFYING? to be associated with a house of Israel that cares? and that makes a house a home.

My personal reminiscences could go on and on but won't. In summary, Jeannie and I are delighted and fulfilled that this House of Israel was founded, chartered, and endured. The latter is a Jewish trait. the charter states that the organization is chartered for perpetuity. We are important to Jews everywhere. That we exist in this mostly Christian area is essential. That we stay as a beacon of fine, American-Jewish citizenry and religion is critical.

Too many small synagogues in small towns of America and even areas of big cities have disappeared. Let this House and Home of Israel live on and on. This House and Home deserves to do such.