

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD:

## MISHKAN SHALOM CELEBRATES 20 YEARS IN ROXBOROUGH

The weather forecast for January 6, 2002 was dismal: The temperatures would be rather mild for winter, but it was almost certain to rain – and rain hard -- at some point during the day. Mishkan Shalom's long-awaited traditional Torah procession to its new synagogue building threatened to be a soggy slog.

So, along with their blue knit caps and clip boards, the parade marshals packed up heavy lengths of plastic with which to cover the Torahs if, as predicted, it rained on our parade.

Nothing was going to dampen the exhilaration of a moment nearly 14 years in the making: after years of dreams, discussions, disappointments and delays, Mishkan would finally have a place to call its own. The building might have a mortgage, an overgrown jungle where a parking lot should be, furniture castoffs from restaurants and law offices -- and no air-conditioning -- but it would be ours.

From its founding in 1988, Mishkan Shalom had lived in rented space. It originally was housed in the classrooms and library of Stratford Friends School in Havertown, where congregants had to set up and take down folding chairs and rickety partitions as well as clean the classrooms and bathrooms. B'nai mitzvah were held in nearly every Quaker meetinghouse in the region as well as Unitarian churches and other facilities. The congregation could not provide a Jewish location to host speakers or events.

By 1995, Mishkan had spread out over three locations in Havertown, an untenable situation. In 1996, the congregation decamped to Chestnut Hill, holding the religious school classes at the Crefeld School and services at the church.

Chestnut Hill United Church was an unusually sensitive host. Mishkan prayerbooks were kept at the end of church pews (where the congregants sometimes leafed through them). The ark (that now rests in the chapel) stood in the church sanctuary directly opposite the altar.

In advance of Mishkan's arrival, a huge cross that had hung from the church ceiling was removed and the community had foregone a Christmas tree in the sanctuary. (Every Shabbat morning, Mishkan volunteers would arrive early to move the baptismal font out of the center aisle and remove a gold cross from the altar, then put everything back after the service. But more than once, the rabbis received phone calls on Sunday mornings wondering where the cross had gotten to.)

The clouds were heavy that morning as people from both faith communities crowded into the church on Germantown Avenue, taking up every available space on pews and floor to hear the Rev. Hal Taussig and Rev. Linda Noonan wish us well. Founding Rabbi Brian Walt noted the uncommon connection that had grown between the two communities. And then it was time to open the ark, chant the *Sh'ma* and take up the Torahs, carried first by Rabbi Brian, Rabbi Yael

Levy and Rabbi Erin Hirsh, the director of the religious school, then handed off to other members of the congregation.

As they walked, through Chestnut Hill and into West Mount Airy, they were greeted by well-wishers, including the clergy and several members of St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church. Marchers stopped at the houses of Mishkan members along the way to use restrooms and get something warm to drink.

Along the way, they sang, chatted, laughed and reflected on the complicated and often-difficult path to that moment.

Over 10 years, Mishkan members had looked at more than three dozen possible venues, and in 1995 actually bought a property in Upper Roxborough and drew up plans for renovations – only to lose it when a zoning variance was reversed on appeal (which turned out to be a blessing.)

Even after the purchase of the Freeland Avenue warehouse in 1998, the renovation process was subject to more than a few stops and starts. Hard decisions had to be made about what to finish and what to leave undone. At the same time, several iterations of a Capital Campaign raised an astonishing amount of money . . . and yet it was clear it would not be enough.

Still, that overcast day was beyond jubilant, full of faith, joy and most especially gratitude.

As the procession crossed the Walnut Lane Bridge onto Shurs Lane and into the upper parking lot, few people seemed at all tired. The crowd stopped at the door. Waiting in the sanctuary were clergy from the 35 Christian churches of Roxborough ready to welcome the neighborhood's first synagogue.

At the door, members Lance Laver and Walt Crimm, architects who had designed the space, held the Torahs, along with congregation President Susan Schewel. Rabbi Brian spoke this prayer through a bullhorn: "May we, our very lives, that which we do, be a prayer to God, to the Source of All. Bless us with abundant love, and with truth and with us being able to witness redemption in the world. And let us say, Amen."

The crowd sang "Mah Tovu," and the Torahs were carried over the threshold . . . just as the rain began. It had held off until we were safely home.

*-- Carol Towarnicky*