

## Rabbi's Report, 2013

The synagogue, as an institution, is over 2100 years-old. Its origins, some scholars surmise, reaches back to the days of the Macabbean revolt. Dissident Jews, who were upset with rampant corruption within the Jerusalem priesthood, gathered together in order to vent their anger and discuss alternatives. The word 'synagogue' is simply Greek for 'assembly hall.' The name reflects both the primary purpose of the institution – a *beit Knesset* – and the Hellenistic Greek culture that overlaid Jewish life in second century (BCE) Judea.

The synagogue was therefore the center of a hidden revolution that ultimately pushed the ancient biblical religion of Israel into becoming Judaism. The meeting place for revolutionary cells transformed itself in time to being the open location for the reading and preaching of Scripture. The remains of one of the oldest synagogues extant – on the top of the Dead Sea fortress Massada - includes an early form of an Ark, where sacred scrolls were kept. By then, the synagogue was about two centuries old, and yet it would still be a few decades before the institution of the rabbinate was established, and perhaps another century before the synagogue became the place for Jewish worship!

Nothing in Jewish history, with the exception of Torah, is more enduring than the synagogue. Both, moreover, entail the same characteristic that has ensured its endurance; that is the ability to change and adapt while preserving its essential core. One can best see the transformative nature of synagogues by a tour of New York City. You can find synagogues that includes pools, gyms and health clubs; synagogues that have theatrical auditoriums for stage productions; synagogues that house homeless shelters and soup kitchens; that contain pre-schools and Jewish day schools. And what unites these diverse structures and facilities? They all reflect the needs and wishes of Jews who choose to assemble.

I cannot guess what the needs and aspirations of Jews will be in a hundred or two-hundred years from now, but I am confident that it will be sustained in whole or part by synagogues.

For nearly 165 years, the Vassar Temple has been a part of this extraordinarily vibrant and enduring institution. While I have experienced only thirteen of those years, it is clear to me that this synagogue owes its continued existence to its constant willingness to change. This past year is a prime example.

Teaching has been an important focus of the synagogue for over two thousand years, and yet Vassar Temple has embarked on a number of initiatives that is transforming its educational offerings from primary school to adults. The change was signaled from the start with a new name: the Seth A. Erlebacher Religious School. Religious School Director **Joel Hoffman** further instituted a *Sababa Center*, a one-on-one or small group learning experience for students through the Religious School morning. Post Bar/Bat Mitzvah has been reorganized into *Gesher*, more than doubling involvement from the previous year. Ultimately, it will connect into a community-wide advanced Judaica program, principally joining with students from Temple Beth-El.

The most dramatic change is in the groundwork that has now been laid to better integrate Hebrew with general Jewish education. The Community Hebrew School in the JCC will be replaced by a stronger and more responsive mid-week/Sunday program at the Temple.

Adult Ed – Vassar’s Lifelong Jewish Learning – has been a constant source of creative response to the interest and needs of members of the congregation. This year’s courses have included poetry, theology, the Middle East and comparative Religion. Classes mostly well attended. Of particular note is that roughly 20% of the attendees come from outside the congregation. Vassar Temple has developed a reputation as a place for good quality and informative Jewish study.

Every year it is my privilege to name the Regulars: members of the congregation who make a point of attending a number of Vassar Temple’s offerings. They are deserving of recognition as the guarantors of Jewish knowledge and vibrancy from generation to generation:

**Joan Blanksteen, Martin & Elie Charwat, Linda Cantor, Doi Cohen, Harriet Fein, Allen & Susan Fink, Sam & Adriaan Finnerman, Neil Gould, Joel Kelson, Maury & Miriam Lacher, Matt & Muriel Lampell, Linda Lant, Lou & Candace Lewis, Elaine Lipschutz, Susan Needleman, Sheila Newman, Sid Plotkin, Bob Ritter, Jim Robinowitz, Ron Rosen, Ralph & Marian Schwartz, Murray & Mary Solomon, Gloria Turk, Melissa Wall.**

I particularly would like to acknowledge **Eleanor Pupko, Gil Seligman, Marty Charwat, Kristy Grimes, Mollie Katz, Linda Cantor, Sid Plotkin, Didi Barrett, Mary Solomon, Marian Schwartz** who extended their time and expertise in order to make presentations for Adult Ed, and for the special Vassar Temple Shabbat programs. Finally, to **Susan Needleman** who managed the Thursday

evening courses with diligence and enthusiasm.

Jews have been going into the synagogue for the purposes of worship for perhaps 1800 years. Services sometime seem to be among the most fixed experiences in the synagogue, and there is certainly some truth to this contention. Worship works best when the worshippers feel most comfortable. This attitude is generally helped by a certain amount of consistency and continuity; a sense that you know just what to expect when you enter the sanctuary for prayer. Even so, changes abound.

There are always small adjustments, particularly in the melodies we sing. Among the more significant changes, however, took place during a service that was held in the Social Hall rather than the sanctuary, and while the congregants were seated for dinner. At that time, we initiated the use of *Visual T'fila*. Instead of prayerbooks, the prayers were projected on a screen. I look forward to increasing use of this innovation.

\* \* \*

The Rabbi's Report, I believe, should dwell far less on the past year, but rather engage – modestly at most – in the future. Before doing so, I would wish to acknowledge a few individuals.

I extend my warmest thanks and praise to **Susan Karnes Hecht** and **Richard & Marsha Lowry**, recipients this year of the Arnold and Founders' Awards. In truth, the congregation is filled with members who give generously of their time, energies and expertise. Susan (along with David), Marsha and Richard are exemplars of the sort *shoene Yid* who ensure a vibrant and compassionate synagogue.

Appreciation must especially go to **Andi Ciminello**, **Jen Danhart** and to the **Finance Committee** chaired by **Brian Silverman**. As recently as fifteen years ago, a healthy congregation was supposed to rely on members dues and fees for about 85% of its annual operating budget. The remaining 15% principally acted as a cushion, as dues could never be predicted with absolute certainty. The high percentage also reflected the fact that most congregations enjoined a certain stability, or even modest growth, in both numbers and financial means. Much has changed since the 90s.

Increasingly over the last decade, the share of an operating budget relying on dues has dropped. Alternative methods of insuring revenue have had to be employed. Thus, there is greater pressure and greater responsibility to be placed upon those in the congregation who care for its financial wellbeing. Jen and Andi promoted and managed a successful campaign that launched the *Hineni Fund*, while Brian and the Committee have been diligent and creative in crafting a responsible financial management plan for the congregation.

The underlying purpose for these acknowledgments is not merely in content, but more in method. Vassar Temple's future success is to be found precisely in the nimbleness, creativity and dedication of its members. For its entire history, the congregation has had the good fortune – and the concomitant challenge – of being on the margin. In 1848, it was the Jewishly virgin territory between the communities in New York City and Albany. Today, it is the edge between a metropolitan area and exurbia; between large and small; between sources of great wealth and a community scrambling to get by.

The synagogue is not weighed by a corporate bureaucracy nor without resources in order to make choices. It cannot look toward a future of profound growth, but it can be confident that there will be a Jewish future in Dutchess County. In this in-between space, Vassar Temple has the opportunity to be experimental in its programming and in its funding.

All it takes is something the congregation has been exhibiting for a while: a measure of trust. Congregants with the welfare of the synagogue – and by extension, the Jewish and larger community – in mind, need to be trusted to act on their instincts and ideas. The benefits are great in the case of a successful, and the loss, for the most part, is small in case of failure.

Susan, Richard, Marsha, Andi, Jen and Brian represent an attitude and spirit that assures the continuity of Vassar Temple as a premier institution for a living Judaism in the Hudson Valley. Their example is replicated by dozens of other congregants, some in leadership, some just doing 'their thing.' If anything, the synagogue must find more ways to nourish and further this spirit.

Best wishes to all for a healthy and spiritually rich 5774.

Submitted by  
Rabbi Paul Golomb

13 Sivan, 5773