

Young Jewish Community in Leesburg

Although there have been Jewish people living in Loudoun County since 1757 (records show as early as 1843), none have come together to build a synagogue. Between the years 1977-1978, several families met to form a Jewish community in Leesburg and, hopefully, a synagogue. However, after 1978, many families left to join the new Beth Emeth synagogue in Herndon and the small group fell apart.

The Jewish Community Comes Together

In the late summer of 1989, Mr. Sid Lissner had an idea. Why not try to get Jewish Loudoun families together? He sat down and wrote a press release and sent it off to local newspapers. When it was published, his phone became very busy with interested folks. These were Jewish folks who were eager *not* to drive to Herndon or Winchester, or even Fredrick, Maryland, to worship and/or educate their children.

The small group of families who responded became a havurah of a Leesburg Jewish community. On June 8, 1996, at the Woods Recreation Center in Ashburn Village, the group held a general organizational meeting to form the Loudoun Jewish Community. Religious services were then held at the Simpson Middle School in Leesburg, with the help of Julie Kozlow-Poyo as the “resident *shaliach tzibbur*” [the one who represents the congregation in prayer]. Julie had a very special rabbinic trait: she was always excited to tell you about Judaism! A service led by Julie was like watching a child discover the universe! Later that year these services were moved to the Farmwell Station Middle School in Ashburn Village and the Sunday School started on October, 1996 at the Sugerland Run Community Center.

In January 1997, *The Bulletin* (the congregation’s newsletter) announced, “As of this date, the Loudoun Jewish Community will be known as the Loudoun Jewish Congregation” (LJC). The members worked hard to make the congregation a viable, legal entity. They had to generate By-Laws, a Constitution, and hold elections. (Until this point, a Steering Committee or Ellen Kane, Joe Levine, Sid Lissner, Janice Pittleman, and Burt Roberts, was managing affairs. There were many financial and legal details to be resolved in order to gain a non-profit status!

On February 14, 1997, the congregation held its first service at St. David’s Episcopal Church in Ashburn thanks to Father Stephen McWhorter, the vicar, who contacted LJC in mid-December to offer the use of his church’s new facilities. LJC was given the use of St. David’s large and contemporary worship hall and was allowed to display LJC signage to St. David’s signpost.

The April 1997 *Bulletin* published the new leadership—Interim President: Margie Oliver, the Interim Vice President, Sid Lissner, the Interim Treasurer, Eric Weissman and the Interim Secretary, Faith Shoup. The newsletter stated “Loudoun Jewish Congregation’s seven core values as: LJC is independent and unaffiliated; LJC is inclusive; LJC is egalitarian; LJC welcomes the entire family; LJC events will be kosher; LJC will do no congregational business on Shabbat; and each family has one vote.”

During 1997, the congregation rented a store-front, industrial space at 10 Cardinal Park, in Leesburg. The facility had one very large room (fondly referred to as the Great Hall), a kitchen, three classrooms and a small office. Shabbat services, holidays and life cycle events continued to be celebrated by lay-leaders, but when possible, part-time rabbis were hired. The small group began to grow.

During her President’s High Holy Days (1998) speech to the congregation, Margie Oliver announced that Loudoun Jewish Congregation had received a very generous donation of \$2 million from Mr. Irwin Uran. She told the stunned audience that Mr. Uran donated the funds to LJC for the sole purpose of purchasing land and building a synagogue and a religious school. It was Mr. Uran’s hope that others will feel motivated to donate to their Jewish community as well. The *Bulletin* quotes Margie:

“Donations may come in all forms and we cannot let this wonderful donation fool us into thinking that our work is done for us. Our work has just begun and there is a lot of work to do! We must all give, whether it be [SIC] with our time or our money. These are exciting times for LJC. Please come be a part. Invest of yourselves. LJC needs you—LJC wants you. There are many different doors to a synagogue. Find the door you want to come through, open the door and step in. We’ll be waiting and eager to welcome!”

The Ritual Committee announced that same month of the acquisition of a Torah scroll, on loan from the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. Also reported was the purchase of the new *Siddur Sim Shalom* prayer books that featured gender-sensitive language, Shabbat and holiday home rituals, with increased use of transliteration.

In May, 1999, Sid Lissner was elected president, followed by Michael Simon in May, 2000 and Perry Immerman in 2002. These elections that also included of the Board of Directors, Trustees and many chairpersons continued to help the small congregation thrive.

The years of Shabbats, celebrations of holidays (major and minor), bar and bat mitzvahs of our children, many births and, sadly, a passing of a beloved member, were experienced and recorded for prosperity in the congregation's newsletter.

May 2004, brought a rousing *Yasher Koach!* (Hebrew: "high-five") to the B'Not Adult Mitzvah Class of 2004. Our congregation's very first. Eight marvelous women were honored as they were surrounded by family and friends to mark the auspicious occasion.

The Rabbis We Have Known

Rabbinic student Ilan Glazer led the High Holy Day services for incoming year of 5758 (1998) were held at the historic Carradoc Hall managed by Ramada Inn (now managed by Holiday Inn). His youth and energy was very evident, right down to his tie that sported dinosaurs!

High Holy Day Services in 1999 (5759) were led by Robert Judd, a student from the University of Judaism and hired for the services. The young student would fly in to Dulles airport once a month from his California campus to lead services. Often he was able to drive up to Pennsylvania on Sundays to visit with his family.

High Holy Days, 5761 (2001), Rabbi Michael Meyerstein, of Baltimore MD, was hired to perform services. His wife, Hadassah and their grown children joined the congregation. Rabbi Meyerstein continued his work with monthly Shabbat services until March 2002.

Rabbinic intern, Jason Miller became a part of the LJC family in August, 2003. Rabbi Miller was a fifth year rabbinic student at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS). It was through the Gladstein Family Fellowship that we were able to obtain his services. The program had Rabbi Miler working at Agudath Israel of West Essex, Caldwell, New Jersey and for one weekend a month, be with us. He and his wife, Elissa, gave birth to Josh in February 2004.

With the coming of the Jewish New Year 2004 (5764), came the good fortune of another rabbinic intern. Rabbi Ilana C. Garber was sent to us, again through the Gladstein Family Fellowship. And like Rabbi Miller, Rabbi Garber also worked at Agudath Israel while finishing her rabbinic studies at JTS. Ms. Garber hailed from Brookline, Massachusetts and was ready to educate any and all that women are very prominent in Jewish life, ritual, and the rabbinic!

The Acquisition of Permanence

A Land Search Committee was formed in October 1998. Theirs was not an easy task. Mr. Uran specifically requested that the new synagogue have a Leesburg zip code. Several locations were sought after and for one reason or another, our offer was not accepted.

A 9.3-acre Evergreen Mill parcel of land was found in 2000; a purchase was subject to a 90-day evaluation period and was signed in December 2000. A study for the suitability began in January 2001. The property for this site of the new synagogue was finally purchased in March 2001. Traffic studies were undertaken and that information was forwarded to the [county] Planning Office. An architect was selected to do a program analysis and define the parameters of the project. The program was drafted in the spring of 2001. (A Special Exception effort began in 2001, with a preliminary conference on December 19, 2001.)

A ceremonial Groundbreaking took place on Sunday, April 28, 2001 and was attended by many local officials. Included were Scott K. York, Eleanor C. Towne, Chuck Harris, Mark R. Herring, Mayor of Leesburg, B. J. Webb and former Mayor Jim Clem. A temporary 36" x 48" sign was erected on the site that same day.

Active work for preparing all the documentation for the Special Exception to build a synagogue on that property began in August 2002.

A 48" x 96" temporary sign was erected on the property to replace the earlier, smaller, less durable sign, on September 17, 2002. It stated, "The Future Home of the Loudoun Jewish Congregation." The purpose of the sign was to let the community know the plans for the site and as well to offer Jews in the community, and elsewhere, a chance to identify with and join LJC.

Five visits to the Planning Office, as well as visits to other departments, took place between August and October of 2002, in preparation for the Special Exception submission.

On November 16, 2002, the congregation submitted their Special Exception application to the Planning Office for review. The Planning Office asked LJC to withhold their application until the new zoning ordinance was approved (scheduled for mid-December), informing the congregation that the guidelines which it was working under, a Special Exception for the synagogue of a size less than 300 seats would not be required by the new zoning law.

December 2002 *Bulletin* announced, "Board of Directors, based on review and recommendation of the Architect Search Committee, chose Dan Tully as architect for our new building." Articles in March of 2003 reported that Mr. Tully has "created

several alternate floor plans based on the extensive input received from members of the congregation, the Board, various committees and even our Religious School students.”

The Building Committee reported in May, 2003, “The LJC Board approved a Hexagonal design with a unique inverted roof structure.” And continued, “With the maze of County approvals to navigate we have a goal of obtaining a Building Permit within the next three months. This will allow us to start construction by mid summer and have the structure ‘closed in’ before the difficult winter weather.” That same month, the Loudoun County Planning Commission voted to support Loudoun Jewish Congregation’s request for a special exception to build a synagogue on Evergreen Mill Road. Approximately 30 LJC member-families attended the Planning Commission meeting. One commissioner expressed surprise at the size of the group because she was not aware there “where this many Jews living in Loudoun County.”

“On October 12, the concrete foundation wall was poured for the lower level of the south pod and the wood forms were completed for the north pod,” reported the November 2003 *Bulletin*. Great detail about these long and intense processes was reported to our membership so that all was kept up to date with the construction.

Through the winter months, despite the challenging weather conditions, the construction was progressing. An invitation to tour the new site was announced for March or April. In May, 2004, the membership learned that all the exterior walls were erected as well as the three hyperbolic roofs and corridor roofs. Crews started working on the interiors. Mr. Tully was “unofficially optimistic that we’ll be able to celebrate Rosh Hashanah in our new shul [Yiddish: synagogue].” The *Bulletin* was stuffed with photos.

The Culmination of a Shul’s Efforts

Summer 2004 did not see any slowing down of activities for our shul. The congregation voted to take a Hebrew name. LJC became Congregation Sha’are Shalom. Newly elected president, Barry Member, reinforced for all that our synagogue is a truly a *beit tefilah* (house of prayer), a *beit midrash* (house of study) and a *beit kenmeset* (house of meeting/community).

The Jewish New Year greeted the congregation in the nearly completed new synagogue building. On September 12, 2004, approximately 40 families walked the sacred torahs from Cardinal Park to Evergreen Mill Road. In a special ceremony directed by Debbie Immerman, Mr. Uran ceremoniously hung a mezuzah by the front door. The press took pictures and quoted many who choked back the tears. At long last, the small Jewish community had its synagogue. The first in the 247 year existence of Loudoun County, a synagogue and its people have found a home.