

Rabbi Ed Elkin: Some thoughts on The Narayever's Building Needs (January 2015)

The Narayever has a heritage building that is cherished by its membership for its intimacy, simplicity, modesty, and beauty. However, as we enter our second century, there are several key ways in which our building limits what we are able to achieve as a community.

It's important to note that we are not aspiring to become a big shul. We cherish the warmth that goes along with being a small-ish shul. Our goal is to grow, slowly, over the coming years both because we believe that we have something important to share with members of the Jewish community who are open to our traditional-egalitarian, participatory approach, and because an expanding membership will provide a solid financial basis to support our work as a community.

In order to maintain our current membership, in order to grow modestly, and in order to live up to our highest values of inclusion as a community, we must make modifications to our building. This project is not about a so-called "edifice complex". We must make our building accessible to those with disabilities, we must have adequate spaces to run our children's programs, and we must have a proper office for our rabbi.

Taken together, these changes would represent a dramatic affirmation of the faith our congregation has in its own future.

Accessibility

Looking to the future, we must find a way to ensure that people in wheelchairs or have mobility impairments have a dignified way to enter our building, participate in services and other programs, and access the washrooms. The time is now.

Our shul is inaccessible to the mobility impaired. There is one step up from the outside into the foyer, six steps up from the foyer to the sanctuary level, and six steps down from the foyer to the basement level, where meals are served and where the washrooms are located. These steps are easily mounted by the able-bodied, but pose either a difficult or insurmountable hurdle to those with mobility impairments. Time and again, we have witnessed members and guests struggling to get up and down those stairs. Even more painfully, it has come to our attention that several of our members have stopped attending shul because they simply cannot deal with the stairs. Some of our families are not able to invite certain guests to their simhas at the shul because they would not be able to enter the building. In

the 21st century, there is simply no excuse for a public building to be inaccessible to those with disabilities. Our society has developed to the point where such access to public spaces is considered a fundamental right. Our Jewish values in particular emphasize inclusion of all members of our community, to the very best of our ability, and our current building to the contrary excludes those who are mobility impaired. As society ages, more and more of our members, potential members, and visitors will face this issue.

Space for Children's Programming

Our future as a shul depends on maintaining and growing our children's programming. We can only do so if we have more distinct, flexible, spaces in which kids of various ages can participate in our programming with a minimum of distraction.

The Narayever is blessed with a membership that includes many young families. These families bring a vibrancy and energy to our shul that is the envy of many other congregations in the GTA. They are our future. We have long recognized that we must provide appropriate programming for our young people of various ages in order to draw these young families to shul on Shabbat and holidays. Currently, the spaces we have available to us for children's programming are

- a) The basement. This is an extremely difficult space to hold programming in because it is so multipurpose. For example, during services, kiddush lunch is being prepared and set out, providing a very challenging distraction for the kids. As well, many members and visitors use the basement as a lounge during services, creating a din that is very difficult to control and which disturbs the program. We use the basement for both our babysitting and our Shabbat Beyahad service and program for kids up to age 7. It has sometimes proven difficult to keep kids in the program when they see the babysitting with its toys just a few steps away on the other side of the room.
- b) The back office. This space works well when only a handful of kids come. On busier days, it becomes very crowded – and every time a child or adult opens the door to the sanctuary, the noise from the kids' room disturbs the service in the sanctuary. Also problematic is the fact that the only way to the solarium is through the back office, so kids and adults coming and going to/from the solarium are very distracting for participants in that program.
- c) The solarium. This room can work well for small groups, but because storage space is so limited at the shul,.

In order to conduct more effective children's programming, we must have more discrete spaces in the shul dedicated to this purpose, spaces in which distractions are minimized.

Adult Programming

A positive by-product of the new spaces will be additional opportunities for speakers, classes, and davening.

Right now, spaces available for adult programming, such as classes and alternate services, are quite limited. We manage, and we would not be undertaking this project solely for the sake of creating such spaces. However we envision enormous benefits to adult programming opportunities once more space becomes available.

A Rabbi's Study

It is time for the shul to have an appropriate study for its spiritual leader.

When the shul hired a full time rabbi for the first time in the year 2000, it became clear that the building's lack of a rabbi's study would have to be addressed. For the first year after I arrived, the shul rented me an office near Yonge and Eglinton. When I bought my house on Lippincott, I moved my office there. That's where I keep my desk, computer, files, and books. However, I have many appointments during the week and it is much more appropriate for me to meet people at the shul than in my home. Since there is no obvious space for this purpose, I improvise. I usually meet with people either in the sanctuary or in the solarium. Because of the traffic going through the sanctuary, and the lack of soundproofing in the solarium, neither space provides the kind of confidential, comfortable atmosphere that a rabbi's study should have in order to conduct the kind of sensitive, personal meetings rabbis often need to conduct. Moreover, when the time comes to find a successor for me, there is no guarantee that she or he will be in a position to have their office in their house. So if we don't do something about the building, the shul may once again have to find appropriate rental office space somewhere else – a far from ideal solution when we want to build people's connection to the shul. Our shul has grown to more than 600 members. There has been a full time rabbi for close to 15 years, and the shul intends to continue to have one in the future.