

RELIGION

At long last, Baltimore's two oldest Reform Jewish congregations are one

The merged assembly planned to install a rabbi, then start a celebration

BY JONATHAN M. PITTS

It has been an agonizingly long time since the members of Baltimore's two oldest Reform Jewish temples have been able to worship as well and as fully as they'd like.

Membership at Har Sinai Congregation and Temple Oheb Shalom dwindled for years, and with it their prospects for long-term survival. They considered merging five years ago, then talks moved forward in fits and starts. They united legally, then a pandemic hit.

Now the members of the nation's "newest and oldest Reform congregation," as its leadership team is calling it, are poised to celebrate their union and jumpstart a new chapter of Baltimore Jewish history. The nearly 500 families that make up Har Sinai-Oheb Shalom Congregation planned Friday to install their first rabbi, the internationally recognized scholar Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi, in a formal ceremony, followed by a celebratory dinner and family events.

The activities will kick off a month-long festival set to draw some of the biggest names in global Reform Judaism. Sabath says the festivities are designed as a dramatic statement of the spiritual and cultural heights to which the congregation aspires.

In the shorter term, those who have spent months ironing out the details of the merger, much of it as the coronavirus pandemic raged, sound thrilled just to see their efforts on the verge of paying off.

"It seems symbolic that we're experiencing this change in the weather from winter to springtime, and the restrictions around covid will hopefully continue to ease, and it's all creating such an optimistic, open feeling," says Abby Hoffman, a longtime Har Sinai member now serving as a vice president of the new congregation. "It's time to come together physically and on all levels and march forward."

With origins in 19th-century Germany, Reform Judaism is a progressive denomination of the 4,000-year-old Jewish faith, a branch whose believers place less emphasis on the religion's ritual aspects and more on what they see as its ethical imperatives.

Both Har Sinai and Temple Oheb Shalom helped make Reform Judaism part of the Ameri-



PHOTOS BY ULYSSES MUÑOZ/BALTIMORE SUN

LEFT: Rabbi Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi, left, congregation board member Katie Applefeld, Cantor Alexandra S. Fox and congregation president David Buchalter at Har Sinai-Oheb Shalom Congregation **ABOVE:** A sacred Torah scroll with a yad, or pointer.

can landscape. It was in Baltimore in 1842 that a group of German immigrants, frustrated with some of the practices of their Orthodox Jewish congregation, founded Har Sinai ("Mount Sinai"), the first congregation in the United States conceived around Reform prayer rites. Immigrants from Hungary and Czechoslovakia established Oheb Shalom ("Lovers of Peace") 11 years later.

Both quickly earned a name for social activism. Har Sinai's first rabbi, David Einhorn, incensed so many people with his antislavery views that he was forced to flee Baltimore, according to the new synagogue's website. Henrietta Szold, the daughter of one of Oheb Shalom's earliest rabbis, founded Hadassah, one of the world's largest Jewish service organizations.

As the decades passed, both congregations moved from their original homes to sites in Northwest Baltimore. They developed close ties as leaders marched during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and they co-sponsored a range of events and social services that lasted into this century.

Neither was immune, though, to the decline in interest in formal religion that has plagued American faith traditions over the past half-century. Membership at Har Sinai dropped from about 800 families in the late 1970s to about 325 five years ago. Oheb Shalom fell from about 1,000 families to 625 over roughly the same span.

Former Oheb Shalom President Mina Wender told The Baltimore Sun that her temple was operating "on a bare-bones budg-

et" in 2017 — the year congregational leaders began talking in earnest about the possibility of joining their histories. Those who worked on the merger say that though both sides shared a range of values and traditions, forging a union was challenging.

"Imagine a marriage involving lots of humans with years of history, personalities and traditions," says Katie Applefeld, a former Har Sinai member on the new congregation's board. "Mergers don't always succeed. It's hard, hard work."

we come together, but that didn't mean it would be easy," Applefeld says.

In 2019, the congregations set up a joint task force to address cultural and liturgical differences, explore common ground and develop a vision for the future.

Members of various ages, occupations and observance levels spent three months "hash[ing] out everything from basic bylaws to finances, what traditions we'd observe, which building we'd use, and what kind of clergy and staff setup we wanted to have," says

"It's time to come together physically and on all levels and march forward."

Abby Hoffman, longtime Har Sinai member now serving as a vice president of the new congregation

Congregational leaders had negotiated for months when allegations of sexual misconduct surfaced in 2018 against Oheb Shalom spiritual leader Steven M. Fink, who condemned them as false, according to The Sun's coverage.

The temple fired Fink, but not before Har Sinai leaders stepped away from the merger discussions. The Sun reported that Fink wasn't charged with a crime. Fink and Oheb Shalom ultimately reached a separation agreement. Merger talks resumed later that same year.

"We've believed for a long time that we'll be in a better position to thrive on the current landscape if

Mandee Heintl, a lifelong member of Oheb Shalom who served on the panel.

"We'd have dinner, and we'd sit there and argue it out, cry it out, cheer it out, just doing everything it takes to negotiate," Heintl says. "Everyone was committed to making it work."

Among the decisions: The new congregation made Oheb Shalom's building its home, less due to its architectural significance (it was designed in part by the Bauhaus pioneer Walter Gropius) than its more central location; Har Sinai comes first in the new name; Torah scrolls from both congregations are used, and photos of confirmation classes from

each congregation dating back to 1930 were hung side by side.

The sides signed an agreement of consolidation marking the legal merger. Two months later, Har Sinai congregants gathered up artifacts at their longtime temple in Owings Mills and took them on a nearly 8-mile march to their new home in Fallstaff in Northwest Baltimore. They were met by members of Oheb Shalom, and the group hammered traditional Jewish signposts, or mezuzas, from old Har Sinai to the doors of the "new" temple as shofars blew.

"Was it sad to walk out of the old building on Walnut? Of course," Hoffman says. "But walking along the road you became excited about where you were headed. If you want to get philosophical, the Jewish people have moved all through history, taking their stories with them. It was a monumental experience."

One change that brought no mixed emotions was the hiring of Sabath, a rabbi who temple leaders say has the kind of charisma, talent and enthusiasm that can inspire long-term success. A scholar of modern Jewish ethics and theology, Sabath earned her doctorate from the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, was vice president of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, and taught at Israeli and American campuses of Hebrew Union College.

She has also embraced a goal that the congregation's president, David Buchalter, says the search team shared with every candidate: that the new leader would not just build on the past, but inspire a unique future. Sabath's goals include building community through services and events, inspiring intellectual curiosity, promoting deeper learning about Judaism and Israel, and ensuring that the temple's scope of interest

includes local, regional and global concerns.

The "festival of installation" will include concerts, family services, the installation of Cantor Alexandra S. Fox, and even a pet blessing. It will also feature appearances by two Jewish figures Sabath has gotten to know through her work: Rabbi David Saperstein, the attorney and Jewish leader who served as U.S. ambassador at large for international religious freedom under President Barack Obama, and globally known author and human rights activist Natan Sharansky.

Saperstein is to appear three times on the weekend of June 3 — once to address a confirmation class, once to introduce the musical duo Kol B'Seder, and once to deliver an address on social justice. Sharansky, a Ukrainian native, will address the community on "Israel, world Jewry and the war in Ukraine" the following weekend. His talk will be open to the public.

Their appearances will inaugurate a speaker series expected to last at least through the end of the year, much of it focusing on the humane roles Judaism can play on the world stage. It's all in keeping with the inaugural rabbi's aspirations.

"The sky is the limit," Sabath says. "We have an opportunity to become truly the most inspiring, innovative, impactful congregation, not just in the community, but in the country."

For now, officials who have shepherded the union sound happy simply to have a time, place and occasion to gather in person to worship among old friends and make new ones. Heintl, for one, sees Friday's event as a major step.

"We've worked so hard to merge congregations," she says. "Everyone is ready to celebrate."

— Baltimore Sun