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CONGREGATION
SUKKAT SHALOM
Bulletin

Sukkat Shalom and Me: Our Journey Together by Rabbi Sam Gordon

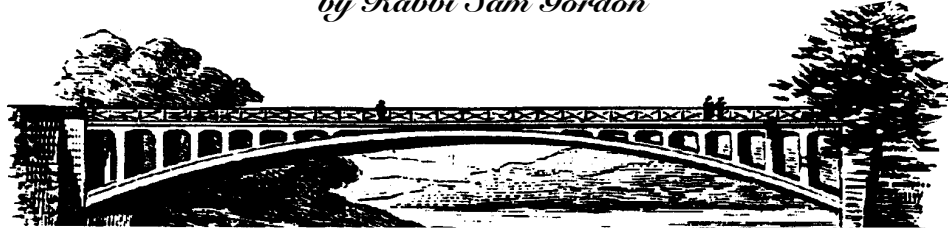
Congregation Sukkat Shalom stands today as a warm and welcoming spiritual home to a diverse faith community.

It may be useful to remember that its success as a thriving Jewish institution was not preordained. Instead, it emerged from controversy and a willingness to challenge conventional thinking. Our congregation is living testimony to the power of acceptance and inclusion. Here's the story:

I was ordained in 1980 and came to Chicago for my first job as an assistant rabbi at an established Reform congregation. Young rabbis were told at the time that no rabbis in Chicago officiated at intermarriages. I soon realized that wasn't true. There were at least three rabbis who officiated, but they weren't completely accepted as part of the Reform establishment.

I also saw that synagogues were operating according to post-World War II designs and were not responsive to the next generation. After my first year of rabbinical service, I decided to enroll at Northwestern's Kellogg School of Business, which had a program in not-for-profit management. I felt that synagogues, as well as the social service and community organizations of the Jewish world, required new leadership models.

I learned many things at Kellogg but, most of all, I was influenced by the idea of "responsive marketing." Rather than try-



ing to convince consumers of the value of the product, it was the marketer's job to understand the needs of the consumer and meet them with a response of value. I tried to translate that concept into the world of religion: Faith leaders should not try to convince people of how "true" our specific religion was. Rather, we should seek to understand what people need in their spiritual lives and try to provide it.

One of the great debates in the Jewish world at that time concerned intermarriage. The Jewish establishment saw the increasing prevalence of intermarriage as an existential crisis. They thought that when Jews married non-Jews they were rejecting and abandoning Judaism. To them, intermarriage equated to assimilation and the end of Jewish identity in that family. Jews who "married out" were failures. No one thought about those who were "marrying in."

I was a contrarian. I decided to officiate at intermarriages because I believed that people who were choosing a rabbi to officiate at their weddings were doing so for a reason: they wanted to have Judaism as part of their lives. They simply had fallen in love. They weren't rejecting

their heritage; the organized Jewish institutional world was rejecting them.

Now came the question of how

to put these ideas into practice. In the beginning, there was no congregation. It was just a small group of friends searching for a way to create meaningful spiritual lives, educate young children and celebrate together. Many of them, though not all, were intermarried. In searching for a spiritual home, the intermarried had not felt welcomed or embraced. All of us sought an alternative to the more traditional synagogues in the Chicago area.

We began to meet in living rooms, dens and kitchens to explore religious identity, marriage dynamics, child rearing and our core values. We hosted some remarkable guest speakers. While the adults engaged in conversations, children met for stories, music and games. Soon, word got around and others asked to join the group. By 1995, we had grown in numbers and

programming and I needed to devote more of my energy to this undertaking. We discussed our ideas for the future and chose to form a congregation.

"It was just a small group of friends searching for a way to create meaningful spiritual lives, educate young children and celebrate together."

Some basic values were shared: This would be an open congregation, not limiting membership on the basis of one's birth religion. All were welcome to explore their own sense of faith identity. No aspect of congregational life would be limited to those who were not officially

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Pandemic Leads Sukkat Shalom to Embrace New Social Justice Initiatives

by Rabbi Carlie Daniels

The past year of living through a pandemic has enabled many of us to see life through a new lens. Throughout this year, I have become even more aware of the severe discrepancies between the haves and have-nots in our community. Many people are hungry, in unstable housing situations and struggling to make ends meet.

One of the most important lessons taught repeatedly in the Torah and throughout Jewish tradition is that we must help the vulnerable, the poor, the orphan, the widow, and the stranger among us.

Last summer, I sat down with Adam Siegel, Sukkat Shalom board member and chair of the Social Justice Committee, to brainstorm on how we could refocus those efforts to make the greatest impact. Together, we decided to organize around four pillars: Economic Justice, Equal Justice for All, Environmental Stewardship, and Welcoming the Stranger: Immigration. Each of these missions is rooted in Jewish values, and we identified a Jewish text and explanation to support each pillar. (See chart, below)

With these areas in mind, Adam sought out members of Sukkat Shalom to spearhead each pillar. After quite a few one-on-one meetings with congregants, we successfully established a multi-



Congregants (from left) Brenda Werth, Eve Williams and Kathy Freedman celebrating a Covid shabbat outdoors with a Sukkat Shalom Shabbat Box.

generational group of dedicated leaders to help move our vision forward. In the fall, the co-leads identified potential educational programs, hands-on volunteer opportunities, and tzedakah initiatives to champion during the year.

continued

Sukkat Shalom Online Survey: What We Learned From You

The Sukkat Shalom Transition Committee recently conducted an online survey to guide our work in finding a successor to Rabbi Sam Gordon. The number of responses was very high and many also contained thoughtful comments.

We are heartened by your willingness to participate in the ongoing search for a new senior rabbi. Here is what you shared with us:

1. We are seriously invested in our faith community and fully committed to its future.
2. We have a keen sense of belonging, we feel connected and informed, and have built life-long friendships through the Sukkat Shalom community.
3. We value our culture of interfaith, inclusion, and diversity.
4. We enjoy celebrating Jewish holidays and life-cycle events together with joyful music and inspirational, thoughtful leadership.
5. We want to have a deep personal connection with our senior rabbi.
6. We prefer to attend many congregational activities in person but, at the same time, have appreciated our virtual connections during the pandemic and may continue to find meaning through them.
7. We are seeking a senior rabbi who cares deeply about people, who will forge personal relationships with each of us, and who will be there for us through times of need and celebration.

During the month of May, we will be facilitating virtual conversations with a cross-section of congregants to build on what we learned through the online survey. The views and opinions we obtain through these more in-depth discussions will be of tremendous value as we seek our new senior rabbi.

We will continue to keep you informed and engaged in this process to shape the future of our faith community.

New Social Justice Initiatives, cont'd

In the winter, these efforts came to fruition with wonderful programs and opportunities for the whole congregation:

- **The Equal Justice team** kicked off with a Purim donation/collection drive for WINGS, a local organization that helps survivors of domestic violence.
- **The Economic Justice team** partnered with Connections for the Homeless to provide meals to the residents at Connections in Evanston twice a month between April – June.
- **The Immigration team** stepped up to plan an informative program with HIAS and RefugeeOne to educate the community on the global refugee crisis.

- The teens who co-lead **the Environmental Stewardship team** created monthly challenges to encourage the community to take small steps to help the environment, with one lucky participant taking home a monthly Shabbat Box.

I am so grateful to Adam and our committed group of leaders who are thoughtfully providing our community with these opportunities to engage in *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world. If you are interested in learning more about upcoming Social Justice initiatives, or want to volunteer, please visit www.sukkatshalom.org/socialjustice.

Economic Justice	Equal Justice	Environmental Stewardship	Welcoming the Stranger: Immigration
Craig Caffarelli Brenda Werth	Missy Fleming Lesley Peters	Sammy Obel Annabel Miller Hannah Rothschild	Doug Fisher Darlene Zamansky
"If there is a needy person among you...do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kin. Rather, you must open your hand and lend whatever is sufficient to meet the need" (Deut. 15:7-10).	"You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kinsman, but incur no guilt because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself: I am the Eternal" (Leviticus 19: 17-18).	"Do not destroy My world, for if you do, there will be nobody after you to make it right again." (Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13).	"You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress them, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:20).
Judaism teaches that it is our responsibility to help the poor, disenfranchised, and the stranger among us. Together we can make a difference in our local community by supporting those experiencing food and housing insecurity.	Jewish tradition teaches that we must accept others without prejudice or bias. Together we can live out our values by engaging in learning about racial injustice and LGBTQ inequality and promote advocacy and action on behalf of policies that mitigate those inequalities.	The Torah teaches that human beings were created to care for and protect God's creations. Conserve and protect our environment through change in personal behavior, education, and action in our local and regional communities.	Jewish tradition places great importance on just treatment of immigrants. No less than 36 times, the Torah commands just treatment of strangers.

Sukkat Shalom and Me: Our Journey Together, cont'd

Jewish. All education would take place as a family, with parents and children learning together. There would be no set dues. Financial support would be based on donor generosity. This would be a place to share dynamic thought and ideas.

Our first High Holy Days services were held in the Wilmette Jr. High School (WJHS) auditorium. Marilyn Price had been leading the education program of the informal group and continued in that role. Judy Buckman joined the team as Executive Director shortly afterward. We were approximately 50 families in the beginning. Family School met in the WJHS cafeteria. Friday night worship most often was held in the all-purpose room of the Community Recreation Center, but we also used the Lakeview Center in Gillson Park and the Wilmette Women's Club.

We decided that we wanted to worship in sacred space. We approached First Congregational Church of Wilmette (FCCW) and its pastor, Rev. David Owens (of blessed memory), to open its doors to us. Our second High Holy Days services were held in that church. Our relationship soon went beyond that of mere renters. Rev. Owens, Rev. Stephanie Perdew and I began to offer joint courses in the Bible, early Christianity, Rabbinic Judaism, the Historical Jesus and many other topics.

When the Field Museum hosted an exhibition of the Dead Sea Scrolls, our two congregations joined together to offer a series of lectures and classes with world-renowned scholars. That was the first shared symposium that would lead to our annual interfaith guest scholar lecture series.

In response to a horrific crime, our relationship with First Congregational Church grew much deeper. In July 1999, a neo-Nazi named Benjamin Smith went on a hate-filled killing spree that resulted in the death of former Northwestern basketball coach Ricky Byrdsong and others. Smith had grown up in Wilmette and graduated from New Trier High School. In response to this horrible crime, Rev. Owens approached me with the idea to do something together that would be an answer to hatred and violence. Thus began a full partnership between our two congregations.

After the terror attacks of 9/11, we sought spiritual support in the midst of our national trauma. Neighbors streamed out of their homes to gather at their various houses of worship, and Sukkat Shalom and First Congregational Church opened our doors for joint worship. In future times of celebration and mourning, we

would join together as one community.

The year 2002 brought our first ordained Cantor, Jill Abramson, whose warmth and talent were treasured by all. Music had been a vital part of our congregation from the beginning. Its role was enhanced by a dedicated choir and the leadership of musical director, Michael Querio.

Our faith partnership was a key aspect of Sukkat Shalom's identity. As our congregation grew, we explored the possibility of a full and equal partnership with FCCW. We thought that we might be able to jointly own the building and share in the costs of major renovations that would enable both congregations to thrive in one shared building. It was a complicated project pursued with great respect on both sides. In the end, however, it was too difficult to realize.

Later, Rev. Perdew told me that she had heard that the Christian Science Church on Central Avenue was investigating the possibility of selling its building. This presented a remarkable opportunity for Sukkat Shalom.

[The story of Sukkat Shalom's journey will continue in the Fall edition of the newsletter.]

"This would be an open congregation, not limiting membership on the basis of one's birth religion."



Rabbi Sam Gordon, Matt and Cathy Baker at the 1990 naming ceremony for their daughter, Melissa, at the Bakers' home in Northbrook.



Thirteen years later, Cantor Jill Abramson and Rabbi Gordon congratulate Melissa Baker on becoming a Bat Mitzvah at the First Congregational Church of Wilmette.

Pandemic Experience Leads to Expanding the Walls of Sukkat Shalom

by Cantorial Soloist Kenny Lyonswright

If 2020 taught us anything, it is that nothing is certain. Even so, I can say with a good degree of certainty that no organization, of any kind, will resume operating in exactly the same way it did before the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, it may even be said that everyone—schools, restaurants, retail establishments and houses of worship—has had to figure out how to operate online.

For us at Sukkat Shalom, this has been a bittersweet experience. Of course, we have deeply missed gathering in person for communal worship and the observance of life-cycle events. We look forward to sharing those moments with you as soon as it is safe. Nothing can com-

pare to spending that time together in person.

However, we have been quite moved by the degree to which our online community has flourished in the past year. Our members and friends have been able to “attend” services, Family School, and educational opportunities no matter where they are in the world.

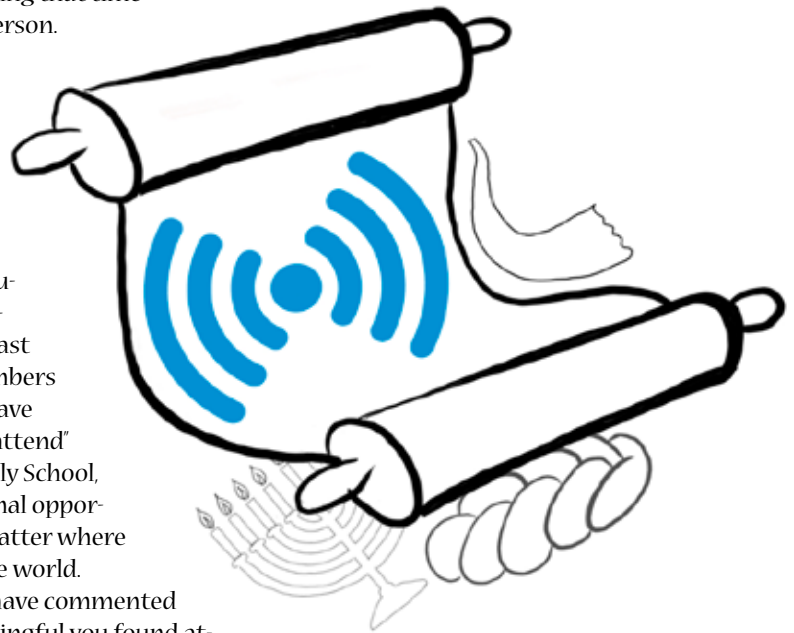
Some of you have commented on how meaningful you found attending services from your own personal sacred space—in your living rooms, kitchens, or perhaps around your dining room tables. Being able to tune in to recorded online content when it’s most convenient has been an added benefit.

We are beginning preliminary discussions for a return to in-person operations

“...we have been quite moved by the degree to which our online community has flourished in the past year.

in the fall of 2021. To that end, we are happy to share that we have invested in a live streaming system for our sanctuary that will allow us to stream services, life cycle events, lectures and concerts.

After careful consultation with audio/visual professionals, other synagogues from around the country and experts in live streaming, we have decided on a system that we are truly excited about! Three separate cameras are able to capture everything that happens on the bimah from various angles. Other components of our installation will allow slideshows, prerecorded videos and even participation via Zoom.



Nothing can replace the experience of being in person together, but we also recognize how meaningful accessing our programming via live stream can be. With our new system in place, congregants will be able to virtually attend adult education or other programming, even if your schedule doesn’t allow you to attend in person. You can welcome Shabbat or hear a loved one’s name read on their Yahrtzeit, no matter where you are in the world.

Our ability to live stream will allow the walls of Sukkat Shalom, our shelter of peace, to extend further than they ever have before. We look forward to joining together with you in community -- in whatever way you are able -- through the rest of this year and beyond.

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