

Shul mourns artist who let in the light

George Greene tended Agudath Israel's space for seven decades

by Robert Wiener
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George Greene, whose artistry and dedication were the lifeblood of Congregation Agudath Israel in Caldwell, died July 14 after a battle with cancer. He was 91 years old.

In seven decades as a member, he took responsibility for the synagogue's building and grounds, arranging special seating arrangements for the High Holy Days and choreographing the congregation's move to a temporary site during a three-year renovation begun in 2005.

He and his wife, Bernice, designed and crafted a set of stained-glass windows for the sanctuary when it reopened in time for the High Holy Days in 2008.

His skills as an artist and planner were recalled beneath those windows at the June 17 funeral in the synagogue sanctuary.

When the relocation took place, said CAI's Rabbi Alan Silverstein in his eulogy, "we had to move huge amounts of stuff and then have it put back in the right places. That was only possible because we had George Greene."

Using what Susan Werk, the synagogue's educational director, called his "awesome organizational skills," Greene created a detailed system for organizing supplies and furnishings for the move to the temporary quarters. When the congregation moved back into the newly refurbished synagogue three years later, "because our boxes were meticulously marked with George's system, what might have been total chaos was transformed into a well-oiled machinery of our return home," Werk said, as quoted in Silverstein's eulogy.

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With hammer in hand, George Greene prepared to shatter a pane of glass and turn its pieces into parts of a stained-glass window for the Congregation Agudath Israel sanctuary, in 2008.

Photos by Robert Wiener

Michael Chiaet, who lived next door to the Greene for the past 18 years, served with him on the synagogue's building and grounds committee. "He was an absolutely amazing fellow," Chiaet told *NJ Jewish News* in a June 19 interview. "He was an artisan of the first degree."

"There are few physical spaces in our building that do not have his fingerprint on them," agreed friend and congregation member Phil Kruger, in remarks prepared for Silverstein's eulogy. "The guy loved his synagogue, the building, and the people in it. He designed and crafted our High Holy Day ark and *bima*, our ark for the junior congregation, our large *hanukkia* of Maccabee soldiers, and our Holocaust Memorial in the lobby."

The Greenes created the sanctuary's 13 windows in the basement of their Caldwell home. The 12 of them that measure 13 inches wide by 12 feet, five inches, high represent the months of the year, the tribes of Israel, and the holidays; they are adjacent to a giant central stained-glass window depicting a menorah behind the ark.

NJJN was on hand in the Greenes' basement studio one day in 2008 as he covered panes of colored glass with a towel to protect himself against flying shards. With deliberate strokes of a hammer, he shattered the glass into random pieces. Then, with his bare hands, he separated out slivers too small to be used.

"It is just like assembling a jigsaw puzzle," he explained.

Rather than deliver a sermon on Yom Kippur in 2008, Silverstein called Greene to the *bima*. With Cantor Joel Caplan moving through the front of the sanctuary, using a pointer to direct congregants' attention to the details, Greene explained the symbolism of the windows and the process involved in their creation.

"When I was done, everybody stood up and applauded," Greene told *NJJN*. "I certainly didn't expect a standing ovation. I was totally blown away."

"What a man he was," said Rabbi Michael Jay, a CAI congregant who serves as religious leader of the Jewish Community Center of Long Beach Island. "He was not simply a talented artist with an attachment to his Judaism. He embodied the core Jewish value of action and would never even consider the phrase 'Let someone else do it.'"

Greene and his family fled his native Vienna after Kristallnacht and settled in Pine Brook before moving to Caldwell. He joined the United States Army and fought as a field artilleryman in the Normandy invasion and in Czechoslovakia.

He joined Agudath Israel after returning from the war, and almost immediately became an active member.

He operated a plastic manufacturing company in West Orange with his father and his brother, Jack. It was sold in 1972, and Greene worked for an aluminum windows business, becoming its environmental compliance expert.

After retiring he picked up drawing, painting, metal sculpture, photography, and stained-glass design in addition to doing genealogy research and writing his memoirs.

Greene is survived by his wife, Bernice, three children, Stephan and his wife, Ellen, of Herndon, Va; Robin Slobotsky and her husband, Meyer, of Aberdeen; and Ralph and his wife, Susan, of Woodland Park, as well as three grandchildren.

The funeral arrangements were by Jewish Memorial Chapel in Clifton; internment was at Beth David Cemetery in Kenilworth. Memorial donations may be made to the George Greene House and Grounds Fund at Agudath Israel in Caldwell.

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