

## Memories of the Founding of Bet Am Shalom Synagogue

In response to Rabbi Bronstein's question: Did Four Families Found the Synagogue?

By Joey Kellman

The Society for the Advancement of Judaism (SAJ), the first Reconstructionist synagogue in the world, used to print diaries that they distributed as a courtesy and as a marketing tool. Although my parents were members of B'nai Jeshuran (long before it became what it is today) they subscribed to The Reconstructionist magazine and received the diary. Inside the diary, in addition to the Jewish holidays, Torah portions, etc. was a description of Reconstructionist thinking.

In early 1954, Arthur and I were not comfortable with the existing White Plains congregations and discussed that fact with my parents. Before you knew it, the SAJ diary appeared in our mailbox. I took Mordecai Kaplan's book *Judaism as a Civilization* from the White Plains library. Arthur also read it and that was the beginning for us.

After the High Holidays in 1954, I called the SAJ to ask if there were any Reconstructionist congregations in Westchester. I spoke with Rabbi Jack Cohen who invited me to talk with him after the Shemini Atzeret service. My neighbor and friend, Betty Roberts accompanied me. (It turned out that Jack Cohen had been Betty's teacher in a Brooklyn Sunday school. He quickly confessed to us that he had become a better teacher since that time!)

The service was particularly interesting because Rabbi Cohen pleaded for less decorum and for more "goings and comings," a distinct contrast to Protestant propriety. I think he meant that there should be participation and congregational singing instead of a choir or Cantor performing. Jack said he welcomed folks kissing new babies as they greeted grandparents in the pews. Since Betty and I were young parents we liked the sound of that.

After a second visit with him and Rabbi Ludwig Nadelmann, Rabbi Cohen said that if we could gather some young couples to form a study group—Rabbi Nadelmann would teach the group about Reconstructionist thinking. We lived in a new development built on Beverly and Albemarle Roads in White Plains where lots of returning veterans and their young families had moved. We found about ten couples and studied every other week during the 1954-55 school year. Rabbi Nadelmann journeyed from the city by train; one of the couples would meet him at the station and drive to whichever was the designated home for that session. Rabbi Nadelmann would lecture and we would ask dozens of questions. (These were the "quiet" Eisenhower years and the sociological movement toward individualism grew stronger and stronger.) Because there was a general apathetic mood, we found it exhilarating to question and do some deeper level thinking.

Sometime during the spring of 1954 Rabbis Cohen and Nadelmann informed us that there was a group of SAJ members who had moved to Westchester and were interested in forming a Reconstructionist synagogue. An articulate woman, Evelyn Mehlman, with teenaged children

visited one afternoon from the SAJ to meet with the study group women to discuss what the Reconstructionist approach meant to her family. She seemed instrumental in mobilizing the women of the study group to seriously contemplate forming a synagogue. The SAJ invited us to lectures and to a Shabbat dinner in New York. Ties were strengthened between the two groups: older and wealthier ex-SAJers and the study groupers. Arthur began to meet with them and he studied with Rabbi Kaplan when that study was offered.

By 1955 things were moving along. We had met the Dannetts (Manny and Sylvia) who were the strongest and most interested of the SAJ group. Sylvia and I spoke frequently and rejoiced over any new person who expressed interest in learning about this little group. After the Fall holidays the Dannetts hosted a meeting to which the two groups met and listened to Rabbis Kaplan, Cohen and Nadelmann and possibly an officer of the SAJ. I believe a few additional Westchester couples attended. (Cora Lee and Joseph Wiesenthal and Ethel and Robert Borg are two couples I remember.) I estimate about 60 people attended that meeting. At the end of the meeting, people voted to form a synagogue. It was at that time that four couples from the study group: Eleanor and Sidney Bergman, Marion and Lou Jacobson, Betty and Ralph Roberts and Jo and Arthur Kellman "signed on" as part of the group of 25 families in all.

We called ourselves Beth Shalom and the first service was held on March 2, 1956 in the St. Paul's Methodist Church in Hartsdale. Rabbi Jack Cohen led that service and Sylvia Dannett had done a fantastic job of PR. I think we had over two hundred people attending the service. (Some may have been SAJ members.) Jack was a superb teacher but not an exciting speaker. I'm not certain, but most of the attendees may have turned away believing this approach was just too intellectual! I think we added only three or four families as a result of that first service.

But we were on the map and Friday night services were held in the church for the rest of the school year. I think thirty or forty folks attended those Friday services and we slowly grew in numbers. Manny Dannett was elected to be the first President. Over the summer it was agreed that Paul Ritterband would be our first Rabbi and he met with a group of about thirty in our home to teach us High Holiday melodies. (That was the first time we met Emily and Sidney Korzenik!) I was a sort of membership chairperson. Sylvia advertised in many places and our home phone number was given as the place to call for additional information.

The first High Holiday services were held in The Square Club, a Masonic Hall in Hartsdale. Arthur became the person who was called upon to explain Reconstructionism to small groups in Westchester homes and to larger groups in various institutions in the county. He even went to Rockland and Long Island to speak. Paul Ritterband taught Hebrew School in various homes. The trunk of his car was filled with books, school supplies and the back seat cradled a Torah loaned to us from the SAJ.

We've come a long way!