

Report to the Congregation Annual Meeting -- May 5, 2005

A Personal Reflection

An interesting aspect of being the synagogue president is getting to know about the mechanics of what it takes to make an organization – a community run. But, at the same time, you never stop being a congregant. In the course of the past year, I've had the opportunity to get involved on both dimensions and realize anew how much BJC offers. My personal experiences reflect that intangible value that BJC provides. Over the summer of 2004, my father was very ill (and fully recovered). The outpouring of support and prayers from BJC was incredibly sustaining. In spring 2005, my daughter became a Bat Mitzvah, affording us a new "high" in worship. I took advantage of Adult Ed opportunities, and once sat enthralled for over two hours while our Director of Education and Congregational Life, Adrian Durlister, tickled the ivories teaching us about great Jewish musicians who have influenced American culture ... and without one note of music in front of him. In the weeks just before the Annual Meeting, we held our third annual Congregational Seder. Memorial Hall was packed. My family and I sat with a family who had never been to BJC before. We watched their faces as we celebrated Passover with a Seder you just can't find anywhere else. So for me, in short, BJC has been a place of worship, of learning, of community. We should be proud.

Membership Growth/Fiscal Health

This time last year we were pleased that we had 179 member units. We're now at 202. Even though we continue to grow, we need to continue to grow. Please spread the good news and encourage family and friends to experience BJC. We're planning an open house for June 17th, in conjunction with our all music service, Simcha B'Shabbat.

Over the past few years as we have discussed the budget, we have focused on fiscal discipline, keeping our members' synagogue support as low as possible and ensuring fiscal strength for the congregation. Treasurer Warren Farb's report will note that we are, indeed, fiscally sound. Warren, our treasurer, has worked diligently with Roz Young, our Synagogue Administrator. As a result of everyone's fiscal discipline, we're now not only solvent, but we've broken the cycle of borrowing from our new fiscal year to close out the old.

Notable Events of the Year

One of the things that make our congregation unique is our long-standing relationship with Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church. This partnership continues to thrive. Much of the underlying work is done by the Intercongregational Partnership, better known as the IPPIES. As a result of their leadership and planning, we engage in joint study. This past year we opened up our dialogue about our similarities and differences by convening a conversation with a Mosque in Burtonsville. This willingness

of BJC and BHPC members to respectfully engage each other to better understand and promote understanding is inestimable.

In the fall, the both congregations also came together for fun with a cabaret featuring performers from both BJC and BHPC. Our proceeds went to support the National Center for Families and Children, as did our traditional Thanksgiving brunch and food basket making event. Once again, the joint worship experience led by Reverend Andrews and Hazzan Schnitzer was inspiring. We also joined together immediately following the devastating Tsunami. On January 2, 2005, members of both congregations, as well as visitors from Sri Lanka and local officials congregated for an interfaith worship that also enabled us all to channel our hopes and efforts to provide relief. Because the Hazzan was in Cuba (see below), Adrian Durler stepped up and helped organize the program and well represented our congregation.

During this past year, considerable controversy followed several resolutions of the Presbyterian Church USA (the national body). Following a facilitated discussion between the members of the two congregations, a joint study group of BJC and Bradley Hills members continued to meet. They prepared a joint resolution approved by the BJC Board and BHPC Session regarding cutting off funding for the church in Philadelphia, Avodat Yisrael, which was overtly seeking to convert Jews. The second matter concerned PC USA's declared intent to consider divestment of companies doing business with Israel. Again, the combined force of the two congregations working through the issue resulted in a joint letter of recommendation regarding handling of the divestiture issue. Our voices were heard: funding stopped to Avodat Yisrael. And we are being heard regarding divestiture.

Social Action

Our Social Action Committee continued to engage the congregation in so many meaningful activities. Throughout the winter months, they collected clothes drive in the winter. The Committee also organized a build with Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church for Habitat for Humanity in October. BJC was also involved in Sukkot in April, a build program run in conjunction with Yachad, "Rebuilding Together." In May, in support of an ecological theme and to mark Lag B'Omer, BJC will join with the Potomac Conservancy in a river restoration outing / sapling planting along a local river.

Again this year our congregation continued to support our sister congregation in Sancti Spiritus, Cuba. We made our first trip there in 2003, with a promise to continue support and return. Since then, we have continued to send medicines, supplies, and ritual articles to these brave and dedicated Jews. Other BJC members have visited with our Cuban friends. As an important update, last May for the first time in over 40 years, two children became B'nai Mitzvah in Sancti Spiritus. Our second mission traveled in late December 2004, renewing many important relationships and building many more new ones. Throughout the year, we continued to provide support through checks and supplies.

As part of our regular Friday Shabbat service, in late March, BJC hosted Sharan London, Executive Director of the Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless who spoke about the Affordable Housing Crisis. Ms. London made a vivid impression on us all and stayed for quite a while during the Oneg to interact with the Congregation.

BJC also allied itself with many area congregations in an effort to raise awareness about the situation in Darfur, Sudan and funds to support the citizens there. Notable was an evening of music at the Historic 6th and I Street Synagogue. We continue to keep information about Darfur posted on our website.

Major Holiday/ Celebrations

Throughout the course of the year, we had many special celebrations and events. In the interest of brevity, just a few are noted here. In June 2004, we had a special celebration to honor Jim and Maxine Perlmutter for their innumerable contribution to BJC over the years. We dedicated the new pair of rimonim (Torah crowns) in their honor.

We were also fortunate enough to celebrate a very special Simcha B'Shabbat at the Historic 6th and I Street Synagogue. BJC hosted Peter Pitzele, who led us in an amazing evening of bibliodrama. In December, we had fabulous festivities with our annual Hannuakah Happenings event.

BJC is proud to honor our retired principal and executive director, Maran Gluckstein with a special program each year. The 3rd Annual Maran Gluckstein Educational Fund supported a weekend with Rabbi Shefa Gold in mid-March. Rabbi Gold, who is the founder of ALEPH, Alliance for Jewish Renewal, led our Saturday morning worship service and stayed to conduct a workshop on chanting and worship. As a capstone to that weekend, our Hazzan and choir participated in a Washington Metropolitan area choral event at Strathmore Hall that recognized our 350 year history in America. Adrian Durlister, our Director of Education and Congregational Life, had a major role in organizing and managing this major event.

Our congregation was very blessed to receive a letter from Charles Ticho of New Jersey regarding the provenance of our Holocaust Scroll. He had done the research about the history of the deportation of the Jews of Brno Boskevice, Czechoslovakia, the home of our Holocaust Torah. As a result of his timely letter, we were able to commemorate the 63rd anniversary of the deportation with a special service. We hope to continue communicating with Mr. Ticho to learn more about "the oldest member of our congregation."

Identity Day March 6th and Looking after Congregants

This year for the first time, BJC had an "Identity Day," which was designed to learn about why our congregants chose BJC, what has kept them here, and what is important for the future. About 60 people helped recount history from two key

demographics: 1970s and 1990s. As we engaged in some facilitated exercises to learn what assets we bring to the Congregation and what we would like to see more of, we learned a great deal. Asset mapping identified new areas to grow in: youth-led services, wellness activities, senior citizen initiatives, poker/casino night, participating in area Jewish cultural events, and a BJC-sponsored trip to Israel -- just to name a few. In the coming year there will be interesting developments on many of these fronts.

This year, Adrian Durlister continued to work his magic with the web page. One of the improvements this past year was setting up a community calendar page from our website that links with other sites and promotes Jewish activities around the community.

We continued our tradition of having mentors help new members get acclimated to BJC, and we celebrate with a new member dinner in early December (thanks to the generosity of the Wolf-Chiaverini family).

Updates on the Space

At the High Holidays, I announced that we would begin a generalized effort to raise funds, "Enhancing the Flame." One of the primary and immediate purposes of was to provide for some needed improvements to Covenant Hall. While the launch of the campaign itself has been delayed, our work in Covenant Hall has not. The Bimah is now 27 inches deeper. It makes an enormous difference.

Based on the recommendations of the Hiddur Bimah committee, the fabric art work project is on hold. We're still working with the builders/architects to get the doors right. The beautiful new Bimah furniture arrived in May 2005, shortly after the annual meeting. It consists of a torah reading table/lectern and a torah stand.

Appreciation

As always, it's important for the Congregation to recognize the important contributions of the current Board Members: David Weiss, Vice President; Gail Weiss Secretary; Warren Farb, Treasurer; Trustees: Bruce Busman, Ruth Salinger, Larry/Davi Walders, as well as the Committee Chairs: Steve Chiaverini, Membership; Dorothy Umans, Programs; Stacey FitzSimmons, Social Action; Renee Asher, Education; and Dick Fogel, Resource to the Board -- all of whom are returning to the Board of Trustees.

Many thanks go to the following members of the Board of Trustees who are stepping down: Leslie Strauss Miraglia, a parent, a teacher, and a volunteer; Cliff Bayuk, whose ideas always pushed us a little further; and David Slacter, who has served in so many capacities on the Board, including as President. It's impossible for others to imagine how many hours David has devoted to this congregation over the years. Without his firm hand, willingness to think outside the box, who knows

A special thank you to Anita Farb, our newsletter editor, and Marla Hewitt, who sends out the weekly e-update

Roz Young, our synagogue administrator, could not attend the Annual Meeting, but wanted the many volunteers to get recognized. In her words, “Please thank them for all their help and cooperation in the last year and let them know how much it means to me to be able to serve the congregation as the administrator. And that I look forward to the next year with a great deal of anticipation.”

Characteristically, these same individuals don’t want to be named. But we know who you are, and we appreciate your help. I’d like to echo with my thanks to and deepest appreciation to the many volunteers who help make BJC work with the little (and big) things behind the scenes: setting up, stuffing envelopes, and doing the other chores that are necessary to make our congregation work.

This is also the appropriate point to insert a note of thanks: to Roz for all she has done and continues to do. Individuals who choose to work in synagogue administration certainly do not do it for the money – nor the recognition, but because they find this work a calling to support the community of the synagogue. Bethesda Jewish Congregation is blessed to have someone of Roz’s caliber who works so diligently and tirelessly on behalf of us all. She’s truly the engine that drives this train.

Special recognition is due to Adrian Durlister, our Renaissance Man, our Director of Education and Congregational Life, Webmaster, Music Impresario and so forth, who just does it all with style, grace, intellect, and good humor.

Thanks to Hazzan Schnitzer for all he does. His energy, enthusiasm, spirituality, leadership, and friendship are an important part of what makes BJC all that it is.

Vision for the Future

Where are we headed? We are about to launch of members-only space on website. It will host minutes from the Board of Trustees, school-related information, the budget, the By Laws, and a special section on tips and resources for the B’nai Mitzvah families.

Planning is well underway for our belated our 40th Anniversary Party/Celebration will happen in the fall (September 9th and 10th). There will be food (what else?), famous entertainment, a silent auction, and lots of other fun.

We hope to continue our summer activities to maintain ties, by going to a Big Train baseball game, and, as it turns out, the Nationals.

Work will move forward on two areas where we did not make as much progress as I would have liked. As the Immediate Past President I will have the opportunity to channel energy into the important areas of “Enhancing the Flame” and long-range planning.

While I know that I have more to contribute, there are many congregants who have not yet started. It's important for you to share what's on your mind, with synagogue staff or any member of the Board. It's imperative that you share your focus and your vision. Get involved. If you leave it to others, be thankful others have stepped up, but also remember you had an opportunity that you didn't avail yourself of.

For me, for the last two years, I am so appreciative of the opportunity to do my part. My thanks and gratitude go to the staff, the Board, and the congregants for the privilege of working with such fine people in order to make BJC a better place.

We have every reason to believe that BJC's future will be bright, and your participation will only make it brighter.

Respectfully,

Harri j. Kramer
President, Board of Trustees