

My Synagogue – A Love Story by Charlotte Fels

There is a small town in northwest New Jersey called Washington. Natives sometimes refer to it as Little Washington, as if anyone could confuse it with “big” Washington, D.C. I have been told that a former rabbi would sometimes say: “I have a dinner appointment with the president in Washington and I mustn’t keep him waiting.” The rabbi was of course referring to the president of his congregation, known as JCNWJ, or inappropriately named the Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey – inappropriate because it is strictly a synagogue cum Sunday School, without gym, clubs, day camp and other activities usually associated with a center.

A stranger could never even “fall upon” it. The synagogue is an unobtrusive small white building which looks almost exactly like its neighbors on either side and across the street. It is set back on a lot too small to permit expansion. Aside from the Star of David and a stained glass window at its entry, it bears no distinctive marks, not even its name. The lawn and plantings are well cared for, the one-story building in excellent repair. It is as undistinguished as the street upon which it has been sitting for these past fifty years – Youmans Avenue. If a “McMansion” were to be placed alongside it, the difference in size and scale would make the 21st century “McMansion” look more like a small cathedral.

In fact, everything about this place – the town, the street, the building and the congregation – is small scale, an anomaly in the most densely populated state in the Union and in a town only some sixty miles from New York City. That is the aspect of the congregation which is most related and necessary to its uniqueness.

Seen another way, suppose in this 21st century, you could find a place to live that was so small, everyone knew everyone else, children felt safe as with an extended family, people cared about and for each other; all of this possible without any intrusion into privacy. That is the feeling one gets at this congregation.

The size of the building necessarily limits the size of the congregation, which ranges from some 70 to 90 families, from 20 to 40 children in its Sunday School. The budget too is limited, but not strained. There are Shabbat services every other Friday night. Saturday morning services are held only to celebrate the occasional bar or bat mitzvah. It turns out to be an excellent arrangement. Attendance at services is almost “respectable”, sometimes downright crowded like on “Shabbat Across America”. Our rabbi, whom we all love and cannot praise highly enough, is “part-time”. We could never otherwise afford someone of her caliber.

Members take direct responsibility to fill the various tasks and duties that make a synagogue function. For example, the Men’s club meets on a Sunday each month and after a bagel and coffee breakfast, perform all necessary chores like replacing light bulbs, painting, fixing what needs repair; by now they are an efficient team. The treasurer takes full charge of every area involving money – dues, bills, payroll etc. One person is in charge of membership, another of fund-raising. Unlike in most other synagogues, fund-raising is kept to a minimum; we have no mortgage, small payroll and overhead costs. Our Sunday School teachers are recruited from our membership and we fortunately have enough dedicated qualified people. We send out a monthly newsletter. We celebrate each holiday with warmth and zeal. On the High Holy Days, a cantor joins the rabbi on the

Bimah. We invite non-members to join us on all occasions including Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, without tickets or donations and are proud that no one is ever turned away.

In addition to the usual Sunday School curriculum of Jewish history and Jewish life, arts and crafts, music, holiday celebrations, each child learns to read Hebrew well enough to participate in religious services and becomes familiar with prayers and liturgy. A year or so before bar mitzvah, each child can choose among several well-trained experienced tutors (all members) and is painstakingly prepared to conduct the service, read from the Torah and the Haftarah and generally prepare for this important ritual. Each child is expected to perform a meaningful community service as his/her first obligation as an adult. One will collect small toiletries for homeless women, another may help in an animal shelter. Many continue their religious education for two more years until confirmation. It is interesting to note that when parents and teenage children are honored with aliyot, it is usually the latter who excel.

An unforgettable event this past year was the bat mitzvah of a blind girl who had memorized the entire service with the help of Braille. Not only was she blessed with a pure sweet voice and performed impeccably, but what really overwhelmed everyone was her utter joy and radiance. This occasion was a milestone in her young life and an unforgettable experience and inspiration for everyone fortunate to have witnessed it.

Ours is a reform congregation, affiliated with the UAHC (Union of American Hebrew Congregations). Most of the service is sung a capella, a good deal of it in Hebrew. But the choice of music makes it more interesting and stimulating than direct reading from the prayer book. If a Chassidic tune is appropriate, then the congregation takes on a lively Chassidic mode. If hand-clapping fits, then the congregation claps. The closing hymn is Adon Olam, to which there are several possible musical versions. We usually choose the one that fits our mood.

Though well-trained and involved with Jewish tradition most of my life, I did not come to this Temple until I was eighty years old. I remember my first service there. I hadn't read or heard the Hebrew language spoken for decades. I felt as if I had come home, the familiar words and music tasted like homey. I was never made to feel like a newcomer. Without any effort on my part, I became a part of that group. Even now, after four years of participation, I feel I found a treasure of a place, no bickering, no politics, no ostentation, no preoccupation with money or fund-raising. It's a place to share with others, to feel uplifted, to discuss day-to-day events, to share a sweet at the Oneg, to watch the little ones grow up, to watch the procession of life.

The performance of Mitzvot is a centerpiece of Judaism and a mainstay of our congregation. Should there be an extended illness, members promptly take turns bringing a home cooked dinner each night. It is considered a mitzvah to attend funerals and Shiva sessions even of people one knew even slightly. There is a network of phone-calling and/or E-mail so everyone is quickly alerted to whatever emergency arises. I remember a sudden flood in our basement one Sunday morning brought out "seven maids with seven pails and mops" within half-an-hour.

The synagogue becomes part of your family life. You may be surprised at how many like-minded people you will find and how participation will enrich your lives, both individually and as families. Ours is a modest congregation; we lack many modern amenities, but we do not miss them because we are able to share our lives in a most human way that transcends fashion and "modernity".