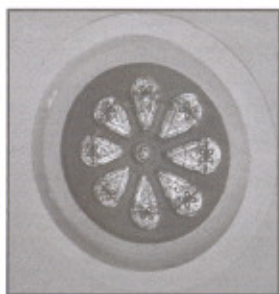


SYNAGOGUE SPOTLIGHT: CONGREGATION BETH MORDECAI PERTH AMBOY

Founded in 1897, Congregation Beth Mordecai in Perth Amboy has faithfully served a diverse Jewish population for 110 years. But something new and exciting is happening at the synagogue these days. This past May, Rabbi Melinda Zalma returned home to Central New Jersey to assume the professional and spiritual leadership of the congregation. Her energy, ideas and enthusiasm are mixing things up and attracting quite a bit of interest. Not bad for a synagogue that just last year was considering merging with another congregation or simply closing its doors. Together, President Raoul Rabiner and Rabbi Zalma have big plans for this historic congregation.

Today Congregation Beth Mordecai has just under 100 families, many of them seniors. But President Raoul Rabiner remembers a different time. Perth Amboy was once a cultural hub for Jews in New Jersey. Founded in 1897, the congregation served as the spiritual home for families from throughout Middlesex and Monmouth counties and beyond, including Perth Amboy, Metuchen, Edison, Woodbridge and even New York City. As the demographics have shifted, most of those families have moved on. Still, the synagogue has meant so much to them, that some continue to return for the High Holidays. In recent years synagogues in many communities surrounding Perth Amboy began to merge with one another or close. Beth Mordecai was having trouble making a minyan and had a decision to make. There were those who wanted to shut the doors.



Stained Glass Window

One of the congregants who felt strongly that the synagogue had an obligation to its congregants and the congregants had an obligation to Beth Mordecai was Raoul Rabiner. The thought of the closing upset him and he knew

it would have upset his wife, Barbara Leon Rabiner, who died in 2002. She had a long family history and had been personally very active in the synagogue. So when members of the congregation approached him almost three years ago with the presidency, explaining that he if declined, they would need to close, he accepted the challenge.



Rabbi Melinda Zalma

The first task was to change the mindset of the congregants and to remind them what Beth Mordecai meant to them. The building needed renovations, the finances needed to put in order and it was time for a change in professional leadership. Mr. Rabiner dug in his heels, began to make repairs on the building and hired Cantor David Levine who led Shabbat services. Word got out about the new Cantor, excitement began build and the minyan returned.

This past May, the congregation hired Rabbi Melinda Zalma to lead the synagogue and to bring a fresh perspective to their revitalization efforts. Rabbi

Zalma grew up in Metuchen and previously worked at the Jewish Outreach Institute. Although it might seem counterintuitive for a young rabbi to come to an older community, she was "touched by the history of the congregation and appreciated its forward thinking." She calls the congregation "unpretentious, straight-forward and warm." Although the idea of a female rabbi took "getting used to" for some congregants, Mr. Rabiner notes that the membership is fairly liberal and was very open to change. "Rabbi Zalma is everything we wanted in the person who was to take on the professional leadership of this congregation," he noted. Over 200 people attended her official installation in September. Three new families joined that same week and since she began just a few short months ago, about 20 member families have joined. Certainly the right direction for a congregation that could not make a minyan a few years ago.

Rabbi Zalma's energy comes with a well thought out plan to continue this exciting trend. First and foremost, she has begun focusing on the current membership. As the demographics of Perth Amboy changed, many congregants lost touch with one another. She is planning programs to allow the members to reconnect with one another and with the congregation itself. Socials in the synagogue and in members' homes will also allow members to reminisce about the history and envision a future.

Also on Rabbi Zalma's agenda is to create a balance between the synagogue family and the general community. The High Holidays brought many new faces into the building. She also plans to expand the courses offered and offer an exciting concert series of Jewish crossover music in the acoustically perfect sanctuary. The congregation is looking to work with other Jewish agencies, including United Synagogue, congregations and Perth Amboy organizations to reach people who have not felt they had a reason to connect before.



The Historic Sanctuary View from the Balcony

Although she has just arrived and is still settling in, the long-term future of the congregation is something to which Rabbi Zalma has given a great deal of thought. She notes "a congregation is always about learning. People at any level or of any background should always feel welcome here and comfortable exploring, continuing their education and connecting to Judaism."

With the support of determined volunteers, an enthusiastic Cantor and a dedicated office staff in long-term member Alyce Fox, Rabbi Zalma's pro-active attitude, open and invigorating teaching style, and impressive vision should have Congregation Beth Mordecai buzzing with constant activity in no time!

Melissa Kohn Rosen