

Jewish Community and Opening a Synagogue

by Patricia Barr

We are truly interdependent. To commune with God through and with nature and not through and with our fellows is really to connect with but a part. And so I come back to Yiskor, and what it is for me, and who I am. I know Zelig asked me to speak because I told him a story, and so I will tell it now.

One year ago I walked into this place with my children to somehow observe Yom Kipper together. We entered with a key provided by someone who still had a key, and found mold and dirt and filth. Downstairs the ceiling had fallen in and walls were covered with mildew. Outside the front steps were in disrepair and the paint was fading. Windows were broken, the heat was off, and a family of chipmunks had made the Rabbi's study their home. It was "shandu", a shame, and I think a public humiliation for the Jews of this community. I later learned that on Rosh Hashanah, Lilo Glick and Ruth Levin had tried to get in and could not. A few weeks later was the observance of Kristalnacht, and because it was the fiftieth anniversary there was a good deal of media attention.

Kristalnacht is the night my father-in-law, along with many others, far too many others, was taken from his home and began his journey to Buchenwald. My husband and children are here because he was not there long. He was able to immigrate to this country in 1940. Many of us sitting here are refugees of that time, or like my husband and I, are the children of refugees. It seemed to me then, almost a year ago, that to be Jews as individuals, but without our synagogue, and to be Jews who would let our synagogue simply die of disuse and disrepair was to take the first giant step toward doing for Hitler what he was unable to finally do. And so with Lilo Glick, also a refugee, a meeting to rebuild was arranged. All of us sitting in this room did what we needed to do as individuals and as a community to save this place.

Now the place is restored. Far from a humiliation, it was one of six public buildings highlighted on this weekend's public building tour. We have a place in which to remember as a community. I hope we will remember with a purpose. That our remembrance, will enlighten our present reality.

Some might take from my remarks that we proclaim Judaism only because at moments in history we were persecuted for it. I am not a Jew because of anti-Semitism. I think the telling of the story about some of my motivation for being part of the rebuilding of this community suggests only that because of my close connections to the recent institutionalized anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany and the third reich, I was reminded of something I have known, I can't be a Jew without remembering my Jewish communities past and without using that memory to constantly create my Jewish communities present.

-Patricia Barr