

## ADAT SHALOM MILESTONES

FIRST SERVICES - Rosh Hashanah 1987

AFFILIATION WITH JRF – From the beginning; Adat Shalom founded with a bit of help from JRF

FIRST ANNUAL RETREAT and FIRST TORAH SCROLL - 1989

FORMAL TORAH SCHOOL INITIATED – 1991

STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES RATIFIED - 1992

CANTOR RACHEL HERSH HIRED, and LAND FOR SYNAGOGUE PURCHASED -- 1995

FIRST FULL TIME RABBI HIRED (FRED SCHERLINDER DOBB) – 1997

NEW BUILDING DEDICATED – 2001 (received 2002 EPA Energy Star award)

VILLAGES ESTABLISHED (12 ‘neighborhood’ groupings of members) – 2004

AFTER CONTROVERSY, ACCEPT HOMELAND SECURITY FUNDS FOR SITE IMPROVEMENTS – 2005

HOSTED HARMONIYAH, THE RECONSTRUCTIONIST MUSIC NETWORK’S GATHERING – 2009

MISHNAH GARDEN’S FIRST SEASON – 2010

SOLAR PHOTOVOLTAICS SYSTEM INSTALLED (first Jewish, and largest of any faith effort, in area) - 2011

### **Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation: From a Seed to Persimmon Tree by Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb and Founding Rabbi Sid Schwarz**

#### ORIGINS

Adat Shalom’s genesis took place in Spring 1987, in Rabbi Sid Schwarz’s office, in a conversation that also included Lillian Kaplan, a local Reconstructionist havurah organizer and president of the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot (now JRF); Rabbi Mordecai Liebling, the executive director of that national umbrella organization; and George Driesen, a local labor lawyer who served on the Board of Governors of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. They discussed "seeding" a new Reconstructionist congregation in lower Montgomery County, an area of significant Jewish density and favorable demographics, and agreed to organize High Holyday services in the area, and see what would emerge.

During that summer a few volunteers planned and parceled out responsibilities for the High Holyday services, held in a small auditorium rented from the Jewish Community Services Building (which years later would hold our first one-room office, and today is the upper school of CES-JDS). About 110 people attended the services that Sid led along with then-RRC-rabbinical-student Jonathan Kligler as cantor. Besides a handful of long-active Reconstructionists in the area, most participants were new, unaffiliated, and willing to try something a bit different.

Interest in continuing to meet beyond Yom Kippur was established at a break-the-fast at Sid and Sandy's house; over 40 people came to the first organizational meeting in November, 1987, to discuss next steps. On the table were a modest proposal to create a monthly lay-led study group or informal havurah, and a bolder approach to actually create a new synagogue. The latter generated great excitement. Rabbi Schwarz agreed to serve as the part-time rabbi of the group with some modest compensation, and the lawyers in the group proceeded to file the papers of incorporation.

At that same meeting, an Adat Shalom tradition was born: three committees were formed! The program committee would plan upcoming events for the group; a mission committee would draft a charter document to set forth what was unique about this new congregation; and an organizing committee explored 'tachlis' issues like marketing, membership and dues. A havdalah and Hannukah program that Fall swelled the mailing list to nearly 200; in December, Lisa and Neil Makstein were elected co-presidents of a new congregation. After much debate, and the rejection of such brilliant alternatives as \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_, the name Adat Shalom was chosen. We were on our way.

#### WANDERINGS

By January, 1988, thanks to Innabelle Levin's efforts, Adat Shalom was holding services on River Road in the beautiful Potomac Presbyterian Church. Within just two years, we outgrew that space, and moved to Christ Lutheran Church on Old Georgetown Rd. near downtown Bethesda. Soon even that wonderful facility was not large enough for us. Through grateful for the hospitality shown us along the way, and aware of the advantages of sharing space, the community began to see the need for our own home. Lengthy community meetings, feasibility studies, and idea-sharings ensued. In 1993 the congregation voted to purchase land and build a home.

To do so would of course entail fund-raising, which already had history. From the beginning, Har Shalom in Potomac had graciously loaned us a Torah. In our first fundraising campaign, the then forty member households were asked to become Torah sponsors at \$100 for each name honored or memorialized. Despite initial doubts this campaign raised the seemingly-astronomical sum of \$6,000, with which we purchased a Torah from a sofer on the Lower East Side. Soon thereafter the Spirtas and Shapiro families each donated a Torah, which filled our small, portable ark. We could then help out others by loaning our first Torah for seven fruitful years to Austin's Heart of Texas Reconstructionist Havurah.

We learned from that experience that money was not a dirty word. When used in the spirit of tzedakah, it is the way we give substance to what we cherish and value. We spent an entire annual retreat arguing, studying and reflecting on that truth, one which we have to learn over and over again. It is a truth that our congregation wrestled with when launching the capital campaign to build our own home, and one which remains imperative today.

In 1995, shortly after moving to the Jewish Community Center in Rockville, we bought a house on 4.7 acres in the Carderock Springs neighborhood at the western edge of Bethesda. This necessitated "Phase I" of our capital campaign, raising nearly \$800,000. "Phase II," with its ambitious goal of \$3 million, still lay ahead. The challenge of the past few years has been maintaining our values and character and extensive program, even while working our way to that goal – which last year, we did indeed reach. As promised at the onset, we built community while building our home.

#### CHARACTERISTICS

From day one, the prime communal time was Shabbat morning services, accompanied by a full lunch to help members bond with one another. Rabbi Sid pushed this idea, which was met with raised eyebrows and skepticism: "People are busy", "children have sports", "no one will stay around for lunch", "why not

Friday nights?". Yet Saturdays offered more time, more light, more liturgy, and greater opportunities to build a community.

Of those who joined, about 60% were young couples who were just starting their families. We also had about 30% singles, and 10% empty nesters. These ratios have since shifted somewhat, though not considerably. One particular group we have always attracted are interfaith households with Jewish partners who are serious about their identity; the interfaith family support and affinity group is among our community's oldest internal gatherings. Adat Shalom's inclusive spirit has also long welcomed lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgendered Jews, single and divorced and childless and other "non-traditional" households, and Jews from across a wide spectrum of class, race, ethnicity, ability, and ideology. Our diversity is also geographic: we have always drawn members from throughout eastern and western Montgomery County, DC, and Northern Virginia. With among the widest ranges of any area synagogue, we remain a "destination" rather than a "neighborhood" shul.

The Jewish mix is equally interesting. Among our membership are those who had attended yeshiva in their youth, and those who were raised with no Jewish education at all. We welcomed this mix and turned it into a strength, with more knowledgeable members tutoring or conducting classes for the congregation. Community was built as members volunteered to train other members in synagogue skills, even as more members became able to lead parts of the service on a rotating basis.

Throughout the first year, the Mission Committee worked to produce a document called "Initial Statement of Principles", which outlined the kinds of ideals that we hoped that Adat Shalom would fulfill. In 1992 it was expanded, ratified by the Board and congregation, and published as our "Statement of Principles". From our very inception, we have been clear that "Adat Shalom is not for everybody". There were many synagogues where one could pay dues for services rendered, such as Jewish education for the children – we wanted members who could endorse the stated Principles of the congregation, and commit to a level of participation and involvement that would ensure our communal vibrancy.

## PROGRAMS

Early on the community agreed to meet on two shabbat mornings per month, and to refrain from any other programming. This channeling of the nascent energy worked – during our first few years, half to three-quarters of our membership joined in each shabbat service. Responsibility for the lunch was shared by member families on a rotating basis, and people lingered until about 2pm, forging bonds of friendship and a strong community spirit – which, with the oneg, continue to characterize Adat Shalom. Soon we began to schedule potluck shabbat dinners in people's homes, holiday workshops, special events, and more. These events have since blossomed into the tremendous committee structure through which much of Adat Shalom's life is currently lived.

Since May of 1989, and still the highlight of our program year, comes our annual retreat. Initially held at Camp Louise in the Catoctin Mountains, we soon moved to the larger, majestic 4-H Conference Center in Front Royal, VA. It is always astounding and refreshing to see over a third of our membership in the foothills of the Shenandoahs for a weekend of study, prayer, fun and fellowship. The services, singing, and socializing are favorites, along with the study: among the topics tackled at recent retreats have been Israel, the Jewish future, kashrut, Jewish arts, and world Jewry.

Five retreat themes in particular -- Shabbat, tzedakah, gemilut chasadim, tikkun olam, and avodah -- took on a life of their own. Like the other topics, these were studied using both classical and contemporary Jewish sources. In each case we grappled with how, individually and collectively, we wanted these Jewish concepts integrated into our lives. After each of these retreats a committee would draft guidelines to be circulated through the congregation for input, comment, revision, and eventual ratification. These guidelines, now an Adat Shalom trademark, stand today as extensions of our Statement of Principles. Their availability at every Shabbat service continues to signal the way we seriously wrestle with, and are engaged by, Jewish tradition.

## LEARNING & DOING

As the retreats indicate, serious learning is something which infuses the life of our congregation. From Dvar Torah discussions on Shabbat morning to late-night Shavuot study sessions to “Torah and Synagogue University,” learning has always been central to our self-definition. Many people found their way here in the early years by taking one of Rabbi Sid’s classes at the JCC and elsewhere, and today the same is happening with Rabbi Fred’s teaching both inside and outside the community. Rabbi Ira has for years taught in his home every Sunday evening; Cantor Rachel offers numerous classes each year.

In the Reconstructionist model of lay-staff partnership, the goal of the clergy is to empower members to not only learn but in turn to teach. Members teaching members, whether Hebrew or history or holidays, has long been both a goal and a reality. To help people get there and grow Jewishly with some kind of roadmap, in the early ‘90s we established the Ben/Bat Torah program, conceived as an adult Bar/Bat Mitzvah program with higher standards. Through this program more and more members took classes, read Torah and haftarah, learned Hebrew, and served the community in various ways. In our culture, reaching a new level of study and action through Ben/Bat Torah became the highest public honor.

The handful of school-aged children in our first couple of years met, concurrent with our shabbat service, in a sort of one-room schoolhouse initially taught by Toby Levin on a volunteer basis. In time the Torah School arose to meet the need for a more established school program, finally hiring teachers and directors. Today we have an active Torah School board, music and arts specialists and family educators, special needs support, member-teachers, and almost 300 students enrolled in programs from pre-K through 9<sup>th</sup> grade, along with a youth program for junior high and high school students. Though Saturday Torah School remains an Adat Shalom hallmark, today an increasing number of educational programs take place on Sunday as well.

Education is one area which developed quickly and profoundly within our community; social action is another. A vision of constructive engagement with the world around us was central, from early discussions of the community to the Statement of Principles and subsequent guidelines to the program as it developed. Rabbi Sid, nationally known for his work in Jewish civics, took a troupe to South Carolina to help rebuild a burned black church; Rabbi Fred, a well known Jewish-environmental educator and activist, has taken a lead in various justice-related initiatives. Numerous members – many of them full-time social justice or environmental advocates, either in government or in non-profit agencies – have offered their professional and avocational skills to our social action program.

## GROWTH

From just a few dozen member households in the late ‘80s, and despite a schism a decade ago which led to the departure of some members, by the mid-‘90s we had 200 households, and today there are 350 and counting. This growth in our numbers creates great opportunities, as well as challenges like maintaining intimacy which are common to all growing spiritual communities. We have always sought to balance our open and inclusive nature with the desire to maintain a certain social and ideological coherence. How to continue this balance as we settle into our new quarters is sure to be a defining issue for the community in the years ahead, no less than it has been in the past.

With growth in size comes an expanded program, which requires more staff-hours. From having no administrative staff, Ellen Hoffman became (and remains) the Torah School secretary. Part-time administrators starting in 1996 paved the way for Sheila Feldman to become full-time Executive Director, whose work is today supplemented by administrative assistant Julie Himmelfarb and bookkeeper Dori Farrell. The bnai mitzvah coordinator and youth director roles, now filled by Celia Barash and Eva Sarelle, are both relatively new.

From the beginning Jack Feder, a charter member and the son of a cantor, was willing to serve as our volunteer cantor. As the demand upon that role expanded, Anita Schubert was hired. Among those she empowered to sing was member Rachel Hersh Epstein, who in 1995 became our Music Director / Cantor. Likewise, child education grew from volunteers to a part-time position under Elissa Kaplan; the job was more than half-time in 1995 when Moshe Ben-Lev became Education Director, and more than full-time by 2000 when beloved Torah School teacher Mary Meyerson was hired. Similarly, Sid’s part-time rabbinic

role became half-time, and by 1993 student rabbis – first Marsha Pik-Nathan, then Fred Dobb – were coming down from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College as well.

All the while, Rabbi Sid Schwarz had been simultaneously growing his Washington Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values into a successful organization with a national profile. His original plan was to remain with Adat Shalom only long enough to set things in motion, but he stayed on as a labor of love. Eventually, though, he knew that he could no longer give the congregation the time it needed to grow to its next stage. In 1996 student rabbi Fred was appointed Interim Rabbi; the following year, after an intensive rabbinic search process (conducted simultaneously with our architect search, which led us to Robert Schwartz), Fred – then the youngest graduate of the RRC – became Adat Shalom’s first full-time rabbi. He is now well into his second contract cycle, and like the other ‘senior staff’ hopes and plans to stay with Adat Shalom for the foreseeable future.

Despite a history of talented and hard-working staff, Adat Shalom has been and will continue to be an exceptional community due primarily to the commitment of its lay-leaders. From presidents to committee chairs to event coordinators, from ushers to shleppers to phone-callers and envelope-stuffers, our remarkable activity and success flows from a concomitantly high level of leadership and participation. As we look toward a future with new possibilities in our own building – and newly-freed energies as a result of its completion – we will continue to draw on this volunteerism, which is the bedrock upon which our community is built.

#### *AD KAN – UP TO NOW*

Our first ten years have been filled with many magical moments. We have prayed together and learned together. There have been babies named, young boys and girls celebrating their b'nai and b'not mitzvah, and weddings. We have met in homes, camps, churches and theatres -- and everywhere we have gone, we have filled the space with music, laughter and tears. We have also had our share of growing pains. But through it all we have learned the wisdom of the verse from the Book of Psalms (133:1) "hinei mah tov umah naim, shevet achim gam yachad " -- how glorious it is for sisters and brothers to dwell together, with common purpose.

Baruch atah Adonay, Eloheinu melech/ruach ha-olam – shehechyanu vekimanu vehigianu lazman ha-zeh. Blessed is God, Ruler/Spirit of the universe – who gave us life, kept us strong, and enabled us to experience this momentous occasion.

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#### Timeline: Major Adat Shalom Events, from Inception to Our Own Home

Fall, 1987	Outreach High Holyday Services
Jan, 1988	First shabbat service at Potomac Presbyterian Church
Feb., 1990	Move to Christ Lutheran Church, Bethesda
Fall, 1991	Torah School started
March, 1993	Congregational vote (85%) to purchase land and build a home
Summer, 1995	Move to the Jewish Community Center in Rockville
June, 1996	Founding Rabbi Sid Schwarz steps down as rabbi; Fred Dobb appointed as interim student rabbi
July, 1996	Land purchased on Kachina Lane in Carderock section of Bethesda
July, 1997	Fred Dobb hired as full-time rabbi
March, 1998	10th anniversary Gala and Capital Campaign Kickoff
____, 1999	Sheila Feldman hired as Administrator, later Executive Director
Sukkot, 1999	Groundbreaking celebration at building site on Persimmon Tree Lane
____, 2000	Capital Campaign reaches its goal
February, 2001	First service in new home

Presidents

1988-90: Lisa and Neil Makstein  
1990-91: Connie and Jay Krupin  
1991-92: Phyllis and Frank Goldstein  
1992-94: Mel Cheslow  
1994-96: Steve Shapiro  
1996-98: Bob Barkin  
1998-: Stanley Newman

(the professional lists below, which were never quite accurate since Jack was not quite “pro”, are no longer needed if the fuller staff history under the penultimate “growth” section goes through as outlined above)

Rabbis

1988-1996: Sidney Schwarz  
1996- : Fred Scherlinder Dobb

Cantors

1988-90: Jack Feder  
1990-94: Anita Schubert  
1995- : Rachel Hersh Epstein

Educational Directors

1991-1995: Elissa Kaplan  
1995-2000: Moshe Ben-Lev  
2000-: Mary Meyerson