

Sacred Tools, Sacred Space, Sacred Time: Ohavi Zedek Then and Now

In 2015 the “Lost Shul Mural” was moved from its original home, once a synagogue, now an apartment building, to our home, here at Ohavi Zedek. Chipped paint and dulled colors notwithstanding, it was glorious. The artwork of Ben Zion Black, painted back in **1910**, recalls an era long gone. In those early years of the twentieth century, when many of our grandparents and great-grandparents left pogroms and poverty behind to find opportunity here in America, they brought their Ashkenazi Jewish culture to the new land.

These immigrants brought their religious practice with them, some influenced by the early Reform movement which began in Germany, and many others carried their traditions and customs with them as observant Jews. Some communities sought the comfort of familiarity and built synagogues that resembled the shuls they left behind in Europe. These shuls included Torah reading tables in the center and balconies where the women were seated. The synagogue architecture and art echoed the Old Country for these newcomers to the “Goldene Medina” —the golden land of America.

Our Mural, so proudly displayed in its restored glory in our lobby preserves the art of that generation. Sadly, the painted murals so common across Eastern European synagogues were almost entirely destroyed by the Nazis, yet another reminder of why we are so grateful to be here in America. How fortunate are we to be the custodians of this surviving example of Jewish

European folk art? The promise of a new beginning here in this country inspired many Jewish communities in America to eschew the styles of their grandparents in synagogue art, architecture and Jewish practice. Now, after more than three centuries of Jewish life in America, we find ourselves changed, and many of us have come to realize that we may have lost too much. The Mural symbolizes not only the world of our foremothers and fathers, but in my view, our heartfelt desire and need to honor our past. Thankfully, the celebration of the immigrant experience helped to catapult our singular and beautiful mural to international prominence. The mural is a celebration of the world of our forefathers and mothers, and also our survival with resilience and strength, that today we may thrive.

At the same time, this is reminder of how profoundly we have changed as a Jewish community and as individual Jews. Just as synagogue architecture and art shifted from the styles of the “old world,” so did Jewish practice and ideas. We are very different from the generation of Ben Zion Black - the generation of many of our grandparents.

While we celebrate who we have become, enjoying the gifts of life in America, we can also notice what we have lost. That is one reason why the Lost Shul Mural is so moving — we don’t want to lose touch with our history and our past. We Jews have survived hundreds of generations by moving forward, integrating who and what we have been with who we are *who we are becoming*. Our people’s evolution has been our strength. We honor our traditions and treasure how they inspire our lives with sacred purpose while we adapt to an inspiring Judaism for our time.

Who are we? We are the children of our parents, grandparents and those who came before them. Who are we? We are 21st century American Jews, valuing personal spirituality, committed to the joy and the value of continued learning, dedicated to the pursuit of justice in a distressingly unjust world, nurturing community that roots our lives in something so much larger and greater than our individual selves.

We are proud Jews, as our grandparents and great grandparents were, but we are very different from them in many ways. Some changes have evolved over time, easing our path into new ways of being. Just think: we don't separate men and women in worship and we don't dress formally, hardly ever, as the mid-twentieth century synagogue communities here did. And some changes have been more dramatic and therefore, disruptive, and even painful to some. Take the change of our sanctuary design, welcomed by many, while others have found it offensive to remove what was here since 1952.

While the times are changing, let us use this season of renewal for reflection upon the highlights of the last seven years. Seven is a symbolic number in Jewish thought, signifying a complete segment of time, as in seven days of the week. This year, it also denotes the time of my rabbinate here at OZ. I pray that here we can find seeds for the future's plantings.

We have had some significant challenges, as have many synagogues today. But ours are stuff of life here in our community. In 2015 the synagogue leadership was stunned by the unwelcome realization that the synagogue's finances were not as strong as believed. That rocked the world of OZ

leadership and led to scaling back with spending restrictions. And into that, I arrived. At the same time, the call for changes to our Jewish practice were heard from some of our members and leaders. But it would be hard to change while our tools: our prayer books such as our daily, Shabbat and festival and high holiday siddurim and machzorim were dated and insufficiently inspiring. How could we advance the need for contemporary updates to our Jewish experiences when there were no funds available? Actually, it didn't take much: following some private and public discussions about the need for new siddurim, lo and behold, the funds donated for new siddurim exceeded the need! This untapped communal resource opened our eyes to what could be possible. We replaced our *siddurim* and *machzorim* with the beautiful ones we now use. Positive, impactful change is possible, even when money is tight— or perhaps *especially* when special funds must be raised, because our members recognize the pressing need.

That became a lesson for our approach to other dreams and communal needs. So much is possible when we **imagine** and work together.

Next, we built a yurt. Who knew what a yurt was? One member continually called it a *NURT*! And who knew what a yurt could add to the life of our congregation? And who would pay for it? I remember when Grace came into my office to propose the yurt and to ask for help in raising the funds. It was such a compelling idea with a human-scale price tag, it took just a few phone calls to generous OZ members, and we were on our way. The yurt helped us to offer selections of alternative services—pre-pandemic: great singing and dancing for our little ones and our adults, and an extraordinary scholar-in-residence weekend with the amazing Joey Weisenberg. Joey

created and directs the Rising Song Institute, an inspiring leader in old/new Jewish spiritual practice.

When Joey came here to teach us the art of Hebrew chant, I showed him our sanctuary space. Joey decided that we would gather, close together in the center aisle of the sanctuary to join our voices together. It was glorious and it was, well, very tight, without enough space to share the experience of communal song and chant as it could be if we had more space. That was when the conversation of the pews and the sanctuary arrangement became more prominent for many of our members who learned from Joey and others, and wanted flexibility in our worship space.

Interior designers and architects were consulted for advice and many ideas were percolating. But how could the money be raised? How could we achieve consensus for change with so many emotional attachments to this space still so dear to long-time members? With no confidence in the possibility of sanctuary renewal, the idea was tabled, repeatedly. Until it wasn't...

Admittedly, the decision-making process for renewal of our sanctuary was imperfect. Quite sadly, some feelings were hurt and for that, we are so very sorry. However, the need for change, based on evolving cultural norms and needs of our diverse Jewish community, led to a reassessment, and the funds were raised to complete the first phase of sanctuary renewal. Look at how beautiful it is! We hope those who were upset by the removal of pews and change of style in the sanctuary will come to find comfort, if not

satisfaction, in the energy this renewed space can create for the OZ community.

Sacred tools, sacred space and sacred time have all been transformed during these years. Along the way, the emergence of song as core to our community's life has brought joy to us in new ways. We created the Singing Community. And, remember the Peter Yarrow concert? I still can't believe he came here to offer us the gift of his music. Peter is not just a famous, influential Jewish singer (Puff the Magic Dragon), but he is also an activist for justice, which is how he was introduced to us through a friend of his who attended an event here. It was a miracle to have him here! (Light One Candle for the Maccabee children!)

But that was not enough, we needed to continue our journey through song, linked to our spiritual practice in an even more central way. I advocated for us to bring a full-time cantor to OZ, but we only had a budget to cover part-time cantorial support. Once again, "if you dream it, it will not be an imagined story," as Theodore Herzl said. A small group of major donors, with board support, pledged to get us started with funding for the first cantorial contract; what a blessing!

More innovations have advanced our congregation's evolution. Over the course of many months, with the help of a dear colleague, Rabbi Dayle Friedman, who specializes in pastoral care training, several of our members who are mental health professionals worked with us to develop skills as pastoral caregivers. They have played an invaluable role in helping to make sure our members are supported at times of need.

Knowing that our community is very diverse in religious backgrounds and perspectives, we have endeavored to create many new and uplifting religious and spiritual experiences. Just a few weeks ago a beautiful group of women gathered with me at Judy Danzig's lakefront home for what is now a tradition: a pre-high holiday women's mikveh. The depth of sharing was richly rewarding, and the joy of song and blessing filled the air. We have also helped Rosh Chodesh groups to form with support when needed. We created "*hallelu*" services; circular, intimate circles for shortened prayer services with chanting and meditation. Anyone can find their way into this experience—it is designed not only to nourish the soul, but to be accessible to all. While the pandemic put a crimp in our style, we are so excited to return to this great adventure in meaning-making for personal and communal spirituality. Who knows what we can create next when we bring our open hearts and talents together!

In the pursuit of social justice, we enthusiastically connected with a very meaningful project our member Paul Growald created: ***Stopping Stones***. Recalling the brass markers installed across Germany to memorialize Jews who had been taken from their homes by the Nazis, these markers recall the places here in America where African American slaves had been held in bondage. We studied many scholars' writings on racism and gathered a broad-based committee of local African American and religious leaders to plan the dedication of the stopping stones. The dedication ceremony and installation of the markers at the location of today's Skirack was transformative for our community. What's next, we all asked?

In fact, our Adult Education team has continued this work by reading and reviewing more contemporary writing on racism. We are on the forefront in addressing the complex social and society issues in our day through the lens of our tradition's prophetic call for a just society.

In that spirit, we have taken a deep dive into the world of interfaith relations, in dialogue with friends in the Christian community and, even more significantly, the Muslim community in our area. In response to the atmosphere of hate toward Muslims in our nation, we doubled down on building connections with the Islamic Society of Vermont, ISVT. We ran a powerful "Children of Abraham" program and shared meals and learning with ISVT and College Street Church. While the pandemic halted many of those programs, the interest and passion for friendships and learning between our communities remains strong, with great possibilities going forward.

This was also set in the midst of growing and intense debate regarding Israel-Palestine. In order to help us gain knowledge and perspective, we brought the renown scholar and author Yossi Klein Halevi here for a weekend and filled the house for three days of rich learning and discussion. Yossi, with our mutual dear friend and colleague Imam Abdullah Antepli, shared stories of the revolutionary joint program they had created at the Shalom Hartman Institute, the Muslim Leadership Initiative, MLI. Yossi's book, *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*, opened doors of heart-felt understanding for many of us. Imam Antepli came back two years later to

be the Rabbi Wall Memorial Lecture speaker at St. Michael's College, where he continued to spread learning of mutual understanding and respect. And, during pandemic isolation, the podcast Imam Hassan, Pastor White and I created, *Kipah, Kufi and Collar*, helped to give voice to issues important to our interfaith communities.

Our learning regarding the challenges in the Middle East continued through regular classes from the Hartman Institute, using their outstanding iEngage curricula. For many Sunday afternoons members of our community gathered, first together and then on Zoom, to learn from the outstanding Hartman scholars and to wrestle over difficult issues in our conversations. Believe me, by Sunday afternoons after Shabbat and Sunday morning meetings, programs and classes, I have often wished I could rest. But then I remembered how much I love the discussions with this class and it was positively energizing!

These discussions led me to imagine that it would be wonderful if we could gather a group for a congregational Israel trip. It had not been done here in nearly 30 years. Working with trusted educators in Israel, we created a balanced itinerary to share the joys and the challenges of the land and people, and we gathered the necessary number of participants for the trip to go. It was an extraordinary experience for us, and I only regret that the pandemic hit rather shortly after our return, cutting short more planning for continued education and dialogue flowing from our learning and experiences. Now we are finally getting that back in gear with help from our Adult Education committee and skilled facilitated discussions on Israel-Palestine.

Along the way, we focused on inclusion and learned from colleagues of the trend to use more inclusive language for the quintessential Jewish lifecycle service, what we have called “bar/bat mitzvah.” We now use the language of “B mitzvah” to create a welcoming home for Jewish young people of all gender identities. These updates include new language for what has been gendered language for our Hebrew blessings of *mi sheberach* at the Torah. Our work on this project continues as we continue to gather examples from communities around the country, along with other ways we are working to create full inclusion and accessibility.

Speaking of B Mitzvah — we love to celebrate. During these recent years we reinvigorated Shabbat lunches — not just for B Mitzvah, but for birthdays, anniversaries and more with our Kiddush committee, who have created countless simple and elaborate Shabbat lunches for our community. That is when we truly feel connected as community. We are thrilled to have reopened the kitchen and started the process again—and if any of you feel moved to sponsor a kiddush lunch, or to co-sponsor with others, please let us know. We look forward to many Shabbat and holiday meals together with you~ This is where joy comes to life!

We have enjoyed created and offering many joint programs with Temple Sinai. We have so much in common and so much to share with our communities together. Rabbi Edleson is a dear colleague, and we talk often, as we are seeking ways to **be** more by **being together**. We have co-taught a curriculum on prayer, created and hosted many holiday programs

together, building on the longstanding traditions of shared Yom Hashoah memorial services and educational programs.

These past several years have brought joyous new life into our building and yurt and playgrounds and paths — our wonderful Full Circle Preschool has been a vibrant addition to our community. The young families and FC staff who have become part of our OZ family are cherished. Our Hebrew School is a thriving center for learning and Jewish experiences.

Our Shalom Shuk contributes to the life of our community and other social service organizations in Burlington. Our continued support for Fern Hill, which was built by OZ under Rabbi Wall's leadership to provide affordable senior housing, continues to thrive.

Finally — even as I say this, I know I cannot fully capture everything we have done in these past seven years at Ohavi Zedek in this limited time. Building on our illustrious past, we have created and enjoyed so much in these years! Together we are evolving our sacred work and our connected, joyous community!

Today I share these memories as seeds for what we can build upon in the coming year together and beyond. As I begin my last Jewish year here, it is my hope that we can continue to create and build together. We have spent these last two+ years creating the vision for “Imagine 2025.” We have learned how much we share and how much we care, and how social justice, community center cultural programs, and religious and spiritual life are core to who we are as a congregation. The inspiration of the many, many

meetings held to sort out and define our vision helped us to chart new directions on a map leading us forward. Yala, we say — let's go! Together, this coming year will be filled with fulfillment and joy. Together; let us seize the blessings!

Leshanah Tovah!