

Joe Belth's Remarks at The Gathering on February 19, 2015

Marge and I and our three children arrived in Bloomington on the hot and humid July 4th weekend of 1962. Ann was 4 1/2, Mike was 3, and Jeff was five months old. We stayed in an air-conditioned motel room while we waited for the moving van to arrive at our small rented house on what is now Arlington Road about four miles west of the campus. We had rented a house because my appointment was for a visiting assistant professorship and there was no certainty the appointment would be renewed. Our six words are: "Came as visitors and stayed here."

I decided to venture into town by myself and look things over. I knew about the Hillel House, and found it locked up for the weekend. I walked around the building and peered in the windows. If I did that today, I probably would be arrested. I also inquired at shops downtown and learned about Irv and Rose Fell. Everybody, it seemed, knew that the home of Irv and Rose was a refuge for wandering Jews.

When we contacted Irv and Rose, they welcomed us with open arms. They put us in touch with Gene and Fran Weinberg, Sid and Riette Smith, and Dave and Mildred Dansker. Fran, Riette, and a few others were already operating a Sunday School for Jewish kids, but there was no organized Jewish community.

In 1964 I got a call from Mel Plotinsky, a faculty member in the English department. He and Joel Spiegler, a military student, were organizing a Shabbos morning minyan. I joined the project. We used as a chapel the loft of the Hillel House. It was a fire trap apparently intended to

be an attic storeroom. The window to the fire escape, such as it was, was in the back of the chapel. Right next to the window was the one and only down stairway. I shudder to think what would have happened in the event of a fire in the back of the chapel blocking access to the window and the stairway. But we soldiered on. When somebody wanted to celebrate a bar mitzvah, we conducted the service in the Beck Chapel on the campus. My recollection is that the Beck Chapel had a Torah of its own.

In 1965 Rabbi Norbert Samuelson, the Hillel director, said the adult Jews should have their own organization. The result was the formation of a small organization with a big name: University Jewish Community in Affiliation with B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundations, Incorporated, or UJC. Hill Trubitt was the first president. I was the second. Mel Plotinsky was the third. Mike Schwartz was the fourth. Mitch Novit, who completed Mike's term when Mike left Bloomington, was the fifth.

When the Sunday School could no longer use the Hillel House, not only because of the fire danger but also because they wanted us out, we had to find an alternative location. One year we accepted the hospitality of the wonderful people at the First Presbyterian Church at Sixth and Lincoln. They offered us a choice of Saturday or Wednesday. The board struggled with the issue. Most wanted Saturday for convenience. However, I vividly remember that one of our members observed Shabbos strictly. His children would not be able to get there, and would not be allowed to write even if they did get there. A few of us took the position that it was wrong to exclude from our school the children of an observant member to satisfy the convenience of the majority. In her remarks on January 17 and in her

book, Lana, citing the archives, said we held the school on Saturday. My recollection is different, although it is possible my memory is playing tricks on me because I was so dead set against having the school on Saturday. My recollection is that we held the school on Wednesday afternoons. As Lana said, Herman Wells later allowed us to use classrooms in Ballantine Hall on Sunday mornings.

There was a lot of talk about a building, as Lana described, but it was just talk. At two points, votes were taken and the idea of our own building was voted down both times. Lana in her book attributed to George Lewis a comment that the vote the second time approved the idea. I must apologize for disagreeing with George, who cannot respond, but I was involved in those votes and George had not yet arrived on the scene. The proponents felt we must have a building of our own. The opponents felt we could not afford it, and suggested we wait and participate in what was seen at the time as the imminent upgrade of the Hillel House. That "imminent upgrade" did not happen for 25 years. After the second vote rejecting the idea of a building of our own, I threw in the towel.

Shortly thereafter, I got a call from Larry Walcoff. I will never forget that call. Larry said we needed to get together again. I told Larry I was not interested in the aggravation of another rejection. Larry then said: "Joe, things are different now." I asked how they were different. Larry said: "George and SydeLL Lewis are in town." Larry said George was determined to see to it that we get a building of our own.

The result of that call was a meeting at the home of Mitch and Judy Novit, who lived at that time in Park Ridge. In attendance were George

Lewis, Sherry Mizell, Mitch Novit, Mel Plotinsky, Sid Smith, Larry Walcoff, and I. Sherry Mizell said he had found an ideal piece of land. The St. Thomas Lutheran Church owned the entire property, and had already sold the westernmost piece to the University Baptist Church. The Baptists had put up a "Future Home of" sign, but did not break ground until several years after we opened our building. I vividly remember chatting with a member of the Baptist group at the dedication of our building. I asked him when they were going to begin construction, and he said they were still trying to raise the money.

The Lutherans wanted to sell the remaining 1 1/2 acres between their church and the Baptist property. It was zoned for residential or church use. However, it seemed unlikely someone would buy it for a residence, because it seemed destined to be a church row. The Lutherans offered it to us for \$20,000 at \$2,000 per year for ten years, or \$18,000 cash.

At the meeting, the seven of us decided to start a "land campaign" and buy the land for \$18,000 cash. Each of us put up \$1,000 immediately, and with relatively little difficulty we raised the other \$11,000. What I must emphasize is that there was never a vote by the UJC to move ahead with the project at that time. We just went ahead and bought the land.

When we launched the "building campaign," we had to work at it. Lana has described very nicely our fund-raising efforts. Many people stepped up to the plate, but many did not. The largest single cash contribution came from George Stolnitz. To me the most discouraging rejection--and one that irked George Lewis for the rest of his life--came from a Jewish couple that had no children and saw no reason why they should help finance a building where Jewish kids could go to school.

Speaking of discouragement, I want to relate an incident. George Lewis, Irv Fell, and I drove together to Indianapolis one day to tell a couple of rabbis about our plans and maybe get some moral support if not a little financial help. We made appointments in advance with the rabbis at Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation and Beth El Zedeck. When we visited IHC, the rabbi, after offering us a cup of coffee, proceeded to tell us there was no way the Jews of Bloomington would ever be able to build a synagogue. When we visited Beth El Zedeck, the rabbi was not there. He just stood us up. During our drive back to Bloomington, we became determined to prove them wrong. In retrospect, I think we did.

George Lewis was better at fund-raising than I was. It was easy for people to say no to me, because I was impatient and abrasive. George had a way about him that made it harder for people to say no to him.

Lana mentioned the mortgage incident. Workingmen's Federal Savings and Loan offered us a mortgage at an interest rate two full percentage points above the going rate for residential mortgages. I regarded that as a not so subtle way of turning us down. I said thanks but no thanks. The president of Monroe County Bank told us they would not lend money to us or to any other religious organization in Monroe County because, if they had to foreclose, they would get a black eye in the community. I asked him if they would lend to a religious organization in Richmond, Indiana, and he said they would. I thanked him for his candor. Then, as Lana said, Irv Fell approached his friend at Bloomington National Bank, who not only loaned us the money but did so at an interest rate slightly below the going rate for residential mortgages.

We built the building, but it had to be scaled back because we did not raise enough money. What is now the old social hall served as sanctuary, social hall, and, thanks to flexible walls, classrooms. The organization was renamed Bloomington Jewish Community Incorporated, or BJC, and later was renamed Congregation Beth Shalom.

When the building opened, the BJC board of directors invited the Shabbos morning minyan to conduct its services in the new building. We insisted that the minyan had to remain autonomous. The board assured us that would be the case, and we accepted the invitation. A few years later, a new BJC board broke the promise by insisting that the minyan be under the control of a religious observance committee answerable to the board. That action by the board caused a schism. Mel Plotinsky, Sherry Mizell, and several other minyan regulars resigned from BJC and formed Anshe Torah Congregation. Arnie Shuster joined the new organization but remained a member of BJC. He thought that by keeping one foot in each congregation he might be able to heal the rift, but he did not succeed in that effort. I decided not to resign, and ever since I have tried to avoid confrontations between the minyan and the board.

Anshe Torah met somewhere in Elm Heights, but usually held its Shabbos morning services without a minyan. Eventually it disbanded when Mel Plotinsky moved to Indianapolis. The reason for the move was that he and Anita wanted their kids to attend a Jewish day school. They bought a house about a mile from the Hasten school and joined B'nai Torah Congregation, an orthodox congregation located adjacent to the Hasten school. Mel switched his faculty position to IUPUI. I kept in close touch

with Mel and Anita for years, until they eventually moved to the Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC. I spoke with Mel Tuesday evening this week. He said he and Anita are well. I told him about our Gala weekend in May, but they have a conflict that will prevent them from attending.

Our original building was designed with the idea of knocking out the east wall of the social hall and adding a sanctuary. However, that did not happen until after a neo-Nazi group firebombed the building in 1983. It happened on the 7th of Elul, three weeks before the High Holy Days.

I will never forget what the staff and members of the St. Thomas Lutheran Church did for us at that terrible time. They literally turned over their church to us. Our Shabbos morning minyan met there, our Sunday School classes met there, our services on the High Holy Days were held there, and we conducted various other activities there. The Lutherans showed us the meaning of true friendship.

We not only repaired the damage with the insurance money, but we also conducted another building campaign. The neo-Nazis made it easier for us to raise money the second time around. We expanded the building to include our beautiful sanctuary. The building was expanded further about a decade later, during the tenure of Rabbi Joan Friedman, and just recently the sanctuary was refurbished.

Over the years we have dealt with various disputes. I remember one problem that arose prior to the firebombing, when we were conducting Shabbos morning services in what is now the old social hall. I refer to the question of whether women should count toward a minyan. We decided that the person who was leading the service at the moment a minyan was

needed would look out over the room, without finger pointing, and decide whether there was a minyan. If the leader decided there was no minyan, we would skip that portion of the service. If the leader decided there was a minyan, we would go ahead with that portion of the service. If the leader decided there was a minyan, but there was actually no minyan unless women were counted, anyone who did not approve would step just outside the open door on the north side of the social hall and continue his prayers there. After a few years, the strong conservatives had left Bloomington or had changed their minds, and the problem went away.

Another dispute was whether the Amidah should include the references to the matriarchs. We resolved that dispute in a similar way. The person leading the service decides whether to include the matriarchs. We still follow the practice today. In that regard, I was intrigued to discover, when I attended a bar mitzvah a few years ago at Beth El Zedeck in Indianapolis, how they deal with the issue. They use the same Sim Shalom siddur we use. Page 115a, which contains the traditional first portion of the Shabbos morning Amidah, has a page pasted over it. Thus only page 115b with the matriarchs is available. There was no musaf service that day, and I did not examine page 156a, which shows the traditional first portion of the Shabbos musaf Amidah. Nor did I examine pages 123a and 166a for the festival morning and musaf services. I question the idea of defacing the siddur, and prefer our approach.

Finally, I want to say that, with so many of the founders of Beth Shalom no longer with us, I feel blessed to have been able to survive this long. In that regard, I must acknowledge my beloved wife Marge for

taking care of me all these years. This June--on the 22nd of Sivan--we plan to observe--quietly--our 60th wedding anniversary. Marge and I also want to acknowledge those three little kids who arrived in Bloomington with us almost 53 years ago. We are very proud of their accomplishments, and we are deeply grateful for the way they have watched over us. We are also very proud of the accomplishments of our terrific grandchildren. We also want to acknowledge our wonderful friends at Beth Shalom, whom we consider members of our family. Thank you for inviting me to participate in this celebration of our jubilee.

And now, on to the Q&A.