

Synagogue, community continues to progress

Everett Jews blending Orthodox and Reform

By RICK JACKSON
Religion Editor

EVERETT — On the outside of Temple Beth Or, there is wear and tear born of relentless Northwest rain.

But on the inside, there is a renewed freshness, an ongoing transformation-born of body and spirit.

That transformation goes beyond the refurbishing of the synagogue in progress on Lombard Avenue in Everett. With the start of Passover at sundown Friday, Temple Beth Or stands as a reflection of renewed growth for the Jewish community in Snohomish County. And that suits Eileen Hinds just fine.

"What we're about is being a community," says Hinds, temple president.

That community has grown beyond just a few families in 1985 to about 75 in 1992, along with a mailing list spread from Stanwood to Bellevue. The growth has sent them on a trek that has embraced the past and future.

Temple Beth Or, which means "House of Light," is a Reform congregation, rooted in a liberal Jewish tradition that attempts to balance modern sensibilities with age-old practice.

Their building, however, is the gift from the surviving members of an Orthodox congregation, where observance to traditional Jewish law and ritual tends to be more strict.

Billy Sturman, who moved with his parents from Poland to Everett in 1924, became part of an Orthodox congregation of 60 to 70 families that met in the Lombard Avenue synagogue.

But the years were not kind, whittling the congregation away to just a few members by the early 1980s.

"I felt real bad," says Sturman, who continues to operate his store, Billy's Western Wear, on Hewitt Avenue. "How can you lead a congregation of three or four people?"

With so few people, the synagogue fell into disuse and disrepair. Sturman kept its Torah scrolls at home, with no future for them in sight.



There were offers to buy the synagogue, but Sturman says he couldn't bring himself to sell it and see the land put to other use. In 1984, he heard of plans to start a Reform congregation, and he and the other remaining Orthodox members decided that the Reform group should have the building.

"I kept going after them," Sturman says, recalling the initial surprise of the Reform group. "They couldn't understand. We wanted to give them a synagogue?"

After numerous meetings, Sturman recalls a member from the Reform group finally saying, "Billy, I believe what you said."

And with a tone of wonder, Sturman adds, "And by gosh, they took it over."

When asked at that time what he and the other Orthodox members would do, Sturman replied, "We're going to belong with your congregation!"

Since that time, the temple community has been a work in progress. As membership grew, efforts increased to refurbish the building, especially during the past year.

Now, religious school may take place in a half-finished room with piles of wood, but it also is a room filled with new families and young children.

Both Hinds and Sturman assert that the new community

transcends the differences that have split Orthodox and Reform Jews in other places.

"I know that has not always been the case with other congregations in other parts of the country," Hinds says. But Temple Beth Or blends its Reform character with sensitivity to its older members, she says.

For his part, Sturman says he has no problem with modern ways of Reform.

"Jewish women can read (Passover) seder like any man of Jewish faith," he says. "If someone don't approve..." He finishes his sentence with a shrug.

Building this kind of community is more important than ever, says Hinds, who has gone from the tight-knit Jewish community of Brooklyn to the spread-out lifestyle of Snohomish County.

Community is more important than ever at a time when many national Jewish leaders express anxiety over increasing assimilation of Jews into secular American culture. Hinds says those pressures show in ways that non-Jews don't always notice, from school schedules that can ignore Jewish holidays to difficulty finding kosher food in stores.

Amid these challenges, Hinds says Temple Beth Or serves a crucial function: "To help people define and

redefine... what's meaningful for themselves in modern life.

To help in that process, the temple has had the help of student Rabbi Bob Davis, who has flown in one weekend a month for the past two years for spiritual guidance.

"For one weekend a month we're more blessed than we thought we could be," Hinds says of Davis' work from school in Cincinnati. Davis will be finishing his rabbinical studies and moving on to full-time work at the end of the year, Hinds says, and the temple plans to bring another rabbi to take his place.

In the meantime, Temple Beth Or will continue to devote itself to building community, Hinds says.

"When Billy and some of the older members of the building (for religious school)... the building children," Hinds says. "To see that new generations are being educated... means that there's going to be a Jewish presence in Everett for some time to come."

Sturman agrees. "No wealth can buy the happiness we have at Temple Beth Or," he says. "The happiness we have at this synagogue to these people," he says. "They're the people I've ever met."

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