

## **A SHUL IN THE CITY**

**By Rabbi Randy Fleisher**

Celebrating our first twenty years as a Jewish congregation gives us another opportunity to reflect on the good choice we made when we determined to make our home in the City of St. Louis. It is an existential fact—we are the only synagogue within the city limits. As such, we revel in the diverse community we have created and we aim to become ever more embracing so that we may maintain and increase our wonderful religious, economic, and cultural mix. It is important for us to remember that there are certainly warm and welcoming synagogues in the suburban counties, yet their locations alone destines them for a more monolithic membership. Our very presence in the city means that we are far more accessible to those who tend to live disproportionately in the urban core: gay and lesbian individuals, couples and families; peoples of color; young singles and couples without children; and people in need who are able to walk in off the street and into our doors in search of food, clothing warmth and inspiration. They gather together, Jews and non-Jews alike, at our sukkat shalom, to pray, sing and schmooze with the more ‘traditional’ temple-types, and this particular form of diversity could only happen at a ‘shul in the city.’

It’s not just about serving city Jews and their fellow urban seekers either; well over half of our members reside in the county. If there were no synagogue in St. Louis, hundreds of suburban Jews would spend time in the city, if at all, exclusively for work and play. But now, they are also connected to the city through the synagogue and so the age-old Jewish impulse to engage in responsible moral action can be exercised here. Because our synagogue is so close to North St. Louis, it feels natural that the bulk of our tikkun work is done there too. Because of our urban synagogue, there are more white Jews in St. Louis who feel comfortable traveling north of that notorious Delmar boundary that was long ago artificially created. Once there, we attend interfaith services meetings and rallies, mentor at the schools with our partners at Cote Brillante Church, build and repair houses, engage in inter-racial and inter-religious dialogue, serve lunch to the homeless, register voters, raise awareness about lead poisoning, paint schoolyard fences and deliver meals on wheels to our elderly neighbors.

When we join coalitions in the struggles for urban and racial equity and when we engage in compassionate acts of giving to the poor and vulnerable, we are more organic allies because of our city address. When we open our synagogue doors wide—as with our monthly free health clinic, our food pantry, and our clothing closet—people come in, because the urban landscape is still friendly to people who walk and take public transportation. When the Christian family of a Black Muslim activist who had worked with many CRC members for social justice wanted to find a ‘neutral’ spiritual home for her funeral, they had a home here. When a group of African-American ministers met concerned about police brutality and the threat of a violent summer, one of their first calls was to Rabbi Talve,

inviting her to be a founding member of their group. When the Metropolitan Congregations United want a non-Christian member to give their religious perspective on the struggle for better housing, education and health care in the city, they turn to CRC. We have become a center--not only for our many enriching Jewish prayer services, holiday celebrations, life cycle ceremonies, and education classes—but also for outside groups who fill our space with the meetings and programs of people dedicated to improving the quality of life in the City of St. Louis.

Not only has our existence brought more Jews to the city, our location has also enabled the city to see Judaism up close and personal. Urban onlookers have watched us eat and pray in a sukkah, dance around the building carrying Torahs, write Hebrew in chalk on our sidewalks, cut children's hair at Lag B'Omer picnics, and hug trees on Tu B'shevat. Visitors walk over from New City School and area churches to learn about Judaism from a synagogue that is also their neighbor.

I will never forget walking up and down Waterman from Kingshighway to Union with Sarah Taucher delivering invitations to the dedication of our *Tikkun* sculpture in the neighborhood. Ours is a great city block-young and old; black and white; apartments and houses-even a couple of members of CRC. Everyone we talked with had a CRC story-they watched as the building went up, or they sat by the sculpture and wondered about its' meaning, or they had attended a wedding, baby naming, funeral, or they heard our singing, or Rabbi Susan had somehow helped them out. And when the day of the sculpture celebration arrived, there they were, our neighbors and our members, playing, meeting and eating together. And together we heard the blessings of the rabbis, the area ministers and the mayor of the City of St. Louis; blessings for a piece of reflective artwork which was designed and placed to be enjoyed not only by our members, but by our fellow city dwellers as well.

And I will never forget a picnic that our Holy Ground group held one spring at the Cornerstone Institutional Baptist Church, just a few blocks east of CRC. From Cornerstone, we walked to each congregation, hearing their various missions, visions and stories. Our interfaith collaborative group consists of an African American Baptist church, a progressive Episcopal congregation, a multi denominational home for gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered Christians, a 100+ year old Methodist church, and a Unitarian congregation whose building was our first home. The walk didn't take too long; because we all 'live' only six or seven blocks away from one another. We ended our tour at our Sukkat Shalom, and I was proud to tell the story of CRC, the only shul in the city.