

Reborn agenda?



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NEW JERSEY JEWISH NEWS

UNITED JEWISH COMMUNITIES OF METROWEST NEW JERSEY

Vol. LX No. 46 | Thursday, November 16, 2006 | 25 Heshvan, 5767 | www.njjewishnews.com \$1.00

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URBAN RENEWAL

Newark's oldest synagogue celebrates a renovation, and seeks to repair relations among Jews and Muslims

by Robert Wiener
NJJN Staff Writer

Ahavas Sholom, Newark's oldest functioning synagogue, celebrated its 100th anniversary and rededication Sunday with pomp, circumstance, and a perhaps surprising call for dialogue between Jews and Muslims.

That call, delivered by synagogue president Eric Freedman from a *bima* crowded with city and state officials, was answered minutes later by an Islamic religious leader who stepped to the *bima* and accepted the invitation.

The remarks and invocation by Imam W. Deen Shareef of Waarith-Ud Deen mosque in Irvington came near the end of a two-hour ceremony that marked the synagogue's history in Newark and its commitment to building bridges between races, religions, and ethnicities.

Newark Mayor Cory Booker emphasized that theme in his remarks. After delighting the audience with his Jewish knowledge and Hebrew vocabulary (see box), the African-American mayor noted the broad diversity of people filling the pews.

"I look upon an audience with Conservative Jews and Reform Jews, with imams and pastors, with black folks and white folks, and I know we are here for a reason," said Booker.

Following the mayor at the podium, Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) praised Ahavas Sholom as an example "of what Judaism is all about." Lautenberg said its congregation is involved in "making certain that whatever we enjoy in our own lives we share in some way with others."

Joking that "this synagogue and I have something in common — we both started at about the same time," the 82-year-old senator spoke of Newark's storied past as well as its decline in the second half of the 20th century. But he also called Newark "our premier city" and said the synagogue's continuing presence is a sign of hope.

"This 100-year-old synagogue is saying, 'We want to stay. This isn't for Jews alone. This is part of the community'.... So here

we are on this occasion saying not only is Newark alive and well, but the Jewish community in Newark has its roots here and will continue to build here."

Founded in 1905 as an Orthodox synagogue, Ahavas Sholom has held services since 1923 at its present location in Newark's former North Ward, at a slight remove from the once bustling Jewish community and its many synagogues that eventually relocated to the suburbs. In the last decade, with Freedman as president, the synagogue, now affiliated with the Conservative movement, has attracted a small but active membership, mostly from suburban communities.

The synagogue includes 400 contributors and attracts 140 worshipers on the High Holy Days.

Hilda G. Lutzke was invited to speak at the ceremony about her own Jewish roots at Ahavas Sholom.

A woman in her 90s who now lives in Verona, Lutzke returned to the synagogue for the first time since "about 1930. This was our temple, our shul," she said. "When we moved into this area, I was seven years old. It's good to be back."

Even as he noted that Ahavas Sholom was neither the wealthiest nor the most prominent synagogue in the heyday of Newark's Jewish community, Simon Rosenbach, the rabbinical student who serves as its religious leader, noted it endures as "a thriving egalitarian Conservative synagogue. It exists not merely to service Jews who are looking for a place to worship; it is working hard to be part of the revitalization of Newark."

Part of that revitalization includes the building itself. Thanks to a \$126,000 grant from the New Jersey Historic Trust, the ceremony saw the unveiling of a newly fixed roof and a rehabilitated facade that includes a historic stained-glass window. The congregation's next step is to raise \$900,000 for renovations inside the building, whose monumentally ornate ark contrasts with plywood wall coverings and fluorescent lights. Plans are also under way to convert the synagogue's upstairs space into The Jewish Museum of New Jersey.

On Sunday, however, one of the main orders of business was repairing relations between Jews and Muslims.

"People of good will must come together to explore their commonality, rather than remain distant because of perceived differences," said Freedman, before introducing Shareef. "I believe a select group of Jews and Muslims should begin meeting in a neutral social framework to rediscover the values and perspectives that bound our ancestors together centuries ago."

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is time to act,"



Above: Ahavas Sholom unveiled a newly fixed roof and rehabilitated facade as part of its 100th anniversary and rededication.

Left: Sen. Frank Lautenberg greets Newark Mayor Cory Booker on the *bima* of the century-old Ahavas Sholom synagogue. Photo by Robert Wiener

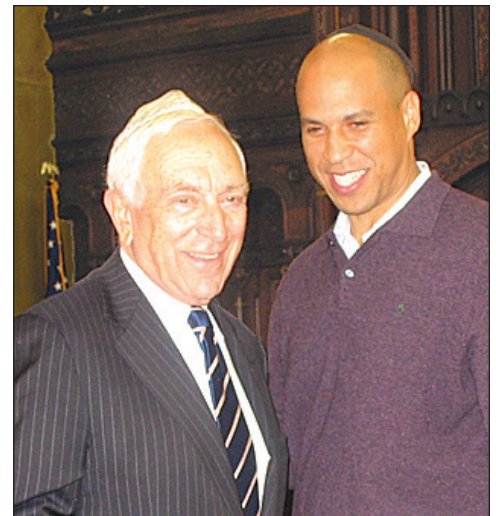
said Freedman, "and I believe we find ourselves in a unique position to put one foot in front of the other to start here, and I'd like to do it in our house as well as yours."

Declaring he was "very honored and privileged to bring greetings of peace," Shareef, who also serves as a senior adviser to Booker, stepped to the *bima*. "I believe it is time for us to renew the love of peace," he said, referring to the meaning of the synagogue's name. Then, noting that "it may be a first for an imam giving a benediction in synagogue," Shareef turned to its president and said, "I want you, Eric Freedman, to know you have a partner in the invitation you extended to this brother right here."

On Monday, Freedman told NJJN that he met Shareef when they served together on an anti-crime program launched in July by Booker.

"It was more about broaching the subject and putting it on the table for the first time than avoiding it," Freedman said of his invitation to the imam. "I don't know about the Islamic community, but I think the Jewish community has avoided dialogue to a large extent. We don't have to do everything on a major, major level. I'm not te federation. I can't change the world."

"But we're neighbors, and getting to rub elbows by working on things that matter to people on both sides — to me that's the key if we are ever going to create a dialogue."



No agenda or timetable has yet been set for the start of the cross-cultural conversation.

Dignitaries helping celebrate the centennial included Clement Alexander Price, professor of history at the Newark campus of Rutgers University; Newark City Council president Mildred Crump; Merle Kalishman, president of the Community Relations Committee of United Jewish Communities of MetroWest NJ; Harvey Rosen, regional president of United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism; Larry Strulowitz, whose father Jack was congregation president from 1945 to 1980; Rob Steinbaum, publisher of *New Jersey Law Journal* and a synagogue vice president; and Carolyn Fefferman, senior policy adviser to Sen. Robert Menendez (D-NJ), on whose behalf she read greetings.

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