

Bluffton's Oseh Shalom: From 17 to 500 Members in Four Years

by Alvin B. Reuben

Bluffton, South Carolina, is located in southern Beaufort County, almost equidistant from Hilton Head Island and Savannah, Georgia. The town dates from the early 1800s when Lowcountry rice and cotton planters seeking high ground and cool river breezes built residences in what was then called Devil's Elbow Barony. Until the late 1970s and early 1980s, few Jews lived in the Bluffton area, but with the construction of new gated communities, the area's population swelled, and so did the number of Jewish inhabitants.

The trend escalated when the Del Webb Corporation began building Sun City–Hilton Head in the early 1990s. A 5,600-acre community for active seniors, Sun City eventually will contain 8,500 homes and over 15,000 residents spread over parts of Beaufort and adjacent Jasper County. From the beginning, the Jewish population of Sun City has been significantly higher than the demographics of most rural areas. Today the Sun City portion of greater Bluffton is five percent Jewish, and this contingent has become an engine for spirited growth of the Jewish population in the area.

Until 2006 most of the Jews living in Bluffton traveled to one of the synagogues on nearby Hilton Head Island or in Savannah for religious services, while a few made the 30-mile drive to Beaufort. Then, four years ago, 17 people from Hilton Head and Bluffton met to discuss the possibility of forming a new congregation closer to home. Six couples put up some seed money, rented a church, and printed a small number of custom-designed siddurim, calculating that about 50 people would attend the first service of this newly formed, non-affiliated eclectic congregation, Temple Oseh Shalom.

The inaugural service was conducted in June 2006 and,

to the surprise of all, 165 Jews—mostly from Bluffton, with some from Hilton Head—showed up. In just four years, the congregation has ballooned to upwards of 500 members, 83 percent of whom live in Sun City, 8 percent in greater Bluffton, 7 percent on Hilton Head Island, 1.5 percent in Beaufort and Ridgeland, and .5 percent in other nearby communities. The new residents come from across the country, from the eastern seaboard to the west coast.

Among the temple's original organizers was Rav Bob Wiener, who volunteered to serve temporarily as the group's spiritual leader and who remained in that position until recently, when Rabbi Robert Seigel from Charleston was hired on a part-time basis to lead the congregation.

Oseh Shalom serves its members in ways most congregations do not. The minimal dues structure (currently \$25.00 per year) is subsidized by voluntary contributions from members at times of Yahrzeit, illness, mitzvot, and through an annual Yom Kippur appeal. There is no building fund. Rather, the congregation rents space at a local Presbyterian church that not only permits the use of its sanctuary and social hall, but also has accommodated storage of the ark, Torahs, and other ritual items. Complementing the strong ties between Lowcountry Presbyterian Church and Temple Oseh Shalom



President Al Reuben bensching lulav on Sukkot, October 16, 2009. Photo: Judy Glazer.



Temple Oseh Shalom presently rents space in a Presbyterian church in Bluffton for Shabbat services on the third Friday evening of each month. A portable ark is to the right of the bimah.



Rav Bob Wiener and Cantor Ken Rosenberg (in cap) dedicate Oseh Shalom Gardens, a section of Bluffton Cemetery. Photo: Judy Glazer and Sue Wiener.



Judy Glazer and Cantor Ken Rosenberg with Jewish Marine recruits at Parris Island, November 2009. Photo: Jeff Glazer.

is an ecumenical outreach program that houses and feeds the homeless for short periods in various religious institutions in the area.

The temple's adult education program supports a variety of opportunities, including two Torah study groups. After a year of study, nine congregants honored the congregation last October by celebrating the temple's second b'nai mitzvah service. There has been no need for a Hebrew or Sunday school for children because the overwhelming majority of the membership's children are grown, although one teenager has celebrated her bat mitzvah after intense tutoring and preparation.

A lay cantor and 17-member choir, led by a music director, supplement the congregation's singing and provide music to enhance services. Land in an existing cemetery was recently consecrated for Temple Oseh Shalom Gardens, a Jewish burial ground with room for up to 500 grave sites.

Oseh Shalom is a congregation of active adults with the time, skills, and desire to take part in diverse projects. The



Bat mitzvah class of 2009. Left to right (top row): Moreh Rav Bob Wiener, Carol Rosenberg, Ellie Crystal, Ellen Altman, Judy Glazer; (front row) Phyllis Wilner, Susan Safranek, Jan Mintz, Ruth Kashine, and Minnie Levine. Photo: Sue Wiener.



Table set with traditional foods for Tu b'Shevat seder, January 2010. Photo: Judy Glazer.

temple's board of directors is supported by volunteers serving on 15 committees. The Sisterhood and Men's Club donate innumerable hours to regional organizations, including local schools. At nearby Parris Island Marine Corps Depot congregants provide weekly and High Holiday services for recruits at the facility's Jewish chapel.

Temple Oseh Shalom's phenomenal rise is attributable not only to dramatic population growth, but to its members' dedication to the educational and spiritual enrichment of their fellow Jews and their involvement in programs that benefit the greater community. The congregation is likely to be a strong presence in the region for decades to come.



Larry Katz plants a tree in the temple's Bluffton burial ground, Oseh Shalom Gardens, January 16, 2010. Photo: Jackie Katz.