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Randolph rabbi forges ties with Mercer County church



Together in the Temple Micah sukka on the grounds of the Presbyterian Church of Lawrenceville are the Rev. Jeffrey Vamos, Rabbi Ellen Greenspan, and Bob Pollack.
Photos by Marilyn Silverstein

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As the second intermediate day of the harvest festival of Sukkot unfolded on Sept. 30, members of Temple Micah and the Presbyterian Church of Lawrenceville came together to reap the fruits of an extraordinary fellowship.

The church, which has hosted Temple Micah in its sanctuary for close to 40 years, had donated the front lawn of its parsonage on Lawrenceville Road as the grounds for Temple Micah's sukka. Now, Temple Micah, in turn, was hosting church members in the sukka during the fellowship hour following their Sunday services.

"We have a wonderful relationship," said Rabbi Ellen Greenspan, a Randolph resident, as she adjusted a roll of thatching on the roof of the lattice-work sukka before the program.

"This is the first time we've built a sukka," she said. "It was actually the minister's idea. He asked us why we don't build a sukka, and he said, 'Why don't you build it on my front lawn?' So here we are."

The deacons of the church have been committed to Temple Micah's presence there ever since they welcomed the congregation to use their sanctuary in 1969, according to the rabbi.

"They wouldn't use the word, but we're their mitzva," she said. "They love having us here. I think it's pretty unique. We're not tenants. This is our home."

The arrangement is 100 percent voluntary, noted Bob Pollack of Lawrenceville, who has been president of the 170-family congregation for the past 15 years. "We're guests, basically," he said. "We're guests at their beautiful, historic building."

"It's just fellowship," he added. "They're of a relatively liberal bent, and they are very active in lots of community projects. They're always looking for interfaith opportunities."

Greenspan is in her 15th year as religious leader of the unaffiliated liberal-egalitarian congregation. She also serves as assistant director of admissions at the Solomon Schechter Day School of Essex and Union in West Orange. She is a member of Congregation Beth Hatikvah, a Reconstructionist congregation in Summit.

The relationship has been especially warm since the rabbi arrived 15 years ago, observed Joan Semenuk, who is retired from her longtime role as associate for pastoral ministry at the church.

"When Temple Micah got a new Torah, the congregation was invited to those services," she recalled. "It was a wonderful time for both congregations, that time of welcoming the Torah."

Over the years, members of Temple Micah have joined church members in various social action programs — volunteering at soup kitchens or in low-income neighborhoods or with Habitat for Humanity, Pollack said. At times, members of each congregation have attended the other's services, and Temple Micah has invited church members to attend its second seders.

Last fall, he added, the congregations came together for an environmental program featuring a screening of *An Inconvenient Truth*. In addition, plans are going forward to bring together teens from both congregations for mutual learning and sharing.

"We couldn't exist without the church," Greenspan said. "Our relationship has enabled us to exist without charging high dues. It's the way we can afford \$250 dues and can invite people to High Holiday services without tickets."

Using a portable ark, Temple Micah converts the church sanctuary into a synagogue one Friday night per month for what are basically Reform services, she said. The congregation celebrates Saturday-morning services whenever there's a bar or bat mitzva ceremony — about 15 times per year. And the 60 students of the religious school come together at the church for 90-minute classes every Tuesday.

"We are a part-time synagogue," Greenspan said. "We attract everybody — a lot of interfaith families, a lot of empty nesters."

Temple Micah is especially comfortable for interfaith families looking for a religious connection, Pollack said.

"What I've always said about Temple Micah is that if it didn't exist, someone would create it," he said. "It's a place where you can come and feel comfortable in every way. It's a draw for people who don't want the pressures of a large congregation, and it also draws young couples looking for a connection. There's no pressure at all."

"That's the beauty of it," Greenspan said. "We serve families who otherwise would not belong anywhere, and I think that's important. That's who we are. I think we serve a very important place in the Jewish community of Mercer County."

Semenuk said she has a Jewish son-in-law and brother-in-law, and that the church's relationship with Temple Micah has allowed her to feel closer to them. "It's meant for me a great possibility of healing between Jews and Christians," she said.

As the fellowship hour got under way, the rabbi welcomed into the sukka the Rev. Jeffrey Vamos, pastor of the 850-member church, members of his congregation, and members of Temple Micah. During the brief program, she explained the meaning of Sukkot, demonstrated the rituals of the festival's lulav and etrog, and read a Sukkot story.



Rabbi Ellen Greenspan displays an etrog during a fellowship hour in the sukkah.

As the program ended, Vamos said in an interview that he felt "terrific" about having a sukkah on his home ground. "How many Christian churches can say they have a sukkah on their front lawn? We hope it's a symbol of brotherhood and sisterhood across religious lines and boundaries," he said.

The pastor said he sees the church's relationship with Temple Micah as a way to celebrate a shared biblical history.

"I think it also, hopefully, is a symbol of the kind of mutual respect that each of our faiths teaches," he said. "We need to have everybody act that out in real ways. The bottom line is, it has been a really enriching relationship for the congregation and for me."

Church member Tom Wilfird, a former mayor of Lawrenceville, called the relationship "wonderful."

"It's an affirmation that what we have in common is more important than what divides us," he said. "We need more of that kind of affirmation throughout the world."

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