

As I write this, it is the 6th evening of Pesach and the counting of the 5th night of the Omer. Thoughts of Bolton Street Synagogue's 36th Anniversary and what it represents for me, come to mind. The counting of the Omer serves as a spiritual preparation and assurance that the wisdom of the Torah will be continually delivered to us. It was passed down to us through the generations by our ancestors. According to tradition, the Torah was given by God on Mount Sinai at the start of the month of Sivan around the same time as our holiday of Shavuot. This course of acceptance and enlightenment by us as a Jewish community takes 49 days, the full counting of the Omer from Pesach to Shavuot.

The meanings and values of Pesach and the counting of the Omer ring in the BSS soul. This is part of God's promise and covenant to our ancestors that is reflected through us. It is appropriate for our community to reflect upon the double chai 36-year story of BSS and its rich history just like the Maggid narration in the Haggadah that recounts the origins of our peoplehood from slavery to freedom.

Recently, I had to drop things off to my son, Michael, who now lives temporarily in the Bolton Hill area. Everything on that crisp mid-spring day seemed the same from the days when I served BSS between 1991-2013. Before seeing Michael, I chose to make the right turn off Eutaw onto Lafayette and then take a right on Bolton Street until I reached number 1311. The trees were close to full bloom, flowers were dancing in elegance, friendly people were talking on the street, and there was **the building that housed BSS**, still shining in its glory. It spoke of its illustrious history.

<https://explore.baltimoreheritage.org/items/show/98>

I am honored to have served during an important twenty-two years of BSS growth. I got to observe how a dedicated group of members gave BSS its independent distinction with tender loving care. The nurturing of synagogue life is not an easy task whether independent or affiliated. The BSS leadership, clergy, staff, and members found solutions to our institution's many challenges. The presence of God was always felt as we engaged together with our holidays, day to day existence and during moments of joy and sorrow.

Redemption for all our efforts come in many forms. The old building was in constant need of repair. And yet, every time I came to the building, it always presented itself very well, and there were congregants always taking care of its needs for the purpose it was created. Every High Holy Days, the many hours of preparation and service presentations, both in the physical and spiritual sense, were handled by the congregation members with our small professional clergy and staff.

There was always purpose and fortitude during BSS times of growth and celebration. I had the privilege to see the vision and transformation of BSS from its Bolton Hill location to its beautiful new home in Roland Park. I was given the opportunity to help the congregation create an acoustic space that would serve its musical aspirations and prophetic aspirations. I remember well, when the building committee granted my request to speak with acoustic engineers about the creation of the new space for worship and programming. The acoustics in the old sanctuary were excellent without amplification for music. I desired to help our congregation recreate this sound in the new space. The acoustic engineer I met in the old sanctuary demonstrated to me how this could be done.

When the building was first constructed in 1874-75, the Reformed Episcopal Church of the Redeemer leadership had the insight to use the best architectural/acoustic methods of the time to also create an acceptable musical and presentation space. The acoustic engineer had me stand in the middle of the

old BSS sanctuary. He then asked me to listen to him speak to me in a normal speaking voice. He began stepping back from me slowly asking me to tell him when I heard the transition from hearing him speak to when the echo of his voice made the room speak to me. I was astounded by the transition. It was about 50 feet. No matter where we were in the room, the transition change at 50 feet was the same. The room spoke as if all the voices of deliverance, redemption, praise and faith had a message to tell us.

Then the acoustic engineer offered that message. The engineer/acoustic technology of 2001-03 would be able to recreate the sounds of the old Bolton Street into a new space using the right construction materials and design of the space. Members of the building committee went to many different faith community spaces and came up with an acceptable and fiscally responsible strategy. And the rest is history. BSS has one of the best acoustic spaces in the greater Baltimore/DC area. The shining proof was when the Baltimore Choral Arts Chamber Choir presented a concert in the newly dedicated sanctuary.

The music we created in both our sanctuary spaces brought our collective Jewish story alive. The melodies, harmonies, arrangements, instruments, BSS choral groups, cantors, soloists and musicians brought dignity, inspiration and participation of excellent musical expression to our congregation. We have created together a tapestry of musical sound that keeps our faith alive that blends tradition with innovation that fits our mission as a congregation well.

Special recognition needs to be expressed about our Religious School with its many devoted teachers and administrators. I felt blessed to be the music teacher for our religious school for many years under the capable direction of Michael Green as we learned together, presented services with the religious school youth and celebrated the many Jewish holidays with joy and delight.

It was also a privilege to work with all the presidents, boards, committees, staff and six distinctive Rabbis during this BSS period of growth. I learned and gained insight about synagogue life from Rabbis Sheldon Elster, Amy Scheinerman, Mona Decker, Geoff Basik, Jonathan Panitz and John Franken. I enjoy my conversations with Rabbi Andy Gordon and wish him continued success with BSS and his rabbinic career.

Congratulations also go to the process of BSS change from independent to affiliated status with the Union of Reform Judaism. I don't believe that BSS will ever lose its independent spirit. The Reform movement celebrates creativity, independent thinking, participatory decision making, meaningful engagement with God & Jewish traditions and new ways to express our Jewish faith. I was greatly influenced from these URJ qualities of Jewish life growing up in a nurturing and successful Reform congregation on Long Island.

My Jewish journey was fostered in great part from my experiences with BSS. It has served me well with my continued involvement with Jewish synagogues in the greater Baltimore/DC area. In addition, the BSS experience had a significant impact upon my family. My daughter Elana has become a successful writer of Jewish children's books and teacher in early child Jewish education. Her husband is in his third year at Ziegler School of Rabbinical Studies (Conservative). Interestingly, the Dean at Ziegler is Rabbi Dr. Bradley Shavit Artson who used to be a student rabbi for BSS in its very early days. You can watch his teachings on the web. BSS played an important role in his development as a rabbi. My son Michael is a practicing artist and pursuing a degree in visual arts at Towson University. Karen has recently retired from Morgan State University. We continue our involvement together in synagogue life.

Just like our Passover story, we all need to retell over again our personal BSS narratives with a commitment to have our BSS preserve Jewish life into the future. We are all connected in very special ways that help form the passage to an engaged Jewish life. My feelings toward BSS are well highlighted in our Hallel and Psalms of praise, sung during Pesach and many of our holidays.

“Ana Adonai hoshiah na. Ana Adonai hatzlichah na.” (Psalm 118)

Please God, when we call, send us your help. Please God, let us prevail.

<http://piyutnorthamerica.org/recordings-by-alphabet> (Great recordings including Ana Adonai archived by B’nai Jeshurun in New York City)

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/513b9fc4e4b0b5df0ebd941d/t/56a4fccd0e4c11b9a8d57c4f/1453653198281/Ana-Adonai-Hoshia-Na.pdf>

How true for our congregation.

Bolton Street Synagogue, your 36 years of service, devotion and success are a testimony for the ages!

Cantor Alan

Cantor Emeritus, Bolton Street Synagogue