

Comments, Ken Karpay
June 10, 2022
Bolton Street Synagogue's 36th Anniversary Shabbat

Thank you to Rabbi Gordon, Joy Mandel, and the rest of the committee for organizing our anniversary celebrations and for inviting me to speak.

Much of life is serendipity.

Sometimes good things happen, seemingly by chance, that shift our lives in unexpected and good ways.

Such is the case with Bolton Street Synagogue. On our 36th anniversary I want to share two stories of serendipity about our history.

Let's go back. To 1986. Baltimore's Beth Am Synagogue decides not to renew the contract of their rabbi, Earl Jordan. A few days after learning this news, Earl is having lunch with his friend David Malone, the minister for Brown Memorial Church in Bolton Hill on Park Avenue.

After Earl shares the news of his imminent unemployment, David tells Earl about a simmering problem he is facing at Brown Memorial. For many years the congregation was housed in a grand and beautiful church, but it also owns a small, old, rundown chapel on Bolton Street, just around the block.

Some Bolton Hill neighbors are unhappy that the chapel on Bolton Street remains empty; it has become an eyesore. The neighbors urge Brown Memorial to sell the chapel. But the only realistic buyer would be another church. And neither Brown Memorial Church nor David Malone relish having another church – a competitor – in their little neighborhood.

At one point during their lunch, either David the minister, or Earl the rabbi, joke that they have a solution to both of their problems: how about Earl start a new synagogue... in that little chapel in Bolton Hill? Brown Memorial would sell the chapel to Earl's new congregation. Earl would have a pulpit, and the chapel would be occupied by a synagogue, not a church – and no longer a problem for David.

An off-hand comment, a joke; but within a few months Bolton Street Synagogue became a reality.

From the start it is proposed that Bolton Street be an open Jewish community rooted in tradition. Our doors are wide open to anyone who wishes to celebrate modern Jewish life. And that openness translates into something wonderful: a Jewish house of worship that is friendly, happy and non-judgmental.

My wife, Jeannette, and I were both 29 years old at the time, with a newborn baby boy. We, along with other Bolton Street founders and other members – many of them here this evening in-person or on Zoom – loved this new community, with all its challenges and quirks, from the start.

Now, the second story. It's 1998. We eventually outgrow that little building and need a new home.

One evening, Nancy Savage, then a Bolton Street Synagogue board member, is having dinner with a longtime friend and her husband, Kirk Carlson. Nancy tells Kirk how the synagogue is looking for a new home; maybe an old building in the city. We look and look, she says, but nothing seems right and affordable.

Kirk then tells Nancy about his problem: his job at BGE is managing the electric utility's real estate portfolio which includes dozens of buildings.

One of the properties in his portfolio is particularly problematic: a vacant, 10,000 square foot, red brick edifice, constructed in the 1950s as a power sub-station that doubles as a bomb shelter. Located in the Evergreen neighborhood, adjacent to Roland Park, BGE has tried to sell the building unsuccessfully. Kirk is under pressure to dispose of the building.

Nancy and Kirk laugh: how about a synagogue on the edge of Roland Park created out of a vacant, electric, utility substation?

The rest, of course, you know.

In 1986 if you had predicted to the 35 families who joined together to create Bolton Street Synagogue that in 2022 we would be a Reform Congregation housed in an air conditioned, ADA-compliant building previously owned by BGE on the edge of Roland Park... they would have challenged your prediction...until you said that we remain committed to being open, with friendship and social justice at our core.

Congratulations to Bolton Street on your 36th anniversary. While much about our community has been serendipitous, and much has changed, our commitments remain very intentional and consistent: living a vibrant, joyful, Jewish life.

Finally, thank you to all of you here today – and those who came before you – who helped us to be who we were, and who we remain.

Shalom.

- Ken Karpay and his wife, Jeannette, were founding members of Bolton Street Synagogue in 1986. Ken was president of Bolton Street from 1997 - 1999.