

## Har Shalom "DAY OF REMEMBERING"

"Remember us for life, zochreinu l'chaim, O Sovereign Who delights in life." So begins this special insertion into the Avot prayer of our Rosh Hashana liturgy. As we remember the days and years of our own lives, we also remember Abraham and Isaac walking together toward their mountain; Jacob dreaming of a ladder to link heaven and earth; Moses turning aside to look at the common bush burning with a divine flame. For us and for our own people remembering is life and thus, it is most fitting that Rosh Hashana be referred to in the Torah as Yom Hazikaron, Day of Remembering.

Memory is so important that written on each license plate in the province of Québec is the motto, "Je me souviens -- I remember." A people that remembers its past will always endure.

Can you imagine the consequences if we had no memory, no past to learn from? There is an illuminating midrash, or Rabbinic legend, about what happened to Adam and Eve at the end of their first day of life. A great tragedy occurred. The brilliant orb that lit the day began to disappear below the horizon; a curtain of darkness simultaneously descended. They were overwhelmed with fear, scared of the first sunset, afraid they would never again see the sun. But in the morning as they awoke to the first rays of a scarlet dawn, they were relieved to witness once again the sun's presence. Then Adam and Eve realized that darcho shel olam kach, that is the way of the world.

And now, 5765 years later, according to our tradition, what can we remember and learn from our past as Jews not from the Garden of Eden, but from the San Juans of Colorado. Who knows when Jews first gathered to worship in Four Corner's Area? Who knows where our Torah scrolls originally came from? As we approach our hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary year of Jewish life in Durango, 10th anniversary of Har Shalom and the 350th birthday of American Jewish communal life 1654-2004, let us recall our proud heritage of service to the family and friends of Har Shalom.

What happened 350 yrs ago last Sunday? September 12 marks the 350 anniversary of the birth of Jewish communal life with the arrival of 23 Jewish souls in New Amsterdam from Recife, Brazil fleeing Portuguese persecution. We have been in this country and thrived ever since. Our journey was not without its bumps in the road. The governor of New Amsterdam, Peter Styvesant, disliked Jews intensely and it was only the corporate higher ups that forced his hand regarding Jews. The Governor listened to the shareholders in Amsterdam and let them in on the condition that the poor among them shall not be a burden to the community, but supported by them. Ever since then, we've been taking care of our own in this diverse society.

But enough about the history of the goldena medina, as my grandparents from Eastern Europe called this land, but our gorgeous state. Colorado Jewry has a golden history: The "Pike's Peak or Bust" gold rush in 1859 led to the establishment of several settlements near the Platte River. Denver City began in 1860. Among the dozen Jewish '59ers, most of them merchants and natives of Central Europe, were some dedicated souls credited with holding the first religious services of any kind (in Denver in September 1859). Their presence received its first official recognition on Dec. 26, 1859, when the Denver City and Town Company adopted a resolution: "... that the trustees of the Hebrew Synagogue be donated ten lots... providing they build a house of worship in Denver City within eight months from this date. Said house to cost not less than \$700." The synagogue was not built, but this group, which doubled in size in 1860, formed a Hebrew Cemetery Association and was known also as the Hebrew Burial and Prayer Society. From it the B'nai B'rith lodge and Reform Congregation Emanuel, respectively, were established in 1871 and 1872, sharing the same rooms for worship and meetings. In 1866, when Dr. John Elsner arrived, there were more than 100 Jews in the city. As mohel he traveled throughout the West, including the Four Corners, for decades. The first medical society in Colorado Territory was organized at his home and celebrities such as, Oscar Wilde, visited him.

When the cure for tuberculosis was sought in the dry climate of the West, creating the problem of indigent sufferers, Denver protested "the town is getting to be a sanitarium." Frances Wisebart Jacobs, "The Mother of the Charities" helped solve the problem by founding the Associated Charities in 1887, a forerunner of the Community Chest and later United Way. Jews also tried to aid their own people. (A

Jewish hospital, named for Mrs. Jacobs, was completed in 1892, but because of economic setbacks it was not opened until 1899.)

B'nai B'rith opened the National Jewish Hospital for Consumptives (NJHC). After 1881, Russian Jews, among them tuberculars, came from the sweatshops of the East to settle. Many members later became successful cattlemen and created and strengthened Orthodox Jewish life in Denver. The city's reputation as a pious Jewish community drew newcomers directly from Europe, especially from 1900 to 1907 through the port of Galveston. Jewish immigration reached a peak before World War I, many seeking care at NJHC and the "tents" of the Jewish Consumptives' Relief Society (JCRS). (Despite a bitter rivalry, which arose when the latter was founded in 1903, they jointly founded a home for the children of the sick in 1908. When tuberculosis subsided during the 1940s these institutions began to treat other diseases.)

With the exception of the period when the Ku Klux Klan captured the state government in 1935, Jews have been prominent in political life. Wolfe Londoner, who had walked most of the way from St. Louis to Denver in 1860, later became mayor. Culturally, beginning in 1859 with the founding of a chess and literary society, the Jews have contributed to Jewish as well as general art.

But when did Jews first come to the Four Corners? While Denver had golden origins, the Four Corners had silver ones! Durango was founded by the Denver and Rio Grande baby railroad as a town to bypass Animas in 1880. By 1886 Durango had 15 thriving saloons, but six uncrowded churches. (p. 43 Smith) even though it was nicknamed "Church city"!

Jerry Gardenswartz, a 4th generation native, relates that there were a small number of German Jewish merchants in Silverton and Pagosa as far back as the 1880s. A decade later his great grandparents, Aaron and Hannah, cattle ranched on the Pine River in Bayfield. They had six children, the eldest of whom, Morris and Mary Cook Gardenswartz, became cattle people. They had four children, the eldest two boys, Sam and Buster, started the Gardenswartz Brothers Sporting Goods Store in 1928 where the Main Mall now stands. One can ascertain the notoriety of being Jewish when the post office delivered a letter addressed to "Jew Brothers" sporting Goods! Buster's effervescent personality and contributions to Durango are recognized with a plaque on the west side of the Ninth Street Bridge (in 1984 by Durango's Jewish mayor, Ira Plotkin). Isaac Kruschke, a German Jewish dry goods merchant from Silverton was another in this line of distinguished Jewish merchants in Durango. He built the historic Gardenswartz Building at Ninth and Main (871 Main Avenue) in 1883. This "Renaissance-Revival" structure is on the Register of National Historic Places as part of the Durango Main Avenue Historic District. An addition was erected in 1901 to this structure that helps define the historic character of central Durango.

During the flu epidemic in 1918-19, Kruschke allowed it to be occupied as an emergency hospital. For years, Kruschke was a leader of the town's business community who helped found and direct the Durango Board of Trade. His wife was a charter member of the Reading Club of Durango whose bibliophiles started the Durango Public Library.

Other personalities helped develop the Four Corners such as, Otto Mears, a Russian Jew known as the Pathfinder of the San Juans as he founded the early toll roads in Silverton, Ouray and Rico earning a portrait on the rotunda of the State Capital. Another Jew who lived a life of service was the Silverton Madam, Fanny Wright, know as Jew Fanny, who is lauded on a plaque on a restaurant building in Silverton near the train station. Her and her fellow "soiled dove", "Sheany Pearl" or Pearl Eastman worked as nurses during the flu epidemic.

While the early 20th century had perhaps as many as one hundred Jews there was no formal congregation. For in 1917, a young Episcopalian minister helped lead Jewish activities in Durango when Yom Kippur services were held at the St Mark's Episcopalian Church. When I first came out her 5 years ago I was impressed by the Magen David in the stained glass at this hospitable church!

Organized Jewish life awaited the instigation of Ira & Kay Plotkin. Ira grew up Orthodox in Washington DC. In 1975, a one year teaching position at Ft Lewis turned into a 15 year love affair until 1990. He got

involved when Bus Gardenswartz bought a coffee for Ira and prompted him to start an organized Jewish community, the Four Corners Jewish Community Center. And so when Ira and Kay Plotkin put an advertisement in the Durango Herald announcing that there would be a gathering of all Jews in the Four Corners region at their house (at 2455 W. 2nd Avenue). Three dozen or so Jews showed up from Durango, Farmington, Pagosa, and Cortez. They were a diverse and transient community as we are today of married, singles, liberal, traditional and secular Jews, who decided to hold shabbat services and potlucks for religious fellowship. Durango Jewish historian and lay leader, Richard Brown recollects of this first gathering was that it was a "personal epiphany" of Jewish communal life. The six or seven regulars decided to meet as a study group, and their first book was "Jews, God and History" by Max Dimont. They soon began to have services rather than the study group. Services alternated between the Plotkin and Brown (1770 W 3rd Ave) houses once a month. Services were held in various places.

(The regular gathering members were Richard and Gayle Brown, Joan Green, Darlene Kagen, Amy Ware (Horowitz), and Susan Witkin. They were later joined by Herb and Enid Brodsky (who were living outside Pagosa Springs) and Frayda and Bruce Ornstein.)

One of the first Rosh Hashanah services was held in Henry Kwitter's antique store on 31st Street. Kwitter had moved here with his wife from the east coast and established a business selling antiques. According to Richard Brown, Henry was a curmudgeon's curmudgeon, but still a likeable guy, who could blow a mean Shofar. Other services were held at FT Lewis College interfaith chapel and later (1983) at Unitarian house.

By end of the second year, the young congregation hungered for spiritual leadership. Or at least they wanted a rabbi for the high holidays, 1st rabbi was an Englishman, Rabbi Goldberg who made a hasty exit from Cheyenne for personal indiscretions. He was succeeded the next year (1973/74) by Rabbi Buz Bogage. Rabbi Bogage shared with me how the community really pulled together (8/30/04 phone interview). At the Ft Lewis chapel, they used the old Union Prayer book and read the prayers and interpreted them to each other with lots of discussion and sharing of feelings. They were an informal group, good humored, free thinking and hands on. Other itinerant rabbis followed suit. Particular mention of spiritual leadership must go to Rabbi Gershon Winkler, a renowned scholar, rabbinic trickster, kabbalist, shaman and sage who has come here regularly these past dozen or so years from his home and retreat center in Cuba where he directs the Walking Stick Foundation for aboriginal Jewish spirituality.

The young congregation and Frayda Ornstein tried to start Hebrew school with the help of Rabbi Bill Cohen, but found it tough to find teachers. Nonetheless, they persevered for the next generation was always an important concern. The Plotkins bought the New Machzor we are holding in our hands in honor of his son's, Noah Benjamin bris. Rabbi Jay Feder did the first bris with Rabbi Eisenman who flew in from Denver for it. In 1983-4 Ira became the 1st Jewish mayor. His Jewishness was never overtly an issue in his campaign only the fact that he was a liberal democrat outsider from DC was the issue! If not for his illness, he would have run for reelection. We left Durango to go to DC for treatment and returned to Durango later briefly before returning to Denver to teach at Chinese and Japanese history until he became dean at Regis University and retired in 2002. Under Plotkin's instigation, the city dedicated 9th street Bridge for Gardenswartz in 1984! The small paper Torah in the wooden case was acquired in Washington, DC and was donated by Ira's mother, Esther Plotkin between 1983-1984.

During the 1980's, there was a parallel and sometimes combined effort underway in Farmington. This was led by Harris Richard, who held B'nai Mitzvah classes for several young people. Harris has been another member of our community for many years, and has indeed been a teacher and spiritual leader for many young and old.

Though it held number of activities in the mid-1980s such as well attended Passover seders in cramped quarters with overflowing matzo balls, the Four Corners' Jewish Center lacked the critical mass to succeed. By the early 1990s it was virtually defunct; there were no regularly scheduled services or group functions.

In June of 1986, after a Passover Seder at the Holiday Inn organized by Lorraine Gardenswartz, the formal community had dwindled. The annual meeting at the Unitarian Center found Gerry Gardenswartz was President, Karen Rodberg VP, Joan Green was Secretary, and Duffy Gold, Treasurer. In a letter of July 18, 1986, they made a decision to keep the corporate structure, but to suspend all activities. Durango's history has always been very "transient and Motley"!

The resurgence started a decade later in Merv Bergal's barbershop chair with conversations with Jeff Deitch, Richard Brown and Bonnie Daily. First organizational meeting at their home and named San Juan Hebrew Congregation-a name that "seemed to fit." Merv Bergal became president for seven years. Merv had bar mitzvah at St Marks at age 55. Herb Brodsky succeeded him as president. With services two times per month, Jan Courte became the spiritual leader until she moved to California returning each year for the High holy days and other events. Services also led by Harold Shure who kept the accounts, Eric Green who was involved with the newsletter; active members included, Suzaane Turpeck and Marv and Pat Dworkin. Lisa Smith became the musical mayven and service leader and excelled at the leadership she continues unto today. Pat and Merv donated the mezzuzah for door frame at St Marks which is still there. Passover seders were held in such diverse locales as the Golden West trailer park and fairgrounds, Mason center, and then Doubletree hotel as crowds grew bigger. Yummy potlucks after services created the heimish "comfortable atmosphere." Of course, there were complaints about services being too liberal and then when changed to conservative, many still didn't come. Balance has always been a challenge for the Four Corners where the community tried its best to be all things for all people.

After the Mervish years, Jesse Hutt came on board with her kids with nursery school, which saw San Juan Hebrew Congregation blossom and later served as president and shadchan through our mutual friend, Seth Stabinsky, to get me here!

Our second Torah was brought from Denver by David Mallin, nephew of HEA's first rabbi, Manny Laderman. David received the Holocaust Torah about 8 years ago from HEA's current rabbi, Bruce Dollin. David later built the gorgeous ark that we are so blessed to enjoy today after he studied the biblical artisan, Bezallem. He hand-made the Ark with careful dovetail joinery out of Cherry and South American walnut wood with plans for a gun rack that he skillfully modified. He found swivel wood from Weminuche woods & African palace door wood to give the ark elegance and authenticity. He used the Tent of Meeting colors with 7 sacred mtns 6th path to tetragramaton. You can see yourself in the name thru 2 way glass. Only our ark has the petition for Middle East peace signified by the Star of David opposite the crescent of Islam as a carved prayer for peace. Harold Shure & Martin Model sanded their fingers to the bone to create this awesome ark of power, mystery, holiness. The Kiddush cup was David's grandfather's.

One of the first Jewish funerals took place when Bart Rafkin (partner in Durango Diner) lost his father unexpectedly. He came to Richard Brown and asked for help lead the first of many funerals. This was the genesis to have a separate cemetery. Sixteen years ago (on 8/8/98) Merv Bergal established the Jewish Cemetery in Durango.

Our third Torah came from DC through the generosity of Jan Philips.

Mark and Alison Epstein generously donated the Jehovah Witness hall to be our first spiritual home two years ago. A new home and resurgent pride led to the bestowing of a new name, Har Shalom, our mountain of peace, here in the land of elk and honey.

We owe a debt of gratitude to these founding members who laid the foundations for the culture of volunteerism for the heimish and vibrant holy community that we participate in today!

Here we stand at the threshold of turning 125, poised to explore the new vistas of a permanent home, congregational affiliation and the reality of Rabbinic leadership. Yet as we do move forward we must preserve the uniqueness of our pioneering spirit, the pulling together to make things work, the satisfaction of being involved in a community where every member counts.

Our congregation has always prided itself on its diversity. People come from all over the Four Corners. They come from Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Humanist and secular backgrounds- and everything in between. As a result, services have been held in a variety of styles and locales e.g., in the New Mexican Desert or Tashlich services at Animas River. In our holy community, no one is turned away for financial reasons. And we've always given back to our community with generosity, leadership and service.

As we celebrate the creation of the world, we recall the highly commendable past of our congregation. What blessings, then, should Har Shalom pray for, this Rosh Hashana? An answer may be found in a parable regarding a person who had been wandering in the desert for days. Close to collapse, he stumbles upon an oasis. He rests against a fine tree, drinks clear water from a cool stream, eats the tree's delicious fruits, and relaxes in its breezy shade. When he at last got ready to leave, he rose to thank it saying, "O tree, with what shall I bless you? Shall I bless you with abundance of water, with luscious fruit, with luxuriant foliage? Why these blessings are yours already. There is but one blessing I may fittingly pronounce upon you: May your seed, when replanted, be like you."

And so, Har Shalom, your challenge on this Rosh Hashana, this Day of Remembering, as we celebrate our 125 anniversary year of Jews in the 4 corners, the 350th anniversary of Jewish life in America and the tenth anniversary of Har Shalom, is to continue in your tradition of excellence of creatively praying together, teaching your young and old alike, helping other Jews, and contributing to the community -- by doing so "May your seed, when replanted, be like you."

Ken yehi ratson - So may it be God's will.

**Gleaned from primary documents in the Har Shalom archives in addition to articles in the CD Rom edition of the Encyclopedia Judaica Rocky Mountain Boom Town: A History of Durango, Colorado by Duane A. Smith, and Exploring Jewish Colorado by Phil Goodstein in addition to phone interviews with Richard Brown, David Mallin, Merv Bergal, Jerry Gardenswartz, Ira Plotkin and Rabbi Buz Bogage.**