

Sim Shalom Annual Report - 2011

Sim Shalom had a satisfying, but challenging year in 2011. Our new Synagogue premises have made possible several new kinds of programs which are bringing new members into the community. That is the good news; the bad news has been a severe deterioration in our relationship to the Hungarian government.

First the good news. Realizing that our future depends on the younger generations, Sim Shalom has placed an emphasis on programs for our school age children and teenagers. Our Talmud Torah was expanded to include a class for very young children. Baby namings are fairly frequent and serve as an early recruitment for it. The group of teenagers in our resurrected youth group are now in their third year together. Last summer they made a 5 day trip to see the Jewish sights of London under the leadership of the Rabbi and their mentor, Kati Gyarfás. It did great things for their Esprit de Corps. During the year, they have an active program of celebrating and studying together. In 2011, the Rabbi started a very popular biweekly program called Torah, Pancakes and Us. The kids take turns making the pancakes with various fillings for the hollow teenager stomachs, and when that need is satisfied, then there is a session of study of some ethical problem from a Jewish point of view. Apparently the teenagers really like dealing with material on an adult level, and it's such a popular program that they bring their friends, some of whom are not even Jewish. And some of the members are now bringing their unaffiliated parents to Sim Shalom for programs. So as a community-building activity, it is working extremely well.

There are also two new programs for the adults in the congregation, both educational. One is a course in Biblical Hebrew, taught by a university professor, for those who want to be able to read Torah and to follow the prayerbook Hebrew. The other is a textual study of the material in the Torah on King David, taught by the Rabbi.

A big step forward has just been made on the religious side of the congregation with the completion of our new Hungarian Reform Shacharit Siddur. Four years ago, the Rabbi and her committee completed the first Reform Hungarian Kabbalat Siddur, but we were still struggling along with a cut and paste Shacharit Siddur from the early 90's. After a bit of rest, they decided to start on a major upgrade and revision of it, with the addition of educational notes and of many prayers for other occasions, including life-cycle events and dealing with health problems. This work has just been finished with the financial support of the Dutch Jewish Humanitarian Foundation. The next step will be to combine the two into a more permanent publication that can be used in synagogues and sold in bookstores. Services are now held weekly on Friday nights, and biweekly on Saturday mornings, alternating with the very popular Torah Study program that goes back to the earliest days of the congregation.

Last summer, the Hungarian government embarked on a program of a major revision of its relationships to the many Hungarian religious communities. There were two main thrusts. One was to force a redistribution of the funds coming to the Jewish Community from the government as a restitution for property confiscated during WWII. This restitution money has largely been given to an organization controlled by the dominant Jewish movement in Hungary known as the Neologs. They were able to

establish themselves in the eyes of the government as the "Jewish Establishment", and hence entitled to manage and distribute all the restitution monies. Unfortunately, they do not consider Reform as being really Jewish, and hence it is not entitled to a share of this support. But then neither do they regard Chabad as entitled to a share, so when they say "...it's not about the money", it's really about the money! The Hungarian government has embarked on an attempt to have this money distributed equitably among the several Jewish movements, but the Neolog are resisting vigorously. It may well come to a court battle, and the outcome is uncertain. If Sim Shalom were to get it's fair share, it would solve our money problems for the foreseeable future.

The other thrust was to cancel the registration of a few smaller "churches" which were really business enterprises taking advantage of the liberal rules applying to religious institutions. But instead of directly going after these "free-loaders" they chose to cancel the registration of all small congregations and then require them to re-register under the eye of the whole parliament. Both Sim Shalom and Bet Orim, the other, younger, Reform congregation, were caught in this draconian net. One of the consequences of the de-registration was that we lost the possibility for our supporters to donate to us 1% of their annual income tax, which amounted to 25% of our annual budget. Some anti-semitism in the Parliament may have had an effect on our losing out also. The legal process of getting re-registered is proving very difficult and will hopefully be settled in the coming year.

The final big development of the past year is that Sim Shalom is exploring the possibility of forming an umbrella organization, the Association of Reform Jewish Congregations, together with our fellow congregation, Bet Orim. This would possibly increase the likelihood that the government would again recognize Reform as a legitimate movement in Judaism, and this is a strong incentive to do so. The government would then have to deal with only one entity in Reform, rather than many. The main problem is the difficulty of finding a legal form of association that will preserve the independence of each congregation inside the association. Our leaders and lawyers are working hard to solve these problems.

Jesse Weil

Treasurer

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