

NORTHERN VIRGINIA



Groundbreaking ceremony for off-street parking lot on June 20, 1976.

Photo courtesy of Congregation Etz Hayim

A tree of life at 75 Arlington's Congregation Etz Hayim plans for its future

By Josh Marks
General Assignment Reporter

The story of Arlington's Congregation Etz Hayim started 75 years ago on the second floor of Public Shoe Store in the Clarendon neighborhood, a place that Rabbi Lia Bass said "has been there it seems since the time of Moses."

While the shoe store on Wilson Boulevard, owned by Etz Hayim member S.H. "Doc" Friedman, is closing its doors for good this year, the county's only conservative synagogue is looking toward the future at the same time as it celebrates the milestone, culminating with a party on Dec. 6 that will be held at its building on Arlington Boulevard, where it has worshipped since 1948.

Bass, the 180-family synagogue's spiritual leader since 2001, said the house of worship has undergone many changes over the years, including name changes. Organized as Ohev Shalom in 1940, the synagogue would be called Arlington-Fairfax Jewish Center and then Arlington-Fairfax Jewish Congregation. After realizing they were the only synagogue in the Washington area without a Hebrew name, the membership in 2003 voted to change the name to Etz Hayim, which means "tree of life" in Hebrew.

The congregation, whose membership

reached its peak of around 300 families in 1968, outlived the American Nazi Party. The hate group was headquartered in Arlington and used to picket outside the synagogue until the late 1950s.

Etz Hayim was also involved in the campaign for Soviet Jewry, an example of what past president Jerry Jacobs, 71, said is a long tradition of the congregation playing a leadership role in Northern Virginia.

"Historically, we were the key synagogue in Northern Virginia," said Jacobs. "There were one or two which were founded earlier than us such as Agudas Achim and Beth El in Alexandria, but for whatever reasons our members looked upon themselves as the leaders of the community and they were indeed very active."

Jacobs hasn't lived in Northern Virginia since 1977, when he and his wife moved to Rockville. But to this day they remain active members of Etz Hayim.

"It's a very *haimish* kind of shul, very friendly," said Jacobs. "You may be deluged by everyone asking you the same questions: 'Where are you from? What are you up to?' and so on, with a real interest in making you feel at home and part of the family."

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The congregation is also welcoming of young families and interfaith families. About 70 percent of the families are in their 50s or younger and about 60 percent of families come from an interfaith background, according to Bass.

Stacey Viera, 35, grew up in Silver Spring at Shaare Tefila Congregation. Her husband Luis is not Jewish. They have been members of Etz Hayim for around three years and send their two children – Myer, 4, and Dagny, 2 – to the synagogue preschool. They live in the neighborhood and like that they can walk to shul.

Viera said when they first moved to the area and were going to start a family, they needed to find a synagogue.

They decided to take a chance on Etz Hayim, she said. They brought their young son to a Tot Shabbat there.

"We felt very comfortable, and we sat next to these people and they started

speaking Spanish to each other, she recalled. "And my husband's Puerto Rican, so it was kind of a sign that this was our *besht*."

Viera said Bass, who is originally from Brazil, was a big reason they decided to join.

"If Rabbi Bass wasn't so warm and welcoming, especially toward the young families, we wouldn't be here," said Viera. "So I think that that she's a major component."

Etz Hayim is involved in a strategic plan for the next five years and beyond, re-examining issues such as leadership, membership, social action and rituals. According to Bass, the strategic plan will be finished around the High Holidays.

Said Bass: "We are definitely looking in the next 75 years to become an even more participatory congregation, with definitely more participation not only in the intersection of Jewish life both in Arlington County and the world outside."

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