

**Roundtable Discussion of the Formation and History of Congregation Ner Tamid.****Date: September 21, 2016****Participants: Bob Unger, Gerald “Jerry” Gordon, Renee Diamond, Gil Shaw, David Wasserman, and Rabbi Sanford Akselrad.**

**Barbara Tabach: It's really nice to have all of you join me today so that we can gather the history of Congregation Ner Tamid. My understanding is that something was happening in the 1970s in Las Vegas; the population was growing. We know that there was over a quarter of a million of people at the beginning of that decade and it was just booming. And at that time, in the early seventies, there still was only one congregation for the Jewish people to celebrate their holidays and Sabbath and all of that. But something happened and some of you were there to form a new congregation, Congregation Ner Tamid.**

**David, I'm going to start with you. Talk about what was going on that got you all together and who was there.**

**DW:** The real early start of the congregation began when I met Gene Kirshbaum at the Jewish Federation office. Someone told me that he was interested in starting a reform congregation, and someone told him that I was interested in a reform congregation, because I had been raised in a reform congregation all my life. We got together and we chatted and we took it to the next level and we started it by having a meeting at his house. I think it was in March of 1994. Renee was there. Gil was there. We had about thirty-six people—or thirty-six interested families actually, more than just people; there were more like sixty people that were there.

We found out that we had to go through the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in order to get any kind of basis and to get started with the forming of a congregation. Gene and

his wife proceeded—Marlene is her name—proceeded to go down that road. And I proceeded to make contact with other people to try to get a good turnout for when we had someone from the organization show up. I think it was at Dr. Perlman's house was our second meeting. Dr. Perlman was also with the original group and he was an ophthalmologist here in town. That's how we got started.

**I'm going to take a deep breath. I screwed up, Kevin. I was going to have everybody self-identify and give me a brief bio about yourself. I messed myself up. So we'll take a deep breath.**

**RABBI:** So 1994, you meant 1974.

**DW:** Nineteen seventy-four, yes.

**So if each of you—we'll start with Renee on the far end—would identify yourself and give a brief biography.**

**RD:** My name is Renee Diamond. I moved here in 1972 with my husband, Leo, and three of my four children; left behind a college-age student in California. When we came here in '72, my twins, my youngest two, needed a summer camp. We came here in February and by June it was time to put them into camp and Jewish camp came into mind and the only place to go was Temple Beth Shalom. So we started at Temple Beth, which was the only synagogue in town, until we heard this rumor and were invited to Gene and Marlene Kirshbaum's in order to start a second synagogue, the reform congregation in town.

I've lived here all these years. I've been politically active, community activist. I currently serve on the State Museum board. Am getting older and am one of the few women left of our original organizing group. I'm kind of proud of both things, living long and being part of that original group.

**That's great. Thank you.**

**GS:** Hi. I'm Gil Shaw. I moved here in 1973 when I retired from the Coast Guard. We joined Beth Sholom because it was the only show in town. I went to work at a civilian job and one day my boss called me and said, "Hey, there's a thing in the paper that they're going to start a reform temple here in town." He said, "I'm going to pick you up." No choice, "I'm going to pick you up." So he picked me up and we met the group and have been in the—semi-active now—in the temple ever since.

**Thank you.**

**BU:** Bob Unger. I've been here since 1967. I actually came to start high school here. So I went to Valley High School. I knew both Gene Kirshbaum and David very well. For some reason I didn't join Ner Tamid until 1992, though. But I knew about their starting up. In fact, my family, its previous involvement, everybody was involved in Beth Sholom because it was the only synagogue. But my family actually was reform prior to moving to town, and so we felt more comfortable in a reform synagogue.

**JG:** My name is Jerry Gordon. My extended family has been here since the early fifties. I moved here in 1960. I attended junior high school here, Las Vegas High School, UNLV, and then went off to law school at UCLA. I came back and have been living here, my wife and I, raising our children here since 1973. Like everyone else, though I was bar mitzvahed in the Bay Area, we joined Beth Sholom, was there for many years. My family was very active. When we got back I felt more comfortable in a reform environment. When I heard about this temple, we did not join, but I went to High Holiday services until ultimately my wife and I joined when our daughter was ready for religious school. And I've been here ever since.

**Thank you.**

**DW:** My name is David Wasserman and I moved to Las Vegas in 1970. I'm a dentist. When I graduated dental school, I got stationed at Nellis Air Force Base, which brought me to Las Vegas. After doing my two-year commitment, I started private practice. I tried to get active in the Jewish community by being a member of the Federation, as well as their early youth movement, because at that time I was just under thirty. When the Yom Kippur War broke out in 1973, I had expressed a concern to one of the board members that this community really could use a reform congregation. He put me in touch with Dr. Gene Kirshbaum, who also felt the same way. From that time on we began to get together and form what was the nucleus of a brand-new congregation. It's a wonderful thing to partake in. It's something that you watch grow from infancy to what we have today, which is a magnificent congregation and a magnificent facility. It wasn't always that way.

**Thank you. Rabbi.**

**RABBI:** I'm Rabbi Sanford Akselrad. I've never been a member of Temple Beth Sholom. I'm actually the fourth rabbi of the congregation. I was brought here in February 1988. My daughter was a year and a half. My son was not born yet. My wife, Joanie, and I were just married few years. She was from Nevada; she was from Reno and I was from the Bay Area, from Palo Alto. So we were attracted by the opportunity of a fairly new congregation. At the time there was just two or three synagogues and twenty thousand Jews and rabbis got to go where the Jews are. I thought there was a lot of opportunity. So almost thirty years later, here I am.

**That's a legacy that you have built. So the idea then, if I'm understanding, is that there was a need in the community for—opportunity to celebrate as a Reform Jew. What does that mean for people who don't know? Would one of you...Rabbi, I guess we'll start with you on that.**

**RABBI:** Well, when I talked with some of the old-timers and just intuitively note, Beth Sholom had that impossible task of trying to please everybody. They were a conservative temple. So there were people who practiced Reform Judaism and then there were others who wanted to practice Orthodox Judaism. For many years, when the community was small, I guess it worked. And they actually were also a Jewish community center. But as the community grew, people's vision expanded and people came from other communities and they knew that they were not Jews who would keep the laws and the religion in the same sense as a conservative temple. They wanted more the reform melodies with a reform prayer book, a reform rabbi, and something that they knew from their childhood, and that wasn't Temple Beth Sholom, but it was something that would eventually evolve into Congregation Ner Tamid.

**And who would like to tell me about the process of hiring the first rabbi? I see some really fun expressions here. That has to be hard to do.**

**GS:** The first rabbi was Rabbi Stephen Weisberg, a very, very bright young man and hit it off well the community when he came in to look around. He was recommended by the Union of Hebrew Congregations in Los Angeles. They said he would fit with us especially starting out, and he did. He would accept things much more readily than, I think, some other rabbis would; like an example, the gift shop. The women wanted a gift shop. Well, you can't open a gift shop when you're in a church, somebody's church. That was our first church. We did have a gift shop and he suggested how we started it. We got a big steamer trunk and filled it with all the stuff. After services we'd lay a blanket out on the floor and put all the stuff and then the ladies would sell things.

But he was good. He was good with kids. He started out the religious school. Three of my four were beyond the age, but I had one that started out her religious training at West Charleston

Baptist Church, she was bat mitzvahed in the Christ Episcopal Church, and she was confirmed in a Methodist church; I don't remember the name, across from UNLV.

**RABBI:** University Methodist Church.

**GS:** University Methodist. So she had quite an interesting...She tells people in her congregation in San Francisco about her religious training. That's just the way it was. We were starting out. We used what we had. The rabbi was a good leader. During his tenure here, he did quite a bit to get us started on the right foot.

**RD:** Barbara, my recollection is that at one of the meetings at Gene and Marlene Kirshbaum's living room in that pretty Spanish house over near Rancho that we were all asked to contribute to a search for the first rabbi. A person came in from the union from California and said that they would assist and send us candidates.

I remember that we were not involved in the search, but it turned out that Rabbi Weisberg, his wife and the two boys ended up living at Braewood Heritage Square where we lived. In fact, one of the boys came back here to be married by Rabbi Akselrad a few years ago. I also remember that at his bar mitzvah, Joe Williams, the jazz singer, who also lived at Braewood Heritage, sang at his bar mitzvah. We all have stories that we like to have. My last name as Diamond. Everybody always asks me, "Is Neil Diamond coming to your daughter's wedding?" No. But Joe Williams did sing at the Weisberg bar mitzvah. It was a very big deal in those days.

But it seems to me that my recollection is that we all committed money and the sum of five thousand dollars apiece from a core group of people sticks in my mind. Now, I admit I am seventy-nine years old and a lot of water has gone under that bridge. But I think that's the way the hiring of Rabbi Weisberg actually came. I don't know if there was more than one candidate sent to us by the union.

**But the locations that you mentioned, how did you get into relationships with churches?**

**DW:** They weren't using them on Friday night.

**Explain that further.**

**DW:** Well, we needed a facility that met when the Jewish Sabbath is celebrated, which we started out with only Friday night services. We didn't have Saturday services at that time because we were too small and it was too imposing to transport things from someone's home to the facility each time. But they were nice enough to let us spend time there. In fact, we were there for a couple of years. Then they found a time that they needed to use the facility that conflicted with us because we needed it for Sundays for Sunday school. So then we went to the Episcopal Church on Maryland Parkway and Oakey. We were there for, I think, a year and a half to two years. Then we moved to the United Methodist Church. So whatever facility could accommodate our needs and our time schedule...that was the most important thing to have the congregants being able to get together at certain times and spots.

**Did they charge you a rent for that?**

**DW:** No. They were—

**GS:** Didn't they charge us?

**DW:** I don't believe so. Let's put it this way. I wasn't involved with that negotiation.

**GS:** Yes, you wouldn't have been there.

**DW:** I think it was just—then they have a utility charge, a minimum amount so that if the air-conditioning was on, we'd pay a utility fee, but it wasn't like a monthly rent for something.

**So it was a nominal fee.**

**DW:** Yes.

**Use fee. That makes sense.**

**RD:** But it was an interesting phenomena that the cross hung on the wall at every one of the churches we ever lived in or coexisted in. There was a bema built with the arcs behind doors, a big wooden thing on big casters, and we would roll it in and it would be put in front of the cross so that we could have our services. Our original Torah came to that specific thing. Gil's daughter, Carol, my twins, Cliff and Jana, were the first B'nai Mitzvah class of that congregation. It's now the Salvation Army Church on Palomino Lane. My twins were B'nai Mitzvahed there. We recently at this synagogue had my daughter's son bar mitzvahed. So it's like the yin and yang of life; the circle goes around. We're now seeing our grandchildren and maybe, God willing, our great-grandchildren here.

**That's wonderful. There's multiple generations occurring here.**

**RD:** Right.

**DW:** I remember when we got our first Torah that someone from the Federation got in touch with an organization and the Torah was a survivor of the Holocaust. That's the one we use as our original Torah. During the summer of the first year we had to have it kind of repaired a bit because it has to be done in a special way. But that was our first Torah; it was a Holocaust survivor.

**GS:** It was either from Hungary or Austria. I don't remember which.

**DW:** I believe it was Austria.

**GS:** Hungary?

**DW:** Austria.

**GS:** Austria, okay.

**RABBI:** Believe it or not, an organization in England that is in charge of overseeing those Torahs contacts me about every five years to make sure we're still in existence and that we still

have that Torah.

**JG:** And we don't own that Torah; we are preserving and we're caring for; we're a custodian for that Torah.

**RABBI:** Yes.

**Is that customary of Torahs?**

**RABBI:** No. That was for the Torahs that survived the Holocaust. Then Britain was in charge of redistributing these Torahs to Jewish communities throughout the world and they were leased for life, so to speak. But if that congregation ever would fall apart, then they'd have to return that Torah to England and they would find another congregation to use it.

**That's quite special. That really is.**

**RD:** And there was always a dilemma come the High Holidays when we were meeting in churches and they weren't big churches necessarily. The dilemma was that the increased number of people, what would we do with them? I remember very well that we contacted the Convention Authority and that was in the old days when the Rebels played in a little dome, which was the Convention Authority, surrounded by meeting rooms. And the largest meeting room was the Gold Room and we had our High Holiday services at the Gold Room on these hard, awful chairs, which later they lent us, the Convention Authority, in our other facilities. But the Convention Authority was very supportive. I don't remember if there was rent involved. But we used to get not only our own congregation but the Jews that wanted to celebrate High Holidays but weren't affiliated.

**GS:** Also we got people vacationing in Las Vegas. They would hear that right off the Strip there are High Holy Day services. And we'd also get some of the acts. Joan Rivers was an attendant. Never contributed anything to us, but she was an attendant.

**RABBI:** Marty Allen—

**GS:** Yes, Marty Allen, too, right.

—came for many, many years .

**DW:** That very first year in the Gold Room we had over nine hundred people.

**JG:** That was the first time I attended. I played hooky from Beth Sholom and I went to the Gold Room to attend services.

**Did you feel guilty?**

**JG:** Not at all.

**What was the Gold Room like?**

**JG:** It was just a big meeting room next to the convention center. The rotunda is where the basketball team played and where they held conventions; it seated maybe five thousand. And the Gold Room was seated with chairs and just a big convention, maybe this size.

**RD:** But the advantage was they weren't folding chairs. They were actually stackable chairs. They had a tiny, thin thing of padding, which, as all Jews know, is an important issue on the holidays when you sit for hours and hours.

Rabbi Weisberg was an interesting guy. He was a very spiritual man. He wrote his own service liturgy. He was an interesting guy and loved being in the community. He left to go to Lubbock, Texas.

**How could you leave Las Vegas?**

**RD:** Las Vegas to Lubbock.

**Let's talk a little bit—and continue to go back and forth as you're doing it; I like that—but let's talk a little bit about the naming of congregation. So at first, as I said, there is some document that you were first just the reform...?**

**JG:** That was just the official corporate name.

**Reform Congregation or...?**

**JG:** The Reform Congregation of Las Vegas, Inc.

**And then eventually it becomes the Congregation Ner Tamid. So can someone tell me how that evolved?**

**GS:** Yes. We had a meeting to vote on the name and several names were placed in nomination.

The rabbi suggested Ner Tamid and it won.

**What does it mean?**

**GS:** It means eternal light.

**RD:** Eternal light over the...

**GS:** Yes, there's the Ner Tamid right over the arc.

**RABBI:** You're forgetting what I think is the most important part is that it's Congregation Ner Tamid rather than Temple Ner Tamid.

**GS:** Right. And that was intentional.

**RABBI:** Because they didn't really have a building and they wanted to make a statement in perpetuity that it's always about the people.

**GS:** Right.

**RABBI:** We're about being a congregation. Even though we have this beautiful temple, the goal is really to form a beautiful congregation that's there to support each other.

**DW:** That's exactly right. It was very affirmed by us that it's about the people and not the facility. The facility would come in its own time, but the people were the nucleus of what was going to happen.

**And how were you involving children in those first days? You talked about some of the**

**early bar mitzvahs and such. So how were kids being educated when you were moving from church to church?**

**RD:** My children, their Hebrew classes and everything else from age ten when we came here were given by Rabbi Weisberg because we lived on the east side in the Boulevard Mall area. I used to drive my twins, Scott Bogets, occasionally I somehow had your daughter—I don't remember if that was just social—and a Gordon child whose name escapes me whose father owned a shop at the airport. His mother's name was Geege, G-E-E-G-E.

**JG:** No relation.

**RD:** No relation. So I'd load my car—I was a stay-at-home mom in those days—and drive over to Palomino Lane and unload children. There were no Starbucks in those days. So I'd have to kill the hour, hour and a half time over on the wrong side of town and then truck them all back to their homes.

**RABBI:** You had volunteer principals and volunteer teachers at the time.

**RD:** Everything was volunteer.

**RABBI:** Yes.

**GS:** Nobody got paid except the rabbi and I'm not sure he always got paid.

**DW:** He did.

**So the classes were held at the church .**

**DW:** Trust me, he did.

**JG:** When my daughter started—and this would be 1981, '80-81—classes were at the university across the street from the church. I remember sitting on the lawn as she was in the social science classrooms having her classes, her Sunday school classes. So we did whatever we had to do. We had students from UNLV later on teach. We had parents teach. We had some long-term people

teaching. It was very qualified, but it was all internal. It was all we could afford.

**RD:** But in the seventies, it was pretty seat of the pants and as long as we could stay at one church, we did; we took advantage of it. It was very much kind of a spiritual exercise, but it was also a physical exercise in that we had to tote around the arc with the Torahs, had to get to the convention center the High Holy Days. But it was a much smaller town. When I came in '72, there were maybe about three hundred and sixty thousand people. So getting from east side to west side was not the chore it is now. So people came. Every year that I remember since the founding year, new people were attracted. I don't know so much that they were leaving Beth Sholom necessarily. It was more people who were unaffiliated and hadn't connected to a synagogue before.

**That's a very good point. There were a couple of other things that seemed to be happening in the mid-seventies according to this time line that was given and it's that there was the Jewish cemetery at Palm Memorial on Eastern Avenue was consecrated in 1975 and, also, in 1976 the first Soviet Jews were arriving in Las Vegas. So let's talk about the significance of having a cemetery that is consecrated for Jewish burial. Would somebody like to talk a little bit about that?**

**RD:** Well, before that cemetery there was a Jewish section at Woodlawn downtown in the Foremaster Lane area off of Main Street. When we came to town, the Palm Mortuary was just organizing out on Eastern. There were Jews buried in other cemeteries here in town. It was not like established communities except for the Woodlawn. A lot of the old-timers bought plots there.

**JG:** My grandparents, my grandfather's brothers are all buried at Woodlawn in the Jewish section. That's what we knew. Your parents are buried at Woodlawn.

**BU:** Right. I'm assuming though that Woodlawn was part of the original cemetery; that Jewish section.

**RABBI:** Right. Temple Beth Sholom owns that Jewish section

**BU:** Right.

**That's a really interesting place to visit. You do really get an amazing sense of history when you go there, the Woodlawn Cemetery, and see the names that I've heard about. So that's really neat.**

**RABBI:** Over a period of time at Palm there were two sections that were dedicated, one for Temple Beth Sholom, conservative and traditional, and then Ner Tamid. It was actually dedicated before I arrived. I dedicated the expansion and then later on King David would come about, also owned by Palm Mortuary, and then I dedicated the reform, and they have conservative and orthodox sections. So the Jewish community has gotten—it's just grown and also it's gotten older. So they needed unfortunately more cemetery space.

**DW:** Palm Mortuary was very helpful with our congregation. Obviously the rabbi we had at the time, Rabbi Hecht, he was involved in having our services done on the Palm Mortuary section of their cemetery as opposed to Woodlawn or the other ones. But when we built our new facility on Emerson Place, an idea came to me to put that candelabra on the wall. I got Palm Mortuary to dedicate the whole cost of the candelabra.

**RABBI:** It was a Yahrzeit candle.

**DW:** Right. And then we sold families the names on the candles and then they'd get reservations for names. And then individual names, when they wanted to have a Yahrzeit, they'd put it on the candelabra and that particular candle would be lit up. It worked out to be probably our biggest short-term fundraiser.

**RD:** And that was an interesting move. Mike Saltman and his wife, Sonja, were instrumental. I was working, running Congressman Bilbray's local offices. And there was a piece of land that Mike Saltman owned that had been Bureau of Land Management land and he was going to trade it for land across the wash at Pecos between Flamingo and Desert Inn for Commercial Center, the first of the Renaissance centers. They got permission for Ner Tamid to take the odd-shaped piece on Emerson Place, but it had to remain for educational, religious purposes because it was BLM land. It was an odd-shaped piece. Our patio almost went over the cliff into the wash that ran behind it.

**JG:** In one of those floods, we lost half an acre.

**RD:** Yes, yes, those hundred year floods.

**So that was Mike Saltman and Sonja that...**

**RD:** Mike Saltman, yes.

**Now, there is Chic Hecht. Senator Chic Hecht was mentioned.**

**JG:** A lot of people take credit and a lot of people did participate in getting the land. It was not easy at that time to get that land.

**RD:** The whole congressional delegation signed onto the approval for it to BLM. It wasn't just any one member of the congressional delegation. It needed approval by them. But it did complicate things, I think, when we were ready to leave Emerson as to what it could be available for sale as.

**So Emerson took place at what time, late 1970s?**

**DW:** Actually it was—

**JG:** Nineteen eighty-one.

**Nineteen eighty-one, okay. So it's about that time that the name of Moe Dalitz pops up.**

**And people love hearing stories about Moe Dalitz. Would one of you share something there?**

**JG:** David Goldwater, who became president of the temple during that period of time, he represented Moe Dalitz and he got Moe Dalitz to agree to give half a million dollars. For that the religious school was named for Moe Dalitz. So the sign would go up "Moe Dalitz" and people were talking about it. But that was a gift. It was a key gift to get that facility built. It wasn't enough to build the facility, but it was the key money that got the building built.

**DW:** And the school was named after him.

**JG:** And the school was named after him.

**People tell stories that when they would first come to Las Vegas and come to the congregation and then see Moe Dalitz name up there, it was kind of the nostalgic twists and turns of living in Las Vegas.**

**JG:** Frank Sinatra gave twenty-five thousand dollars and he got a little plaque that went way up in the lobby area up on the wall above the doors. It was very high because they were concerned that someone would steal it.

**GS:** It did get stolen once.

**JG:** It did get stolen. So it was way up on the wall and it said "Frank Sinatra."

**Who would steal that type of thing? That's amazing.**

**RD:** I had an interesting call one day from a friend of mine, Herb Tobman. Herb Tobman was at that time involved in the ownership of the Stardust Hotel. Herb calls me. And I knew him through democratic politics. He was a lovely man. Any time you needed money, you could call him and say, "I have a busload of folks that are too poor to drive to Reno for a meeting. Will you come up with a bus?" And he'd arrange it.

I get a call one day and Herb Tobman says to me, "Can you pick something up at my office?" He had a cab company as well on Western Avenue. I said, "Sure, no problem. Will you take me to lunch?" There was a diner nearby. And he said, "Of course, I'll feed you."

I went over there and in an envelope, plain white envelope, there was, he told me, a check to take over to Ner Tamid, and in it was one of the checks that he gave to Congregation Ner Tamid that led to his name being put on the religious school. He was a very charitable guy and he gave to, I think, a lot of the synagogues in town.

**GS:** But there is a—I don't know how much of this is real or not. But for a while his name [Moe Dalitz] came off the school. And the way I heard it, which somebody may know otherwise, but I heard that he was being investigated and he called and said, "Please take my name down. I don't think this is the time to have my name." And then he was cleared, as he was of many things, and they put the name back up.

**JG:** We took his name down. We put the letters somewhere. Then when he asked that his name go back up, well, there was this moment of panic trying to remember where those letters were. We found all of them except for one, and then we found that one. So we put it back up.

**BU:** That's better than we did with the time capsule. We did a time capsule.

**What's the time capsule about, Bob?**

**BU:** When we did the expansion on the Emerson property—originally it was built as just a social hall.

**DW:** And a school.

**BU:** And the school. When we expanded it, we expanded it with an administrative wing and the sanctuary, new sanctuary. We did a time capsule at the time, just memories from the religious school and various other things. We put it into the time capsule and we've never found the time

capsule. We thought about it when we sold—

**JG:** I knew exactly where it was because I was there when they put it in and I knew exactly, but it wasn't there and we never found it.

**What was the series of events that led you to move from Emerson? Talk about that. That had to be a big deal.**

**JG:** That would be the rabbi and me. When we moved in Emerson, it was really in the center of Jewish area. It was near DI and Emerson, right off DI and Eastern. When we added we raised about a million and a half, a million and three-quarters and built a synagogue and made it complete. But as soon as we finished that and a few years past, as we got into the nineties, mid-nineties, we started realizing the town was expanding. The rabbi and I were talking about it over a period of a couple of years. Then we did a...

**RABBI:** A long-range planning.

...a long-range planning. Neither the rabbi nor I participated in it; we just kind of observed. But it became apparent to us that people wanted to move and they were prepared to basically pick up and leave. No congregation had ever done that really in the country. Congregations had built satellites. Most congregations simply wherever they were failed and went under. I was very active after my presidency in the union. I was on the board. In fact, there was an executive committee. And the union at that time was running something called Synagogue 2000, talking about synagogues of future. I got the idea and so did the rabbi and Bob that let's just move; we'll just sell what we have and move. Because if we were to stay there, we were not going to survive. Families were moving out. They were living in Henderson. They were living in the west. As Renee said, the west and east were very close early on, but by the nineties it was miles apart. We decided that we would move.

**BU:** It really is demographics.

**JG:** It was demographics.

**BU:** We were losing families with children. We knew the congregation was getting older.

**JG:** We didn't know where we were going to move; we didn't know how we were going to raise the money, but we knew we had to. And so we set off on what we thought would be a couple of years, a few years. We originally set our goal at five million of fundraising and a million and a half from the sale of our building. By the time we got here, we were about four times that amount.

**DW:** We got a lot more for the sale of our building.

**JG:** And we got a lot more from the sale of our building, which is a story in itself. That's really what it is. In some ways we were naive, we were optimistic, but we—the thing about this temple is perseverance. We've gone through a lot of issues here, as all temples do, but a lot of issues. But it's just perseverance and a belief in ourselves. There's a core group. Even as big as we get, there's a core group that has been here forever and they just have never lost sight of the future and where we go. So this was the result.

**So you moved into this location what year?**

**JG:** February 2007, possibly the worst time of all.

**RABBI:** A little thing called Recession.

**I was going to say, for posterity you can explain that that was the...**

**JG:** When we moved in we had done very well fundraising, extraordinarily well, but we had an additional several million to raise. We assumed we could do it. We moved in with six hundred and fifty families and lots of celebration and this beautiful facility and, of course, we hit the wall. Again, we persevered. We did all these things to keep this place alive, keep it thriving, and it's

here today.

**RABBI:** Yes. It will be our tenth anniversary.

**Wow. You were going to say something.**

**RABBI:** Well, I was just going to add a little more about the move. When we decided we were going to move, it was really just five years after we built the previous building, as Jerry indicated, but it was only five years. So in 2001 that was when we were going to make the big announcement, and we did, but a little thing called Nine-Eleven happened. Do you remember that? And that's when we made our big announcement. We didn't know Nine-Eleven was going to be Nine-Eleven. And so the town went into a recession and the whole world changed. So we had to shelf the idea until 2003 and things started to pick back up. Then we began building in earnest in 2005, moving in in 2007. So it was quite a journey, really, from 2001 to 2007.

**JG:** A couple of stories. One is—and Gil is the major witness to this and it was mentioned before—we had to sell our old building and we had difficulty because it was restricted as to who we could sell to. So we tried to our county, we tried all over, educational, public service, other areas. We were approached by the Church of Scientology. They approached through a law firm in L.A., approached me. So we met and over a period of four months we negotiated with the Church of Scientology. That was not an easy negotiation because they would sit across the table and there would never been an expression on their faces. The attorneys would talk, but there was stone silence from these people and we'd not hear from them for two or three weeks. Then we'd get a redraft of the document. Ultimately we arrived at a very good price.

But in order to sell it, we had to have a congregational meeting and have the congregation approve it. So we called a meeting and we were in the social hall at the old building. We had literally every family show up. The place was packed. The rabbi is up on the bema and I'm here

and Gil was the photographer; he's the historian. So he's behind me. This was not...It was sensitive. I mean, we're selling to the Church of Scientology and all the stories. There were several congregants who had questions and comments and it was a free, open forum. We wanted to hear it. And they were talking and asking and expressing reservations. And the rabbi is standing next to me and he's getting kind of concerned because we really want to sell this. We had really a good deal. He's concerned and Gil's behind. And I let this go on. I keep letting it go on. And I say, "Okay, thank you. Now, is there a call for the question?" There is some murmurs going through the room and someone calls for the question. And I go, "Okay, let me just reiterate. It's three point"—well, it was three-point-five million cash. And I said, "Cash." And I said, "All those in favor raise their hands." And Gil got this shot from behind me. And this entire room, all these hands went up like this. I remember the picture. It was a marvelous picture. I looked at the rabbi and I said, "No problem, no problem." And we sold the building.

**So were all of you in that room?**

**JG:** And by the way, the money came from...Oh, come on.

**RD:** Tom Cruise.

**JG:** Tom Cruise.

**RABBI:** Oh, it did? It came from Tom? Okay.

**JG:** Yes, yes.

**Another celebrity connection here.**

**RD:** I need to say I was one of the ones who voted against it.

**GS:** You were.

**You did, okay.**

**RD:** I am always on a side that I have my own set of principles and I did it. When we walked out

my husband says to me, "Can you ever just once do something because I asked you to?" So we had a split house.

**JG:** I share your concerns, but it was far more important to sell it.

**RD:** Well, it fit the legal description for the land; that I knew. But I had this like little pinch in my heart. I always said that the one who would understand it would be the rabbi because I've always felt that he is not just a religious leader, but he has the yin and the yang, which is that he has this soft core in the center for the right thing and the community and the liberal stuff that I like so much and still do.

**GS:** Didn't we have a couple ladies resign from the congregation?

**JG:** Yes, but they came back.

**GS:** Did they come back?

**JG:** Yes, they came back later on.

**GS:** They resigned because they didn't want to sell to a cult.

**RD:** I didn't resign.

**JG:** Yes, they did and I felt very bad about it. I remember we were—we wanted to get it all out. It was a troubling issue in some ways. But they did come back.

**And why this particular piece of land here in Henderson?**

**DW:** Oh, that's a real easy one.

**That's the easy story, okay.**

**DW:** It was donated.

**JG:** Well, I got a phone call. We had been meeting with Brian Greenspun and the Greenspun family and I get a phone call from Brian. He says, "There's a piece of land. I don't know if you want it, if it will make any sense to you." And I did not know Henderson at all; I lived on the far

side of town. And he said, "But it's at Valley Verde and the 215." I go, "Okay." He says, "Why don't you take a look?" So I'm at my office in the afternoon. I leave and come over and I find this here.

**RABBI:** I know we met with Brian first. We went with Brian.

**JG:** We first met with him, but it was another piece of land, remember?

**RABBI:** Oh, okay.

**BU:** We were originally looking for a mutual location between—

**JG:** Yes. First he had a piece of land across from Midbar. That's the piece we first saw and it didn't really work.

**RABBI:** No.

**JG:** And so he called me and said—and so I come over. I drive over and I park next to this piece of land. I'm looking at this land. I'm looking around going, *where is this piece of land? It can't be here.* And I finally figure out, *this is the piece he's talking about.*

So I immediately called the rabbi. I said, "You need to get over here. You need to see this." And so he does come over. We're looking at this piece of land.

I call up Brian. I go, "Brian, I'm across from here and this." He says, "Yes, that's the piece. Does it work?" And I go, "Yes, it works." And he says, "Okay, now let's talk about a deal."

And so ultimately—this is in the summertime before High Holidays—he and I are going back and forth. They were going to donate the land, but they want to know that we're going to actually start building on it before they deed it to us. So as we're getting close to High Holidays, he and I are talking about it. And ultimately, near Rosh Hashanah when we're going to announce the gift of this land—I want to announce it—we're going back and forth on our phones, emails.

Because of that Yvonne is driving us and Myra, his wife, is driving because we're both going back and forth. And so we're going back and forth with terms on this phone, this email. Finally we're getting close to temple and I sent an email. I said, "Where are you?" He said, "I'm in the parking lot. Where are you?" "In the parking lot." So he says, "Now where are you?" I said, "I'm in the lobby. Where are you?" "I'm in the lobby." And he says—there's one final small point—he says, "Is that agreeable?" I said, "Yes." He said, "You got it." I said, "Can I announce?" as we're walking in. He says, "Yes, you can announce."

So I pull this speech I have ready and I start marking it up a little bit and we walk in and I announce. We took the land deed two years later. Until that period of time, the only evidence that we had between us was that email. We never had a written agreement. We never had anything other than that email. When it came time to get the land transferred, I called and I said, "We're ready. We have a loan. We have the money raised." He said, "I'll send over a deed." He sent a deed, with no restrictions.

**That's a wonderful story. That's great. Wow. So you were president at that time?**

**JG:** No.

**No. What was your job?**

**JG:** I was president during the first capital raise and build out at the old facility. I was asked to be chairman of the campaign and Bob was—he was in charge of part of the building aspect. So it was a series of—no, I was just...

**BU:** We had actually been looking for a piece of property that was more neutral between the east and west parts of town. In fact, we broke ground at a piece of—

**RABBI:** Yes, it was like at Sunset and 215.

**JG:** We went into escrow.

**BU:** Yes, we went into escrow and we did a small ceremony to build up the idea. We ended up having to get that spot up because of drainage issues. It would have been expensive to revolve that. So then we were back looking again.

**RABBI:** Also, the Henderson people didn't support it either. I think they felt it was too far away.

**BU:** Yes.

**JG:** It was a nice piece of land over by the curve where the hospital is at 215, but no one cared about it.

**RABBI:** No. It was too far away.

**JG:** No one. You couldn't raise any money.

**BU:** It was halfway between everything.

**RABBI:** I used to tell people when we were on Emerson that we were equally inconvenient to everybody. So the Summerlin people would come; the Green Valley people would come. And they did come until they didn't and that's why we had to move. So we thought, *well, we'll get another piece kind of in between and we'll get both sides*. But the reality was no one really wanted to drive. So we had to pick a side. We really did. We could've picked Summerlin and not moved to Green Valley, but the donation of this land really solidified the deal.

**RD:** And I wonder whether the building of the large amount of synagogues that exists now...When we came here we all know that there was one and then we built number two. And while we were doing that the orthodox group bought on Maryland Parkway. And now how many synagogues are there, twenty something?

**RABBI:** Twenty-six, twenty-seven.

**RD:** And I wonder if the expansion of the city and the wandering Jews didn't help with that many synagogues to get started? Everybody remembers the days when we were young and our

grandmothers had a synagogue five blocks away. You walked to shul. So I think we all—

**RABBI:** Well, a number of these synagogues are orthodox, though. That's why; they do have to walk to shul.

**RD:** Right.

**RABBI:** So I'd say half of them are orthodox.

**RD:** But like we moved the end of 2005. We moved to Sun City Anthem because the synagogue moved here. We had been about a half-mile away when it was on Emerson. And so we actually moved to the synagogue. My husband, may he rest in peace, was here for the groundbreaking. Always on the hottest day do we pick an event. We almost died out there in the gravel. He passed in December of '05. So he never got to see it built. But I think that part of the community interest is that we're still the most vibrant and welcoming synagogue, reform synagogue in town.

**DW:** Congregation.

**RD:** Congregation. And we all work at it.

**Well, there are some significant names that I associate or I hear about when I do oral histories that are involved within this congregation and one of them is Bella, Bella Feldman.**

**RABBI:** Bella Feldman, yes.

**Who wants to tell me about Bella Feldman?**

**RABBI:** So one of the things I love, of course, is music. One of my chief weaknesses is, of course, I can't sing a note. So when I was first hired, I knew that if I didn't find someone to sing pretty quick, instead of saying, "What a great sermon," they'd go, "Oh, what a horrible voice he's got." So they had a stack of paper for when the rabbi would come, literally, and read a Moses. They had this stack and one was for a guy who said, "I want to learn to be a singer, a Jewish

singer, a cantor." So I went to go find him and I introduced myself. He said, "Oh, I called Ner Tamid six months ago and no one ever called me back." And I said, "I'm calling you back." And so by my second or third week with the temple I had this volunteer singing and he did it for about three or four months and then moved to L.A. and I knew I needed someone else.

So there was a young girl Bella. She was probably twenty-one. And she would come with her mother. And I listened to her sing. I said [nodding head]. And then I found out that her dad had passed away, but he had been a cantor at Temple Beth Sholom. So I thought, *she's got it in her blood and this would be a perfect marriage of intent and skills*. And so I began to train Bella.

And there were two other women who also were involved; one was a Marilyn Monroe impersonator and another one was Rene Campos. And the Marilyn Monroe, she...Well, let me just put it that way. That's when we started introducing robes for the clergy and so that's how it started because at first it was just street clothes. Then we started putting robes on everybody. The ladies all had to share one robe and they didn't like that.

So eventually what happened was the congregation grew and Bella grew and matured and she became our cantorial soloist for sixteen years. Now she's in Ashland, Oregon. And we're still dear friends. I talk to her all the time.

**And music is a huge part of this congregation.**

**RABBI:** Yes. It's always been huge. It's one of my—

**Always? Or did it—**

**RABBI:** Always, always.

**Even before rabbi came?**

**GS:** Always.

**RABBI:** Well, I don't know. But my dad had a beautiful singing voice. I inherited my mother's

voice. So I love music and I understand its appeal in the service and it's a great balance. And Bella had a great voice. We hired someone with a wonderful voice after her and now we have a female cantor who also grew up in the congregation who's got a beautiful voice and a beautiful *neshama*. So we're blessed.

**Let's talk about that, too; I mean, the generations. You've been in existence for over forty years now. You've talked about some of the rites of passage that have occurred in your families. But in general, what does it feel like when you see the congregation mature like that?**

**BU:** Actually I look forward and I've been very pleased lately at how many young people are in the audience at Friday night services. The younger, the better because that's exactly our reason for moving to this location was to get young congregants, parents with young children to join. That's always a very good, healthy sign for a congregation. Lately it's been quite a few youngsters in the services. Rather than thinking about the maturing of the congregation, it's great to see the young people.

**GS:** It's also nice to see some of those who were the young people and they're now adults that are in the congregation.

**And they move into leadership positions.**

**GS:** I imagine some of them have.

**RABBI:** Absolutely.

**I think the names are starting to repeat. The idea that Jessica Hutchings—**

**RABBI:** Jessica was about eight years old when she was in our congregation. She's now our cantor. Melissa Lemoine, Melissa Glovinsky, she was teaching religious school at age sixteen when I came here and she's in charge of our NextGen program.

**GS:** She was about yea tall and her mother would walk her in by the hand when we first (indiscernible).

**RABBI:** Her mother served on our board. We have multiple generations now who are a part of our congregation. It's very gratifying.

**So as we wind this up, I'd like each of you to share one more story that's personal to you, perhaps, or memory that you would like to have record on this conversation. What haven't we talked about that you'd like to share?**

**DW:** I've got two. So I'll start with the first one. The first one was in 1974 my parents moved out here from New Jersey and they were real excited with the fact that the reform congregation was now in existence and they stayed with it through the rest of their natural lives. Those people who were here, like Renee and Gil, they have fond memories of them. They were there for every year for High Holy Days. My father would always hand out the books and make sure the Torah got in the right place at the right time especially at the Gold Room because I helped them move it. And those kind of things just stay with you. It makes you bond as a congregation.

**RD:** So I'll always think of David as a second generation because I remember his parents.

**DW:** The rabbi keeps reminding me how much I look like my father.

**RABBI:** He would just stand there and pass out prayer books. That's a good image of Milt.

**RD:** Yes. And when I come up here during the High Holidays with my daughter Jana and my grandson Braddon who was bar mitzvahed here, I think we are the continuum right in our family. My husband's name is outside in the memory fountain area. The rabbi kindly was there to bury him. He married one of our daughters. It's just our lives are so deeply woven into the tapestry.

For some of us, we loved the little congregation. We like second day High Holiday services because the congregation shrinks. So that's like my favorite day of the year. I come.

There's maybe a hundred and fifty people here and we feel like we did in the beginning in the old days and I like that feeling of the current and then the past.

**How about you, Gil?**

**GS:** I think I like the continuity. I've had a daughter married in Congregation Ner Tamid. I've had a granddaughter married in Congregation Ner Tamid. I've had a grandson named here and I've had a great-grandson named here. So my family, I feel, has a good tie to it.

**Bob?**

**BU:** Just, again, with the idea of youth, rabbi always is kidding that for me to get my young children to come to synagogue is more difficult than getting me to come, which is difficult enough. But both my grandchildren are in the preschool here at the temple and rabbi is always—his remark is, "Well, I got your family back. Even though you couldn't get your sons and daughters-in-law to join, we got the kids back." So they're both attending the preschool and it's wonderful.

**That's great. Jerry?**

**JG:** Most stories I can't really talk about. But let me talk about one that I think is indicative of what we do here. When we were in the process of talking about building this building, I recall that—I was on the board of the union and they hold a biannual every two years and there was a biannual in Atlanta, and Bob, the rabbi and I were there and we were in the service. What they did at the Torah service is that they would—a huge room, six, seven thousand Jews in this room. Way down on the bema when they would do the Torah, they'd open the Torah and they have a camera up above shining down on the Torah. And as they were reading the Torah, you would see on the side walls, the actual camera, you see as they read the Torah, and we thought that was an incredible idea.

**RABBI:** A Torah cam.

**JG:** A Torah cam. So we come back and we say, "Okay, when we build this building, we're going to have a Torah cam." If you look up, there's a Torah cam up there. So we had the Torah cam. So when you read the Torah, the camera is on it, the screens come down, everyone can see it.

Several years after we built it, by maybe 2010, 2011, the union has annual—or biannual, every six-month meetings and they bring like two hundred of the trustees and rabbis and everything, and they had one in Las Vegas, which is really a big event. For Friday night they all came to service. Because I had been on the board for ten or eleven years, I knew most of these people and I especially had a relationship, not a great relationship, with the president of the union, a rabbi. By chance, they asked me to sit on the bema. So I'm up here on the bema and he's sitting next to me. And we're going through the service and everything else. And we're looking and he says, "What's that up there?" I said, "That's our Torah cam." He said, "Your what?" I said, "Our Torah cam." I said, "When we were back in Atlanta, you have the camera and you have... We said, 'We have to have that so when we read the Torah everyone can see as you read the Torah.'" He said, "We don't have that." He says, "We just had a camera in the back of the area and we just shine this camera on another Torah as we're reading it. You really installed that?" And I said, "Yes."

**[All laughing] That's great.**

**David, do you have another story, did you say?**

**DW:** Well, I could go on forever, but I won't. One of the things that's really been great is to have our rabbi with us as many years as he's been. I remember in our early years after Rabbi Weisberg, we had a tumultuous period of time for almost a decade. It's really wonderful to have

you.

**And you came in 1988?**

**RABBI:** I came February 1988. I remember when I first walked in. It was a pretty bare bones operation. I mean, the bema furniture, well, it was kind of mismatched and there was some cardboard furniture. My wife said, "Listen, it's called potential. They have a building." A lot of beginning pulpits, you don't have a building and are meeting in a strip mall. They had a building. They had leadership. They had a committed group of people. When they interviewed me they said, "Well, how long will you be here?" Expecting maybe you'll be here a few years and then you'll be off. And I said, "The Akselrads are family rabbis. We want to see people from the time that they're born to the time that they're grown up and so forth. As long as it's mutual, I'm your rabbi." And that's what I said and that's what I meant and the years have come and gone and here I am.

**JG:** He's been stuck ever since.

**RABBI:** Yes.

**DW:** The continuity has been wonderful.

**I think that's a really good place to end today. I appreciate each and every one of your stories and time in telling the history and bringing us to where we are today. This is great.**

**[End of recorded discussion]**