

Kehillah Comes of Age



Having just returned from Israel with the Kehillah of Old York Road Family Trip, it is a good time to reflect on the contributions that the Kehillah has made to our area, and, in particular, on the accomplishments of its outgoing director, **Karen Kantor**.

The Kehillah of Old York Road grew out of AJ's strategic planning process which was chaired by **Sheva Cohen** and co-chaired first by **Dr. Michael Haifets** and then **Dr. Robert Atkins** in the mid-nineties. We came to

realize that in the most basic challenges we faced as a congregation, we were not alone. Each synagogue and Jewish institution in our area was beset by similar concerns. But each of us was trying to deal with them alone, as if in a vacuum. Congregational and rabbinic interaction and cooperation were negligible.

The concept evolved of creating an umbrella organization, a "*Kehillah*," a true "Community," out of all of the synagogues in our area and of the many Jewish institutions based here. Together we would set an agenda, share visions, cooperate on matters of concern, and, most importantly, highlight what a special community this is for Jewish living.

In the entire Philadelphia region, there is not another area as densely populated by Jewish institutions. Not only are there eight synagogues of Reform, Conservative and Orthodox denominations, but also Perelman Jewish Day School, Saligman Middle School, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Gratz College, Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education, the Mary Bert Gutman Early Childhood Center of Federation Day Care and Jewish Family and Children's Services, to name a few.

The Old York Road Corridor has one of the highest affiliation rates in the region and an enviable charitable spirit for the Philadelphia Jewish community. The mission of the Kehillah has been to highlight these outstanding aspects of our region, and to build on them, fostering new cooperation and accomplishment, and affirming the area as a destination community for families committed to Jewish living.

Initially, the Jewish Federation helped get the Kehillah started with a Jewish continuity grant funding part of the budget, and the balance of support coming from area congregations. AJ has donated office space and support as our primary contribution. Today, Federation funds the expenses of Kehillah, and we are happy to continue to house the office as a statement of our involvement and commitment.

Dr. Ruth Vogel, who was a member of AJ until last year when she and her husband moved to New York, was the founding chair of the Kehillah, and our member, **Jan Frisch**, and Beth Sholom member, **Sue Kassutto**, co-chair Kehillah today.

Karen Kantor has been the director since its inception. Karen has worked indefatigably on behalf of the area, above and beyond anything in her job description. She has been a passionate and creative advocate for Kehillah, and for the Old York Road Jewish community. She capitalized on the resources in the region to form a Jewish soccer league, a Night of Jewish Learning at Gratz College, a fund raising for a Mobile ICU unit in Israel; she has used the Ogontz Fire House, Barnes & Noble, the train station and Acme Market for Kehillah programs. She has convened a rabbis' group that now meets regularly, and has established community observances for *Yom HaShoah* and *Yom HaAtzmaut*. Now, she is leaving to become executive director of one of our constituent congregations, Old York Road Temple-Beth Am, where she previously served as president.

Nothing could have better capped her tenure with the Kehillah than the family trip to Israel. The trip was Karen's vision which she pursued relentlessly. The trip brought together families of different ages, and from many area congregations. It was a microcosm of the Old York Road area. We toured Israel together, and discovered that we are all moved by the same Jewish soul. **Rabbi Lance Sussman** of Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel and I worked together on religious issues in a cooperative and complementary way. We got to see first-hand the Magen David Adom Mobile ICU unit funded by our community. We visited Federation's Partnership 2000 community in Netivot, and we reveled in the glories of our homeland. The community spirit was palpable.

Jewish life in the Old York Road Corridor is better, more aware, more cooperative today than it was seven years ago. And it would not have happened without Karen and Kehillah.

I will miss Karen, her creativity, her sense of humor, her determination and her dedication. But I am so grateful for what she has built. She leaves in place a thriving community, poised to be led to the next level of accomplishment.

Truly, the Kehillah has come of age. And we are all the more fortunate as a Jewish community for it.

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