

chestnut hill local

Celebration in Mt. Airy for beloved Rabbi

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by Jean-Bernard Hyppolite

Rabbi Marcia Prager has been the spiritual leader at West Mt. Airy's P'nai Or congregation for 18 years. In Hebrew, the word "chai," which means "life," has the numerical value of the number 18. It's an important meaning for a thriving community led by a dedicated rabbi. On October 28 and 29 P'nai Or held a two-day celebration of Rabbi Prager's contributions to the congregation and to the Jewish world in general.

"I've been privileged to serve a wonderful community of warm, caring, sharing, sweet, wonderful people," said Rabbi Marcia.



Rabbi Marcia Prager, of Mt. Airy, has been called "one of America's 50 most influential women rabbis" by a national Jewish publication.

The celebration began with a Kavannah Shabbat, which is a joyous, song-filled "love fest," as Rabbi Marcia described it. It was filled with live music and dinner at the end of the night. P'nai Or continued the next morning with their regular "Shabbat" morning service, led by Rabbi Marcia and her husband, "Hazzan" Jack Kessler, a musician and master of Jewish song and liturgy.

As it turned out, people from all over the Eastern seaboard and even as far as Oregon drove and flew in for the service and celebration. The rest of the day's festivities included an exceptional potluck lunch, small gatherings and another music-filled gala and dinner to close the weekend. Jack Kessler's band, Klingon Klezmer, performed at the celebration.

"Everyone danced and feasted; it was really quite a weekend ... A lot packed into two wonderful days," said Rabbi Marcia, still glowing a few days after the events.

Rabbi Prager first came to P'nai Or as a student, then became a member and is now, according to her, just is one of its many leaders. "P'nai Or is not a very traditional synagogue in which there's the 'leadership' and the 'followership.' In P'nai Or there are many wonderfully skilled co-leaders. Everyone contributes and leads with their gifts."

Rabbi Marcia speaks of the synagogue as a place where people can hone their gifts, share with each other, learn leadership skills and give. She believes the environment that everyone has helped to create at P'nai Or makes it a loving and non-judgmental place. It's due to these traits that Marcia describes P'nai Or as "unusual and unique" in the most positive of ways.

“P’nai Or’s unusual in a variety of different ways. Not only the way in which leadership is shared, and service leadership is shared, but the style of the prayer,” added Marcia, describing the sight of people dancing in the aisles, singing and clapping as a real “celebratory atmosphere.”

People don’t sit in the pews and pray with their knees down and hands closed, and Rabbi Marcia prefers it that way. The prayers are sung in a blend of Hebrew and English. While Hebrew prayers are often sung, their translations are simply read instead. “In a way, we’re praying in ‘Heblish,’” she said.

At P’nai Or it’s not unheard of to have opportunities for meditation, reflection sharing, and genuine conversation with each other about important and meaningful topics in the middle of service. When Rabbi Marcia reads the torah, she welcomes people who may be touched by a specific story to come up by her side at the desk. “People are invited to have a very personal relationship with scripture.”

Marcia is a Jewish Renewal Rabbi, and P’nai Or is a Jewish Renewal Congregation. Jewish Renewal aspires to create models of Jewish expression that are contemporary and also speak to the heart as well as the mind. The full inclusion of women is embraced.

Mt. Airy has a significant Jewish presence, and P’nai Or is just one of four Jewish congregations in West Mt. Airy. P’nai Or does not have its own building but is located inside the community wing of Summit Presbyterian Church, 6757 Greene St. (at Westview). It was founded by Rabbi Schacter-Shalomi in 1973.

Rabbi Marcia, 59, was named one of the top 50 most influential female rabbis (aka The Sisterhood 50) by The Jewish Daily Forward newspaper. This entire list is particularly impressive considering that the first female rabbi in America, Rabbi Sally J. Priesand, was ordained as recently as 1972. There were no female rabbis around when Marcia was growing up; she garnered inspiration from the women’s ordination movement in what she views as the liberal Jewish world.

“We are proud to have Rabbi Prager, one of America’s 50 most influential women rabbis, as our spiritual leader,” said Elyse Seidner-Joseph, chairperson of the Chai celebration.

“I don’t do what I do in order to be recognized or be on a list,” said Rabbi Prager, “but it is delightful to have my achievements noticed. It’s particularly moving to live a life in which I am able to do the work of my heart and contribute in important ways to the world ... Being a Rabbi offers me an opportunity to bring Jewish values into the heart of how I and an extraordinary community live our lives.”

Rabbi Marcia Prager, originally from Queens, New York, moved to Philadelphia in 1984. She and Kessler, who have been married since the late ‘80s, lead workshops together at P’nai Or. They have a son, Aaron, 21, a senior at Temple University. Rabbi Marcia is also a teacher, author, artist and therapist. She became a therapist after graduating from a four-year training program in marriage and family therapy at Penn Council For Relationships. She also earned a B.A. in cultural anthropology along with an M.F.A. in photography and drawing from Pratt Institute, New York. She is the author of “The Path of Blessing,” and she works for ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal. For more information, visit www.pnaior-phila.org or email PnaiOrRabbi@aol.com.