

IN MANITOWOC, WISCONSIN, JEWS GATHER TO PRAY IN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

By Alanna E. Cooper | December 5, 2018

This past Saturday morning, members of Anshe Poale Zedek (APZ) – the only Jewish congregation in Manitowoc, Wisconsin – gathered together in their new sanctuary. The hired hazan, who travels to town every other week to lead the services, sang familiar prayers in Hebrew. Sitting on a warm wooden pew, facing the ark that holds three Torah scrolls, I almost forgot where I was.

I could have been in any little American shul. The aesthetic of the memorial plaques at the back of the room, and the fringed-velvet covers on the reading tables were all familiar. Yet, these Shabbat services were actually taking place inside the sanctuary of a Presbyterian church. The tiny APZ congregation, which numbers somewhere between nine and twelve members (depending on how you count), has been meeting in this space since they sold their building just a few weeks ago.



The congregation, founded by thirty individuals in 1900, grew over the years, reaching its peak in the 1970s with 65 families. Looking back on that vibrant period, a member writing for the *Times Herald Reporter* recalled “A large number of children attended Hebrew as well as Sunday school classes. There were many Bar Mitzvahs and a number of Bas Mitzvahs.” But most of these children did not stay in Manitowoc.

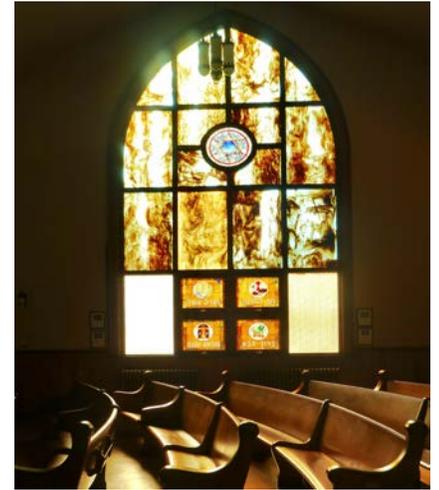
As early as 1981, member Dora Graff wrote (in Manitowoc County Historical Society’s newsletter) “the local Jewish population has not increased in size in recent years. As the third generation of young people leave for schools of higher learning, few decide to return to make Manitowoc their permanent address”

The story of APZ’s aging and declining numbers is much larger than a Jewish story. Manitowoc saw a steady population increase until 1970. At that point, the numbers plateaued at about 33,000 and began aging. The school district, which has been steadily losing about thirty students a year, recently decided to reorganize and vacate one of its facilities.

About six years ago, when APZ member Howard Zimmerman began pushing the synagogue board to put their building up for sale, he was met with resistance. “This is our heritage!” he recalled the

response of a fellow-member who believed that selling the building would betray the early synagogue founders.

Howard himself was born and grew up in Manitowoc, and has long-time ties to APZ. He remembers the little brick building on the south side of town, which had been the congregational home from 1925 (when it was constructed for \$16,000) until 1953. Then, responding to community growth in numbers and affluence, the group sold their brick building to a church, and purchased another building on the north side of town. This one too, happened to have been a church, which belonged to the local Norwegian Lutheran congregation. APZ refurbished it for a total of \$100,000, adding a mikvah, expanding the kitchen so it could be used for both meat and dairy, and installing stained glass window panels with images of the Jewish holiday cycle.



Despite long-standing ties to this building, Howard – who has a business background – understood the pragmatic implications of holding onto it. He did the math and realized that if the little group did not sell, they would not be able to afford the costs of maintaining and heating the building for much longer.

After four years on the market, and a few deals gone awry, APZ found a buyer. The people who purchased the building for about \$90,000 will likely be converting the space into a family home. In the meantime, Pastor Matt Sauer, who ministers to the nearby First Presbyterian Church offered to rent out space to the congregation. Howard was quickly drawn to this neat solution. “I felt like we should go out like we came in,” he explained.



Buying and selling from local churches is an integral part of APZ’s history. And now in their rented space, they seem quite at home. Pastor Sauer has worked closely with the group to help them settle in. In addition to bringing some of their furniture and fixtures with them, APZ members have used wood paneling to cover up a picture of Jesus, and they have affixed their *ner tamid* (eternal light) to the ceiling. Perhaps most telling, is that when speaking to the group, Sauer refers to the space they are renting as their “synagogue” (rather than calling it a chapel or a sanctuary inside the church).

Sauer understands well that challenges facing religious institutional life today, “transcend any single faith tradition.” This past Sunday, Manitowoc’s United Church of Christ congregations voted to merge. The two groups (that belong to Manitowoc Cooperative Ministry, which Sauer serves) will be downsizing into one building and will have their own challenges as they move towards actualizing their new arrangement. In this sense, Manitowoc’s long-standing religious communities – Jewish and Christian alike – share a common story.

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