

*(This article originally appeared in the May/June 2006 issue of Focus, the newsletter of the Jewish Federation.)*

### Why We're Grateful for Temple Sholom

Two years ago, my family relocated from New Jersey to Connecticut (what I jokingly refer to as the "real diaspora"). While we had been active in our local synagogue in New Jersey, I suppose it might have been easy to become unaffiliated once we landed in Connecticut. After all, our only child was 3 years past bar mitzvah, and we were all busy coping with our first major move as a family. Just the same, "something" drove us to look for a synagogue "home" in Connecticut. Two years later we continue to be grateful that "something" led us to Temple Sholom in New Milford, for it was by joining that we immediately became rooted in a wonderful Jewish community and the larger community around us.

What makes Temple Sholom special? For starters, it is small enough so that one can quickly make friends, but big enough to offer strong programming. Founding members reach out to new members and share stories of the history of the synagogue. Rabbi Koch is a genius at weaving new members into the strong core of volunteers. And what do those volunteers, led by Rabbi Koch, do? They serve on teaching teams in our unique, nationally recognized and praised Education Program, providing inspirational role models for the children in the program. Jewish Journeys, the education program, is not dry, read from the text sessions, but a hands-on, affective learning experience where learning groups engage in journal writing, stage short skits and shows, listen to and discuss stories, and participate in arts and crafts, all while learning topics such as "The Hidden Meaning in the Holidays" or "Jewish Values." An energetic Social Action Committee works with the larger community to reach out to those in need. The Committee also provides educational programming, such as the annual Tu B'Shevat Seder or our Tikkun Layel Shavuot, where community members have an opportunity to learn about and discuss topical social issues. SHAGGY, the senior youth group, participates in many activities, both locally and through the North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY) Northeast Region. In the past two years, two SHAGGY members have even spent a semester in Israel through the Eisendrath International Exchange. On a personal note, SHAGGY warmly welcomed our son and quickly integrated him into their group, thus playing a hugely positive role in his adjustment to our move.

Social action, religious education, and youth programming are important aspects of synagogue life, but so are worship and adult education. Rabbi Koch leads a challenging and informal weekly Torah study before Shabbat morning services, and other adult education programming is offered in conjunction with topics being studied by the participants in the Religious Education program. Shabbat services at Temple Sholom are special because in part because everyone in the community feels welcome to help celebrate the occasion of a bar or bat mitzvah. Somehow Rabbi Koch has managed to form a community where b'nai mitzvah are still truly community Shabbat services, albeit special ones, ones where children can bask in the pride of the members who have helped them prepare for becoming a bar/bat mitzvah. This achievement in ritual has recently been augmented by the introduction last year of an innovative, creative, lay-led Havdalah

service, well attended by young children, teens, and adults who gather for a light supper, story/slide show presentation, and celebration of Havdalah.

I hope the word “community” reverberates throughout this description of Temple Sholom. It’s a word you hear often among the members, old and new, because it’s at the core of what Temple Sholom strives to achieve. As proof of success, I offer the testimony of a relatively new member -- the Temple Sholom community has made our family feel like we’ve been members for years. All in all, we no longer feel like we’re living in the “real diaspora!” We are so glad that “something” led us to Temple Sholom.

-Cindy Grinberg