

Kesher Israel Board Meeting Minutes – August 15, 2005

Attendees: Gary Winters, Jonathan Frenkel, Leon Wieseltier, Dave Sloan, Barry Schochet, Michael Gelfand, Jerry Chapman, David Barak, Roz Singer, Al Altschul, Lisa Schreier, Ken Weinstein.

1. Dvar Torah

Gary noted that the rabbi has eight weeks of sabbatical this year. While the rabbi is on sabbatical, Rabbi Breitowitz and Rabbi Bieler will answer questions for the community. Their phone numbers will be posted on the SAP and on the shul voicemail. The rabbi will be away from August 15 until September 13, and then will take another 4 weeks of his sabbatical in December.

Leon gave a dvar Torah about sinat chinam (“baseless” or “trivial” hatred).

2. Approval of New Members

The following new members were approved by the board:

Lydia Belzer

Isadora Binder

Michael Lewyn

Jeremy and Rachel White

3. Budget and Fundraising

Jerome Chapman noted that we are anticipating meeting our fundraising goals. We briefly discussed the rabbi’s contract and agreed to have a more thorough discussion on this topic at the next meeting. It was noted that the budget for the rabbinic intern had been redistributed into the Education Budget, which is appropriate given that the costs of honoraria are increasing.

4. Discussion of House and Nursery School

The lease for the house ends in March, and it is covering our expenses. If the nursery school is not ready to open in the fall, we can renew the lease.

There was an article in the Georgetown Current about the school, expressing disappointment that the ANC was not consulted when we filed a zoning request. They said they could not reach anyone from Kesher Israel. Gary explained that he was traveling on business when they called him, once, on the Monday before the article appeared. It has now been arranged that someone can always be reached on this issue.

Barry Schochet said that in the very same Georgetown Current was an article in which a church was asserting that it can have a school on its property regardless of the neighborhood’s views. He suggested that we tell the ANC that we do not need their approval.

David Sloan said that we rely on the ANC's goodwill for other purposes, and there is no risk to make a small effort to be nice. He suggested that we use this point as a trump card for later in case we run into difficulties.

Barry said that we should simply let them know that we can have the school as a matter of right, so that they don't try to micromanage every detail with the school.

Al Altschul asked where it is written that we have the right as a "church group" to have the school. Michael Gelfand said that it is a matter of federal law that zoning cannot be used to bar the religious functioning of a church. He said we used the same principle for the Mikvah.

Gary Winters said that Daria is working with a lawyer, Steven Gell, on this. Michael asked whether we applied for zoning as a matter of right. Gary did not know the details but promised to follow up with Daria. [After further inquiry after the board meeting, it was reported by Steve Gell that we do need to submit a request for a zoning variance, and that we cannot have a school as a matter of right.]

Evonne Marzouk said that it was important that someone on the board be working with Daria so that the board is up-to-date and can oversee the effort. Gary said that David Barak is doing this informally, but has too much that he is already doing to manage it more closely. Daria is keeping Gary up-to-date. He said that he would appreciate it if someone would volunteer to work with Daria on the project.

Ken Weinstein volunteered to do this.

5. SW DC Property

Jerome Chapman said that the H Street Development Corporation no longer has interest in our property. Their original plan to acquire all the lots in the area did not materialize. They have the option to buy one lot, and they were waiting to hear about ours. They already own a substantial amount in an adjacent square. There is also the problem of a hill on our land which would be very expensive to fix.

There is still a foreclosure option on one of our lots, the smaller one on the street. The other property is still ours. Taxes are owed on each of the properties. Jerome has made some effort to get the city to remove the tax obligation. Rabbi Freundel is working with a Council member, and has asked Rabbi Shem Tov to talk to the mayor. Jerome has prepared some information for a meeting, but does not know the timing.

Jerome proposed the following options:

1. Redeem lot #1 (which is up for foreclosure), which will cost \$14K. This is the only way to prevent the corporation which has a foreclosure option from getting it, if they want it.
2. Approach the corporation to see if we can negotiate with them for the purchase of both lots. The front lot is tiny (906 sq. ft.) and can't be used for much.
3. Do nothing.

Jonathan Frenkel suggested a fourth option – to engage in a discussion with the corporation to delay the process, pending the tax issue. Jerome noted that he would request a continuance at the outset of the negotiations, if we pursued option #2.

Gary said that it was still possible to reach the rabbi for the next two weeks while he is on sabbatical, and said it was worth asking him about the timing for the tax issue.

Michael Gelfand expressed his appreciation to Jerome for his efforts. He said that he suspected that the corporation really had no interest in our property, and would not come to the foreclosure hearing. He said the best case would be if they would go ahead, and we could sell the second lot so they could make something of the space.

Evonne Marzouk asked whether approaching them initially might make them more interested in the space, since they would know a second lot was available. The consensus was that they probably already know this lot is available and it would not make much difference to approach them before the hearing.

Jerome said that he had researched the history, and the lots have been sold in tax sale five times over the year. This is the first time the sale has advanced to a foreclosure hearing.

The consensus was to wait until August 31 to see what happens, and also, in the meanwhile, to follow up with Rabbi Freundel about the tax issue.

6. Rehabilitation/Beautification of the Shul

Gary noted that we have signed contracts with the electricians for the circuitry work and with the roofers for the roofing.

We have applied for a permit for the changes to the downstairs of the shul – one permit for all of the proposed work, including bathrooms, coat closet, and the kitchen. The downstairs work is not included in the Gottesman funds. One \$25K donation has been made toward the additional work.

We are using a permit expeditor to get the permits more quickly. It is possible that if the permits come through very quickly, the bathrooms could be complete by Rosh Hashana. David Sloan stressed that if this is attempted, there need to be appropriate penalties in the contract to ensure that the bathrooms are done by the holidays! Gary agreed.

Barry Schochet said that we should not need a permit to do this work. Gary said that he would put him in touch with the contractor to discuss this.

The contractors have given us sketches for proposed work on the kitchen, which Gary shared with the board. We should get the final drawings at the beginning of September. Gary met with them and stressed that we would rather the work take longer, than to be displaced from the shul while the work is done. They say this can be done so long as we

can tolerate plastic sheets and ladders during Shabbos. David Sloan explained that moving from the building for a short while would create an astronomical cost.

Evonne Marzouk asked what the electricians are doing with the circuitry. Gary explained that they are making a map of all the wiring in the shul, so that the lighting work can be done. Evonne said that she would like to see the lighting and electric proposals so that energy efficient designs and options can be considered. Gary said that will be available for review.

Gary also noted that he thinks the window issue has been resolved. A kind of glass that is tinted green will work halachically and also prevent light from causing a glare and extra heat. David Barak and Rabbi Freundel have looked at the glass. Only the outside portion of the window will be removed – the central “U” with the star will remain.

David Sloan stressed that when we get the permits, we need to post them.

Jonathan Frenkel asked whether the responsiveness of the contractor has improved. Gary said that it has and he will continue to stress the importance of this.

Gary said that he will provide further updates as he receives them.

7. High Holidays Learners' Service

Gary noted that an individual in shul has made a significant contribution to have a Learners' Service at the Four Seasons for the high holidays. We are looking into renting a space there, into major advertising, and also to holding a lunch on Rosh Hoshanah. The donor wants this done nicely.

The Four Seasons' service/lunch will be on the first day only; the second day, the Learners' service would be in the social hall and babysitting would be re-directed to the Bayit. On Yom Kippur, the service would be held at the Four Seasons but we would join together for Minchah/Neilah.

We discussed the cost of the event. We would like to have it be free, but we don't want to draw too many people away from the main service. Additionally, we'd like to have a sense of the numbers to be expected (especially for lunch) but still to leave open the opportunity for people to decide at the last moment.

Dave Sloan asked whether we would consider upgrading the program of the Learners' Service, as well. Gary responded that David Barak is coordinating leaders and teachers. Dave asked whether we would consider giving speakers suggested notes or curricula. In the past, there has been little quality control for the teachers. It was also suggested to try to find a way for the rabbi to participate. The rabbi is planning to go to speak at the service. Could he attend the lunch?

Gary noted that the donor is also providing funds for a monthly Learners' Service on Shabbat. Alan Gersch and Pearl Kaplan will be leading it.

Pearl will take a role in arranging for the High Holidays Learners' Service, but she will not be in town for the service itself. Alan will be leading/organizing the service, and Pearl will act as the Adult Education liaison.

8. Children's Activities

Lisa Schreier proposed new weekly activities for children in the neighborhood. She said it would be an opportunity to outreach to local families who may not belong to the shul.

The two proposed programs are:

1. A toddler Music Class (Thursday mornings)
2. A school-age Art Class (Thursday after school)

The idea is to have the classes be self-funded, but we would need money to get started and to advertise. The classes would be offered free or at a discount for Keshet members. Ads will cost \$80-200. There are children in the neighborhood and it is thought that they will be glad to come to organized classes of this kind.

We discussed the cost for the teachers/supplies. The music teacher will cost \$150 for a session. There is a risk that not enough children will sign up, or that only Keshet members will sign up and not cover costs. We agreed to offer to Keshet members at a discount but not free. We need to be careful not to commit a huge amount of funds unless we know people will come to the class.

There was a general positive feeling about doing outreach in this way.

It was suggested that the toddler program be in the afternoon, since some have morning day care.

It was agreed that \$750 could be allocated at the outset for advertising and start-up.

Lisa also asked whether there was interest in having a PACE Young Mother group meet at the shul. They would pay a small amount for using the space. There was general agreement that this was a good idea.

10. Upcoming Programs

Elanit is lining up good speakers for education, for the coming year. She is putting together a brochure for the year. She has Dina Zimmerman coming in November and a scholar of the Dead Sea Scrolls coming for March. Leon is working to have Rabbi J.J. Schachter coming to speak, as well.

Oshri Feldman will be teaching a Hebrew Class and Michael Bloom will be teaching about Sheilot and Teshuvot in the fall. The rabbi will do lectures in September, before the chagim.

There will be a Lunch and Learn on the Alexander River Project on September 10. [After the board meeting, this lunch was rescheduled for September 17.]

Jonathan Frenkel noted that the IMAX Fundraiser will be held on Sunday, September 18.

Gary noted that the new member/new to the community lunch will be on September 24.