

*Minutes from Keshet Israel Congregational Meeting on the Proposed Nursery School
February 2, 2005*

Gary Winters, President of the synagogue, explained the background of the Nursery School idea. The house next to the "Bayit" went up for sale in the summer, and there was an emergency board meeting to discuss this and to consider whether or not to purchase it as an opportunity to expand the synagogue "grounds." When the board discussed ideas for use of the house, a nursery school was the most promising possibility. The board made the decision to purchase the house ("Bayit II") with the understanding that it would be possible to sell the house again with little cost if the project was deemed unworkable.

Michael Gelfand explained the financial status of the house. It is currently rented to a third party with a thirteen month lease to March 2006. The rent for the house will pay mortgage costs for the year. The house was purchased for \$1.1 million, with money from four allotments:

- Approximately \$300,000 from trustees' funds
- Approximately \$250,000, with more pledged, from new donors
- Approximately \$400,000 from the bank mortgage

It is proposed that there will be an assessment over three years on all members of the congregation to raise \$250,000 toward repayment of the trustees' funds and the mortgage.

Michael will continue to try to raise money from donors, with the goal of paying back the trustees' money and the mortgage. Funds will likely come not just from the congregation, but from the larger community. The goal is to have the mortgage paid off by September 2006, when the nursery school would open.

Members raised questions in response to the presentation: Is six months (March to September) enough time to renovate the house? It was answered that we will start planning now so that we are ready to go as soon as the house is available again. We would also hire an administrator ahead of time to act as project manager, to make sure the work gets done.

How was it decided that the nursery school is what we need? Gary responded that the board believes the nursery school would be a contribution to the community, to add to Jewish life downtown and to provide a place for children to be in a Jewish context. Today there are many families at Keshet Israel with young children, who are sending their children to a secular nursery school. A nursery school with Jewish content would be a benefit and would create stability for the community.

Daria Fane, representing the board's Nursery School Committee, presented the importance of the project. She said that parents now are sending their children to schools where they are the only ones wearing kipot, there is no kosher food, and the children are decorating Christmas trees. The opportunity is to create a school where children learn to say brachot, learn the Hebrew alphabet, and learn other basic building blocks of Jewish education.

The ages, staffing, tuition, and size of school – written up in the attached Nursery School Report – are driven by DC laws. The requirement is 35 square feet of usable space per child. The house has a large living room that could accommodate 10-12 children and a second space that could accommodate 10-14. With space upstairs, we could eventually accommodate 40-48 children, and could also open a class in the Bayit I.

The standard age for nursery school is 2-5 years. The intention would be to open the school with a first class of 2-3 year-olds, since older children are generally already enrolled in a school that works for them. The 2-3 year-olds of the first year could become the 4-5 year-olds of future years. The first year could also be a multi-age class.

There are three audiences for children for the school:

- children being born now
- other people who live downtown
- former Kesherites who work downtown

For tuition, we would charge a market rate that was high enough to support good staff. The standard rate is approximately \$1000 per month, per child. We could offer a full-day and half-day options. The tuition would be set by the amount of time a child spends at the school. There would also be a three-tier tuition program with members of the synagogue paying least, members of other synagogues paying more, and members of no synagogue – which could also include non-Jews – paying the most.

The space for the school could be available to the community during weekends. Supplies can be bought that can be “rolled away” at the end of the week.

Regarding zoning and licensing, our first option is to get a building permit for a nursery school which argues that a school is a “customary use” of a synagogue. If that fails, we will need a longer “special exception procedure,” including notifying neighbors and a hearing. If we needed this procedure, we would still likely get the permit in the end. Once zoning is arranged, we apply for licensing, but the key hurdle is zoning. Once this is handled, there are technical modifications that need to be made for the house. The board has used the advice of Nir Buras, an architect who is a shul member, to consult on these modifications.

The community responded with questions and concerns. Suzette Klein cautioned that this project would not be easy or automatic, and that opposition should be expected, as well as legal problems, and the need to separate the school organizationally from the synagogue. It was clarified that the nursery school would NOT be a separate legal entity from the synagogue, but that we would get a standard liability package for a religious institution which includes nursery schools - to protect the synagogue from any liability.

It was asked whether there was any risk of a connection with the nursery school and the mikvah in terms of safety. The answer is no.

It was asked why does the board view this project as a good use of shul funds? The rabbi expressed his view that building a nursery school will extend people's length of stay in downtown Washington. The eruv and the bus to the Hebrew Academy made it easier for parents of children to live here. However, for parents of very young children, the school bus is not an option because the children are too small to deal with it. The nursery school would fill a critical gap for keeping people here. Other steps like the eruv and the school bus have grown the membership of the shul and this would, too.

It was asked if "customary use" is an acceptable claim for an "add-on" school? We don't know, and this is something currently being researched. It was noted that, if needed, a special exception is easier to get than a variance.

It was asked: Are families stepping up and offering their children for the school, and if there are too many, how will they be turned away? Someone raised a concern about the traffic in the area and how that would be addressed with the neighbors. It was also expressed that the financial and administrative costs of running an institution will require an incredible amount of resources. With paying off costs and start-up costs, it will be several years before the school pays for itself.

In regard to the project manager for the project, it was expressed that someone has to "watch the watcher." In this community of volunteers, people move out and get burned out. It is necessary for there to be a critical mass to put time and energy into this project. An experienced director needs to come in as early as possible. We recognize that if we aren't able to do this, we have a saleable asset. David Barak clarified that in the Nursery School Report, he based the numbers on a worst-case scenario situation. It was reiterated that we need to hire a director at a very early stage. Part of what is needed to raise for the school is start-up funds.

One person commented that the building is a house, not a nursery school, with small rooms and stairs – it is not a school and it never will be. It was asked why the school needed to be next to the synagogue and whether it would be possible to put it elsewhere, where it's cheaper? Could the school be placed in a cheaper location that would be a "satellite synagogue" for people who can't live in this area? Gary clarified that we are not considering other options for a location for a school. This is the house we've purchased and we are basing our decisions on the house as it is.

It was noted that the space can be used on weekends by all synagogue members.

It was asked about the religious and administrative policy of the shul. This would be set by the board and the rabbi.

It was noted that this is a project that can set the future for the congregation – a legacy for us to leave for future members of the synagogue.

Gary concluded the meeting and said he would be available for further discussion.