

## Temple's Palette

### Artist's collage becomes congregation's exploration of faith

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By Linda Strowbridge



Muralist Jay Wolfe Schlossberg Cohen takes a break from piecing together paintings by congregants of Temple Emanuel in Reisterstown.

Few things strike fear in the hearts of adults quite like an artist's paint brush.

The fear is born, no doubt, from a third- grade teacher who criticized your painting of a pink polka-dotted cat and insisted you follow proper two-point perspective when drawing a picture of your house.

So members of Temple Emanuel were understandably addled when muralist Jay Wolf Schlossberg Cohen handed them brushes and asked them to paint impressions of faith, history, the Holocaust, prayer, hope, civil rights, the Torah, the environment and the future of a modest temple in Reisterstown.

"When I see all these paints, I get a big smile," Cohen said. "Most people look at paints and feel like they're facing oral surgery."

Yet, for more than a year, Cohen has worked with Temple Emanuel members to create a mural that goes beyond the realm of a commissioned piece of art and anniversary present. The expansive collage, slated to be installed this spring, has become a community-building exercise, an exploration of faith and a means of finding a new path for a synagogue in transition.

"It is an ethical statement, a sacred statement, a statement about hope and renewal and the future," Cohen said. "It will be a reminder always of who these people can be at their best."

Eliciting stories

Leaders of Temple Emanuel acknowledge that they didn't quite know where the mural project would take them when they launched it to celebrate the synagogue's 50th anniversary.

"I saw it really as a community-building event. The art would just be the icing on the cake," Rabbi Batsheva Meiri said.

Cohen -- who has spearheaded the creation of murals at the Jewish Community Centers in Park Heights and Owings Mills as well as other public venues -- had developed a system of helping communities create large, collaborative pieces of art.

He would pull a group of people together in a workshop and spark a discussion about a set topic, such as prayer, the environment or social activism. He would ask each participant to paint an image depicting some facet of that discussion, then ask the group to cut up all the paintings and assemble the pieces into a single collage that illustrated their topic.

"It's a great way of eliciting stories, sometimes from communities whose stories are never told," Cohen said.

Multiple workshops with multiple groups later, Cohen could spread out all the collages in his studio and design a mural based on them. Consequently, the final piece would be shaped by the skill and style of a professional artist, yet embody the insights and imagery of members of the community.

Andy Benjamin, the incoming president of Temple Emanuel, and his wife, Linda, were so intrigued by Cohen's process that they offered to fund the art project.

"I got extremely excited," said Benjamin, who coordinates artwork for packaging on Proctor & Gamble products.

The workshop process, Benjamin said, would give members of the synagogue an unusual opportunity to reflect on their history and faith, and envision the future of a temple that is going through a transition from one generation to the next.

The Benjamins "thought it would create a positive jolt in the congregation that would not only bring more people together, but inspire new projects and a new wave of ideas in the congregation," Cohen said. "It was very idealistic and I loved that. So I said, 'OK, let's try it. In the worst case, we'll put a very pretty thing on a very blank wall.'"

Fear factor

But first there was the problem with the paint brushes.

"It was so frightening," said Sue Brown, a past president of Temple Emanuel, about the first time Cohen asked her to paint something. "I didn't think I could live up to what he thought we could do. But he brought out the best in people."

Some skeptical members were won over by Cohen's infectious enthusiasm and his encouragement, Meiri said.

"You ended up being impressed and proud of what you did. But, back at the beginning, you just thought it was stupid," Benjamin said.

"But I think the most memorable and engaging part of the process was having to make concrete emotions and thoughts that are amorphous," Meiri said. "It made people reflect on very deep, unarticulated emotions about their faith and culture, sort out some things and commit to some things."

#### Avalanche of art

In his gleaming studio, Cohen is now building the mural based on collages created by 23 workshop groups at the synagogue and nearly 300 watercolor paintings and pen-and-ink drawings he made on site.

The completed piece will include a painting of the synagogue, the choir, holiday celebrations, the deer that browse outside the windows and the fashions displayed at services.

"Everybody knows that each congregation is kind of defined by what people wear and how they do their hair. It's like that in all religions," he said.

But Cohen, who joined Temple Emanuel midway through the process, said the mural will stretch beyond the story of the synagogue to examine the faith and history of the Jewish people, the Holocaust, Jewish participation in the civil rights movement and the desire by many Jews to ease current crises, such as global warming and the atrocities in Darfur.

Although Cohen initially expected the mural to be a muted, gentle work, the style of the collages created by temple members prompted him to fill the mural with bold colors and contemporary lines.

"I love Chagall, and I love the guys dancing in the shtetl. But that's 100 years ago," he said. "We are aiming for a 21st century American Jewish point of view on life. When you walk in on this wall, it's going to be like an explosion of light and color."

Cohen said he believes the depth and complexity of the final collage will leave Temple Emanuel members finding new things in the mural each time they look at it. And he hopes the mural, like other pieces of sacred art, spurs viewers to live up to their better selves.

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