

Genesis

TEMPLE ISRAEL HAD A PROBLEM. THE TEMPLE'S Sanctuary had 270 seats, a number sufficient for Sabbath services but far from adequate on the High Holy Days of *Rosh Hashanah* (New Year) and *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement). On those days, the doors between the Sanctuary and the adjacent Social Hall would be opened, making space for an additional 600 seats.

But in 1984 over 950 congregants sought High Holy Day seats for themselves and their families and the Temple, with great regret, had to turn some of them away: there was simply not enough room. It was clear to the Temple's Board of Directors that the following year's services would have to either be held in a larger place (e.g., the High School auditorium), be conducted simultaneously in two locations, or be shortened so that there could be two abbreviated services conducted each day in the existing space. The Board asked Burt Marmer, a former President of the congregation, to form a committee to consider the alternatives and recommend a course of action.

Marmer assembled a Task Force that comprised congregants Gordon Kane, Paula Levine, Harvey Hayett, Peter Cukor and Debbie Astor, plus Jon Miller, the Board's Vice President of Administration and Jay Ball, the Board's High Holy Day Seating

Chairman. The Temple's Rabbi, Harold Kushner, was an *ex officio* member. They met numerous times and held two open forums in which the entire congregation was invited to participate. In due course Marmer reported back to the Board with the Task Force's recommendation: that there be a second, unabridged 'parallel' service conducted in a tent erected in the building's rear parking lot.



Tent in rear parking lot

The tent's 400-seat capacity eliminated the seating crunch, but it came with its own set of problems: it would need a second rabbi and *chazzan* (cantor), as well as chairs, lights, a sound system and furnishings — an ark to hold the *torahs*, two reader's desks and a *torah* holder.

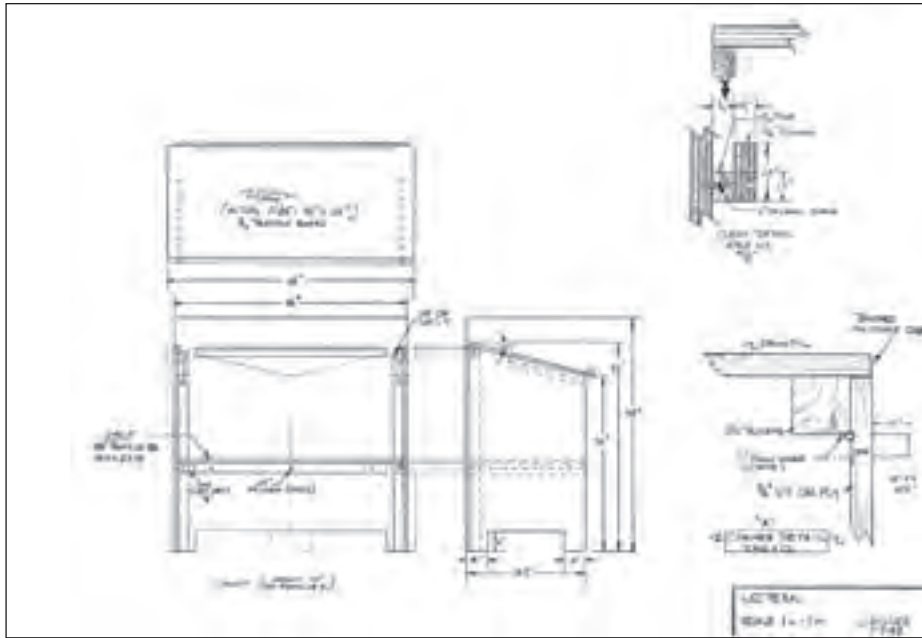
Fortunately, the Temple already had a second rabbi — Associate Rabbi Mark Cooper — who would alternate with Rabbi Kushner in leading the Sanctuary and tent services on the two days of *Rosh Hashanah* and the single day of *Yom Kippur*. Chairs could easily be rented, and choosing lights and a sound system were relatively straightforward, but the ark, reader's desks and *torah* holder proved problematic.

There were only a few companies advertising synagogue furniture for sale, and their offerings were expensive and uninspired in appearance. (More significantly, their arks and reader's desks could not be disassembled or folded up when not in use. Temple Israel's storage space was limited, and there was simply no room to spare for four bulky pieces of furniture that were needed only three days a year.)

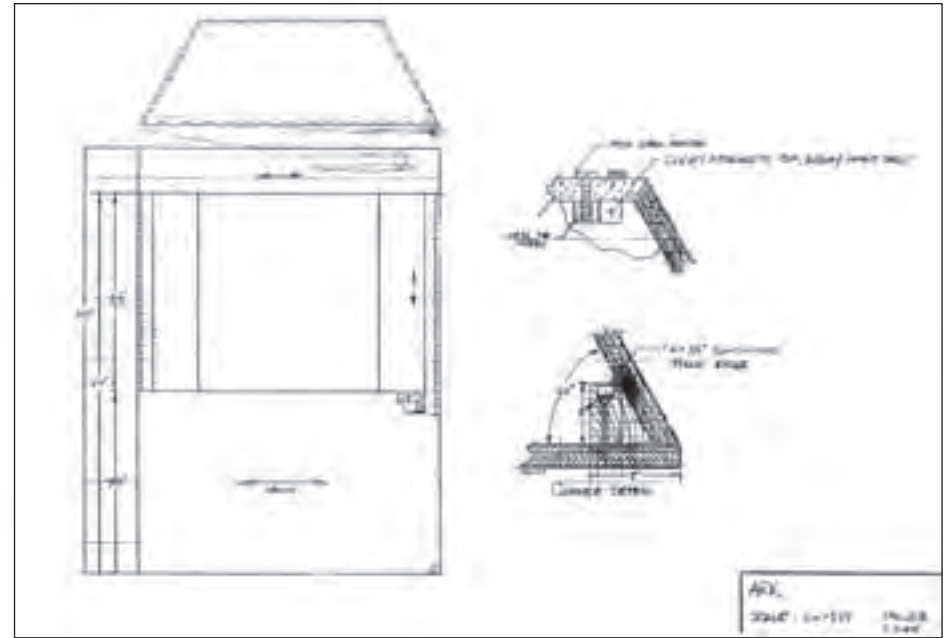
Miller and Ball suggested that these furnishings could be built rather than bought, and that they could be designed to fold up or come apart. The two volunteered to make

that happen, and called on two friends — Ben Greenberg and Fred Merkwitz — to help. Miller, Merkwitz and Ball were engineers; Greenberg owned a paint and wallpaper business. On the second floor of the building that housed Debsan Wallpaper and Paint was a large workspace, devoid of tools but equipped with several large worktables on which many of the Ark Builders' projects would be built.

Merkowitz researched the lights and sound system, and Miller assumed responsibility for designing the tent furniture. It was all built from sheets of oak-veneer plywood. Here are his original hand-drawn sketches, the very first Ark Builder drawings:



Plan for original tent reader's desks



Plan for original tent ark

Miller, Ball, Merkwitz and Greenberg had never worked together before, and only Miller had any real woodworking experience. Nonetheless, in under two months, they managed to design and — with the help of congregant Mark Durschlag's table saw — build the tent furnishings. Ball fashioned a *ner tamid* (everlasting light) to hang over the ark from an Israeli glass vase, and with the addition of an old Sanctuary *parochet* (ark curtain), all four pieces were complete.

Miller's designs clearly met the objectives: everything could be disassembled for storage and reassembled when needed, and although the pieces would suffer damage with each passing year, they would continue to be used for over two decades.

The tent service was an astonishing success. Marmer's committee had had serious misgivings about how many — if any — members of the congregation would want to attend High Holy Day services in September in an unheated tent instead of the warm, comfortable Sanctuary and Social Hall, so the seats in the tent were priced lower than those indoors to encourage buyers. The committee and the Temple Board were delighted to discover that the concept of services in a tent didn't have to be *marketed*: instead, it appeared, the idea of celebrating the High Holy Days in an *ohel mo-ade* — a 'tent of meeting' — struck a chord with many of the congregants. The 400-seat tent sold out well before the majority of seats inside were spoken for, and in the years to come many congregants who had purchased 'permanent' seats in the Sanctuary would desert them in order to celebrate the High Holy Days in the tent.



Original tent reader's desk

Several factors contributed to the tent's popularity: first, the *bimah* (the dais on which the service was conducted) was centered on one of the long sides of the tent, so in the three blocks of seating (center, left and right) no one was more than nine rows away from the Rabbi and cantor. The feel of 'theatre', of 'things taking place way up there in front' associated with the Sanctuary and Social Hall was nonexistent in the tent: there was an intimacy and sense of inclusion that the indoors services simply didn't have.

The U-shaped seating arrangement offered another advantage: everyone could see the faces of many of his fellow congregants (in the Sanctuary and Social Hall, what congregants saw was predominantly the backs of the heads of those in front of them); again, the sense of services as a 'spectator sport' present indoors was happily absent.

In addition, parents of young children were encouraged to bring them, even in strollers: the wide aisles made this not only possible but inviting.

There was a palpable sense of participation, of camaraderie, in the tent. In the years that followed it was often cold, or rain would pour in under the sides of the tent and people would be literally be sitting with their feet in a stream, but everyone seemed to accept the conditions without complaint. It was as though they were celebrating *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* as their ancestors had done, without the benefit of central heating or air conditioning — in a tent.



Original tent ark

When *Yom Kippur* ended and the reader's desks, ark and *torah* stand were taken apart and stored away, the men shook hands and counted — yes, there were still forty fingers among them. The Almighty had clearly watched over them, and Greenberg dubbed what they'd done "worship through woodworking."

In assembling and disassembling their creations, and in hanging the lights and loudspeakers, the men assumed that in the years to come those chores would be handled by the Temple's custodial staff. But that was not to be. "You guys know how to put all that stuff together and we don't" was a mantra the group would hear every year, and it became *de rigueur* for them to meet each year a day or two before *Rosh Hashanah* to *schlep* the furniture, lights and speakers down from the attic and set everything up, and to reverse the process the day after *Yom Kippur*. The lights and speakers were especially challenging, as they required two men standing on very tall and rickety ladders, working together to hoist and bolt things into place. It was a job the men would have happily handed off to others, but could somehow never get anyone else to volunteer to do.

No one could foresee that the Temple need that had brought them together would be the first of many, that their friendships would blossom and grow for nearly three decades, or that they would soon come to have a name: the Ark Builders.

JON MILLER

Ark Builder

JON MILLER, 57, GREW UP IN LONG ISLAND, NY WHERE HIS FATHER WAS A dentist and his mother taught Spanish and English to special needs students. He attended Northeastern University, where he earned both Bachelor and Master's degrees in electrical engineering.

He began his professional life working on medical centrifuges before turning to telecommunications and later aviation. He has worked for the past 11 years for Pratt & Whitney on systems that monitor jet engine performance.

In 1982 Jon joined Temple Israel and after serving one year on the Board became VP of Administration. At the time there were about 600 families in the congregation, so even if only the couple attended High Holiday services, the Temple would already be over seating capacity in the sanctuary and social hall. Families wanted to sit together. He recalls congregational meetings in which the suggestion of two shorter sequential services was broached, and remembers Rabbi Kushner rising in opposition saying, "If you do that, you will need to find another rabbi." The idea, along with holding services at a larger venue like Natick High School, was shelved.

A decision was made to have a second 'parallel' service in a tent in the back parking lot. This would require an ark and two reader's desks. "This was before you could just do a Google search on the Internet. I recall looking for an ark in a catalog and finding nothing other than a fancy broom closet with a curtain on it, and it was very expensive. I had built our home kitchen cabinets when I was 16 and was confident we could do a better job for far less.

"Let's just build the stuff ourselves."

— JON MILLER

"Let's just build the stuff ourselves' I remember saying. My contribution was structure and functionality. Jay Ball would in subsequent projects contribute his artistic talents to the furniture shape. He was the Seating Chairman at the time. Fred Merkwowitz would take care of audio as he had done for years before. Ben Greenberg volunteered to let us use the loft above his paint and wallpaper



store. The designs were drawn by hand on vellum and worked as planned except for the plan to make the ark fold flat by using a piano hinge. Instead, we joined the pieces with screws in the oak plywood. This was before our use of veneer."

Not all the designs went as smoothly. Several Ark Builders recalled the challenges with the MetroWest Jewish Day School portable ark. Jon recalled that the design originally had the doors set vertically, but the group decided that angling them back would look more impressive. Unfortunately, the doors were heavy and had a tendency to open by themselves. In addition, a low track with ball bearings, the curvature and angle of the doors, and other factors made for a tendency for the doors to jump the track. Steel bars and fiber washers installed to promote friction failed to alleviate the problem. Ben Greenberg and Fred Merkwowitz were ultimately successful in keeping the doors closed by placing wedges under the back of the unit which pushed the doors back to a vertical orientation. Miller had strong feelings about the project. "You can't design by committee. The Day School ark was designed by committee and it showed."

While the vast majority of Ark Builder designs came from the fertile mind of Jay Ball, it is equally evident that Jon has functioned as a structural sounding board. When Jay planned to construct the sanctuary ark in place and glue on veneer sheets 15 feet in the air, Jon disagreed. "With the last *Bar Mitzvah* in June and a completion date required in September I pushed to do the project off site. We only had a couple of months and starting months earlier in Goody Raider's warehouse made the project possible."

Jon and Jay sometimes differed on how to construct projects. The disagreements were invariably structural as opposed to artistic. Jon remembers his opposition to the way the *bimah* walls were built. Had he done the design,