A HISTORY OF THE MITZVAH CORPS OF TEMPLE SHALOM

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THE MITZVAH CORPS OF TEMPLE SHALOM

BACKGROUND

Shortly after arriving here from Congregation Or Ami in Richmond, Virginia, Rabbi Kahn began to feel a bit frustrated about his inability to minister to his new and larger congregational family as fully as he was accustomed to doing. The rabbi approached Sisterhood about getting organized around the idea of providing help to congregants who were recovering from hospitalizations or were in some way incapacitated. He was told by Sisterhood that such an idea was very laudable but not possible to pursue, given the busy lives of Sisterhood members and the need to meet demands of current Sisterhood programs. He was not dissuaded from seeking a better way to meet the pastoral needs of the congregation. As time passed, and the congregation grew, the urgency of the matter intensified.

In 1985, Rabbi Kahn listened intently one afternoon to a guest speaker addressing the Washington Board of Rabbis. His name was Dr. Dan Leviton, a professor from the University of Maryland. Dr. Leviton had established an organization called "The Interfaith Training Network" (ITN). This organization trained members of Jewish and Christian congregations to assist their clergy in

visiting the sick and the bereaved. He described his carefully constructed forty-two hour training program which would thoroughly prepare screened candidates not to make mistakes when working as congregational "friends" on behalf of a given minister, priest or rabbi. He wanted to encourage congregational rabbis to send candidates to ITN.

INITIAL PLANS

Rabbi Kahn recorded the information. He asked Sid Levine, chairman of the Chesed Shel Emeth Committee (Shivah Assistance Committee), to contact Dr. Leviton. Sid did so, and subsequently took the course. He asked Irene Rosenfeld to take it, as well. She did, along with Judy Garner and Mike Miller. They received the encouragement and financial backing for the training program from the Temple Shalom Board of Trustees. Lori Barth was in the class, too, in connection with her professional work with the elderly. By December 1985, they had completed the training, Irene had become chairperson of the unofficial committee on Pastoral Assistance, and the first formal meeting of the committee was held. At this point they saw themselves in the limited--but helpful-position of assisting Rabbi Kahn in visiting the sick and the bereaved and working with the elderly and shut-in members of the Temple.

In the spring of 1986, the rabbi was asked to convene a meeting in his office to discuss policies and procedures for the

use of this pastoral assistance project within the Temple. Irene Rosenfeld, Anne Goldberg, Sid Levine, Mike Miller, Judy Garner and Lori Barth were present with Rabbi Kahn. The group began speculating about the entire concept of pastoral care assistance and how it might work with the Temple's view of itself as a congregational family. Suggestions began to pour forth. Almost immediately, everyone realized they had hit on something very old and very new in synagogue life...... and very necessary.

The Committee began to function in a limited capacity just in time to provide some critically needed support for several members of the Temple, especially one family who joined the congregation for the sole reason that such help was available.

They all saw the need to bring more individuals into the effort. Categories of assistance were developed. Then, the people in the rabbi's study began searching for a name for this new effort. Anne Goldberg proposed the name "Mitzvah Corps". Everyone agreed with her suggestion. A strategy was set concerning how to approach the congregation with this new creation. At Irene's suggestion, it was agreed that over the summer (1986) a quiet test would be made of this innovation to see how the trained volunteers worked out and to discover how realistic their involvement was in a variety of activities. If all went well, Rabbi Kahn would then address the congregation about Mitzvah Corps on the High Holy Days.

Rabbi Kahn consulted with the Congregation President, Mort Labovitz, and the Executive Committee about the test and plan. At the Rabbi's suggestion, Irene Rosenfeld was formally asked to chair the Mitzvah Corps. On the Holy Days of 5747 (1986), the rabbi presented Mitzvah Corps to Temple Shalom. While a central group of trained volunteers would administer Mitzvah Corps, in actuality, the entire congregational family would comprise Mitzvah Corps at As anyone in the Temple could be a beneficiary of this innovative group in our organizational structure, so could anyone be a benefactor. For some tasks, special training would be needed; but for a host of other tasks, either little training would be necessary or the required skill might already be the expertise of the member being asked to provide assistance. For example, we might need help driving a member to dialysis; or we might need a social worker with expertise in dealing with the Medicaid system to help a member get more prompt and complete assistance from Medicaid officials. The idea was that in today's world, with a congregation spread over the Metropolitan area, we would establish a shtetl-like internal support system to cover any mitzvah (commandment) or act of g'milut chasadim (lovingkindness) required among us.

The Rabbi had a concern about control. These volunteers would be acting for him. He wanted to be certain nothing inappropriate or harmful would result from bringing numerous members of the congregation into the pastoral effort. Irene Rosenfeld and Rabbi Kahn agreed that Mitzvah Corps would not act concerning any intimate or sensitive matter without his authorization. They agreed that in matters such as providing transportation and preparing meals, Irene could proceed and respond on her own with those who were working with her. They also agreed that no one would enter Mitzvah Corps training who was not approved by both of them. They sought people to take the ITN course who were mature, sensitive, empathic, with positive self-esteem, able to maintain confidentiality and who were responsible. Such Temple members were then asked to take the 42-hour training course of the ITN.

Some of the topics covered in the course which the trainees went through included: listening skills; grief, loss, and bereavement; losses across the life cycle; psychosocial and spiritual needs; support groups; needs of the elderly; suicide intervention; caregiving-hospice; special needs of cancer and Alzheimer patients; technical, legal, emotional & ethical concerns regarding AIDS patients; spiritual beliefs and rituals; and the volunteer's role as an outreach person.

Irene and the rabbi began talking with each other almost daily to go over Mitzvah Corps matters for that particular day. This routine went on for several years, as each case which came up was thought about very carefully and a plan mapped out for attacking and solving the problem with the involved families' confidentiality

kept intact. Mitzvah Corps leaders were limited to those individuals who had completed the training or who had other credentials equal to or better than that which the ITN course provided.

The congregation clearly favored and got very excited about this new program. It fit in very well with the congregational family mind-set which already had deep roots in the Temple. The benefits of it began to bring in very positive feedback. Mitzvah Corps has covered the bases for our members from providing a caring presence in numerous highly sensitive, highly charged situations; to giving warranted financial advice; helping someone get long-term disability benefits; creating the Temple Shalom Blood Drive program, wherein the entire membership is covered by those who give; helping the infirm and the shut-in and the bereaved in hundreds of ways.

BEGINNING PROJECTS

The first enormous challenge to Mitzvah Corps began in the winter of 1987. A former Soviet Jewish Refusenick was killed in a car accident. He left a wife and two young children who knew nothing about Judaism or America. After a call for help from Rabbi Kahn, Irene Rosenfeld took charge. With a host of volunteers to assist her, Mitzvah Corps worked about 20 to 25 hours a week (sometimes a lot more) with this family for 2 1/2 years to get them through! Irene and Herman Rosenfeld provided the overwhelming majority of the care. There is almost nothing one can imagine

which the Rosenfelds did not do to meet the very special needs of this family. It was all-encompassing from religious, emotional, social, medical, educational, and survival perspectives!

A second major effort arose soon thereafter when a young girl in the Temple lost her mom to cancer. The girl was 11 1/2 and believed that all that was good and normal in her life would stop now that her mom had died, including any chance she had of having a bat mitzvah. Mitzvah Corps stepped in and worked with her and her dad to deal with their grief. Volunteers, led by Irene, became surrogate mothers for her in matters concerning her bat mitzvah-from working with the young lady on the service and her speeches, to teaching her to dance, buying her a dress, planning the celebration, addressing invitations, working out housing and dietary needs of Orthodox relatives coming in for the service, and much more. The Bat Mitzvah was held on time, eighteen months after the Mitzvah Corps got involved. Every feature of it was extremely successful. At this time it is appropriate to mention that Judy Garner, a Mitzvah Corps member, worked many hours with this family in all phases of preparation.

The trained members of Mitzvah Corps continued to assist the rabbis in responding to very sensitive efforts such as ministry to the ill and bereaved. In time, under Mike Miller's impetus, it only seemed natural that Chesed Shel Emeth should become a part of Mitzvah Corps. So this became another sub-committee which fell under the responsibility of Mitzvah Corps.

The Mitzvah Corps also initiated big project programs meant to benefit the congregation in its entirety. Some of these programs, which will be described in more detail later, included the blood bank program, the huge four-part seminar on aging, and more recently, Operation Y'di'dut, or "Friendship". In it, a trained congregational contact person is assigned to ten Temple members. The volunteer stays in touch with each of those ten members three times a year as well as in emergencies. The trained contact person, or chaveir/chaveirah, then informs the rabbis, or whomever else should be notified, about whatever concerns his/her assigned members may have.

During the first year of operation, (1986-1987) the Mitzvah Corps accomplished many projects, some of which were:

- A film was shown to the Mitzvah Corps members and also shown after a Friday Oneg concerning the loneliness of the elderly.
- Sponsored a Sunday morning training program for committee members, led by Ann Joselof, Coordinator of Education and Volunteers for the Jewish Social Service's Hospice on the subject of "What and How to Speak with a Terminally Ill Relative".

- Arranged for the American Cancer Society to give a session to members on how to examine the breast, for both males and females. The topic, "Breast Health Care and Teach-In" was well accepted.
- Organized a Blood Bank to benefit our entire congregational family, their children and parents, even though they may live out of town.
- Organized rides for handicapped and elderly members of the congregation to attend Friday night services and special programs.
- Held a Symposium on Aging for the Temple congregants which was open to the community. The symposium ran for four consecutive Monday nights and featured panels of experts in the field of aging. A question and answer period followed.

VARIETY OF ASSISTANCE

In addition to the situations described above, the trained Mitzvah Corps members have assisted the rabbis in helping our members in scores of situations. Some examples follow:

A Woman Homebound with Crippling Illnesses and Disorders. Her husband went into early retirement to care for her. He could take her out on occasion, but he had difficulty taking her shopping for clothes because he could not help her in the dressing room. During this time, arrangements were being made by the Mitzvah Corps to take her on the clothes shopping trips, as volunteers were already taking her on lunching outings and visiting her at home. She was elated with this care and so was her husband. Unfortunately, before a clothes shopping trip could be arranged, she passed away. After her death, the Mitzvah Corps and the rabbi continued to support and keep in contact with the husband, who has since become an active member of the Mitzvah Corps and helps other widowers with their grief.

1.

2. A Young Woman Died of Cancer. She was Jewish and a member of Temple Shalom. Her husband, a practicing Catholic, had promised to raise their son as a Jew. He was devastated by his wife's death and knew nothing about raising a child "Jewishly", although he wanted to fulfill his wife's request. Mitzvah Corps helped the rabbis provide the family with many hours of pastoral care in the months and years following the woman's death. A member of the Corps remained a permanent on-call advisor for Jewish matters with which the widower needed help. Another Corps member was an on-call advisor for general child rearing matters.

- For nine months, the Mitzvah Corps provided emotional support to get the son over the toughest period of his grief. Because of his emotional roller-coaster, his grades began to suffer. He went from being on probation the first semester at school to being on Dean's List the second semester, as he found strength in his extended family.
- 4. An Elderly Member Was in Trouble. She was dying a very slow death from cancer. Her husband was crushed by her suffering and impending death. Mitzvah Corps became involved and provided visits, Pesach seder at their home, and many other home meals. The Corps took her husband to the hospital to visit the wife. After her death, the Corps helped with the arrangements for shive and maintained regular contact and support for the husband.
- Mitzvah Corps had been "looking after" her for three years, as she did not have much family in the area. She lived many miles from Temple, but loved going to services every week and missed this aspect of her life. Mitzvah Corps arranged a driving assistance program asking volunteers to drive her to and from Temple each week. Fifty two members volunteered and each was assigned one

week to drive her to and from services. Members who need it, now have transportation whenever they desire to come to services, which is almost every week. This particular widow has since died, but many others are benefiting from the transportation program. Driving was only one part of the many activities in this lady's life with which the Mitzvah Corps became involved. We drove her to activities at the JCC, visited her in the hospital many times to boost her spirits, and took her to Sisterhood meetings. Because she was lonely, she expressed a desire for visitors, and we fulfilled that wish.

- 6. Provide Social Support at Home to an Elderly Couple. The husband was extremely ill but not in serious danger of an immediate death. They had nurses around the clock. The Mitzvah Corps provided emotional, spiritual and social support. When death came, the peer support by trained Mitzvah Corps members gave the wife counseling and comfort.
- 7. 40-Year Old Wife and Mother of two Children Developed

 Bile Duct Cancer. An extended 18-month relationship

 developed with this family who had a 12-year old

 preparing for a Bar Mitzvah and a 2-year old who did not

understand what was happening. For the first hospitalization (2 weeks) in the early stages of sickness, the Mitzvah Corps provided fifteen full course meals to the husband and children. Mitzvah Corps helped with arrangements for the son's Bar Mitzvah, the date of which was moved forward so that it could be held while the mother was still able to participate in and enjoy it. The Mitzvah Corps provided car pools to drive the son to soccer practice, Hebrew School, and other after-school activities. The young daughter was taken to playgrounds and Chanukah parties. Baby sitting was provided by Mitzvah Corps members to allow the husband to spend long visits with his wife in the hospital as the disease progressed. After this woman died, continued support and assistance was given to the family. Many members invited the husband and children to holiday dinners and even nonholiday dinners.

8. Government Employee in Need of Additional Sick Leave.

A Temple member needed to undergo medical tests in another city for a serious illness. The member had already used up all the sick leave available and would have to take leave without pay, incurring an additional burden. A notice went out to Temple members to donate their sick leave hours under a new government program which allowed for the transfer of sick hours from one

employee to another. Fifteen Temple members responded, with one member donating 40 hours of sick leave and an offer of more, if needed. Because of the generosity of Temple member donations of sick-leave hours, the employee did not have to take <u>any</u> leave without pay.

- 9. Member's Father Taken for Dialysis Treatment. This man was driven 2 3 times a week to the hospital for kidney dialysis. It was difficult for the daughter or son-in-law to keep taking time off work, so arrangements to do the driving were made with Mitzvah Corps members who were at home during the day. Doing so also gave some respite to the family caregivers.
- 10. Assistance Given to Member Whose Husband was Dying. This member did not drive, and her husband was in a hospital in Washington, D.C. She was reluctant to take the Metro at night, because of possible danger, so Mitzvah Corps members drove her to and from hospital visits. Specialists in the congregation also assisted her after his death in dealing with the necessities i.e., a lawyer helped with legal papers and an accountant with getting the estate in order. Assistance was also given with handling insurance papers and doctor's bills.

- 11. Death of an Active Member's Husband. Because this member, as well as her husband, were both very active in many phases of Temple life, there were plenty of family and friends to surround her after his sudden death. None-the-less, the Mitzvah Corps and the entire Temple family rallied around her and filled the house with hundreds of visitors, cooked many meals, and gave support in immeasurable ways. It reinforced the rabbi's notion that caregivers may also need care, and we all may become the beneficiaries as well as the benefactors of this wonderful help.
- Assistance is Given in Admitting a Member's Father to the 12. Hebrew Home. A member had to relocate her retired mother father to this area because of the father's Alzheimer's disease and the need to place him in a nursing care facility. The mother's health was beginning to suffer as a result of the strain on her of his home The waiting list at the Hebrew Home was very long and there were many stumbling blocks to admission. Because of the close working relationship the Mitzvah Corps Director had with staff members at the Hebrew Home, much assistance was given to the member of Temple Shalom in a successful attempt to admit her father in a timely Additional help was given when the mother of the Temple member needed transportation for her medical appointments.

Daughter of Temple Member Undergoes Back Surgery. 13. Complications from serious back surgery damaged a nerve in the spine of the daughter of a Temple member. She had seen over 15 specialists and was hospitalized 10 times in three months. The rabbi gave the mother the names of Temple members who were specialists in neurological fields so that she could speak to them and understand what was happening to her daughter "layman's language" as well as to know what kinds of questions to ask her own physicians and what signs to look for. Experts from the Temple family in the fields of pain therapy, psychological therapy, physical therapy and other areas were all willing to speak to the family in an effort to reassure them. In addition, many members of the Mitzvah Corps and congregation at large visited the daughter during her long hospital confinement, and bolstered the spirits of the parents, neither of whom had family in the area.

1991 ASSISTANCE

As 1991 opened, the Mitzvah Corps had expanded its projects and activities in the following areas:

1. Outings for an Elderly Mother of Temple Member. The elderly mother lives at home with her daughter. Neither

mother nor daughter drive and so are confined to the house most of the time. The mother loves to go to stores and shop, almost on a daily basis. The grown daughter asked the Mitzvah Corps for volunteers to take her mother, and herself, for a couple of hours on weekends so they could both get out of the house for awhile. Two or three members of the Mitzvah Corps volunteered and on several weekends, the mother and daughter were taken shopping to a variety of department stores, drug stores, card shops, etc. It is hoped that this will be an ongoing project through the year.

When a Temple member's father became ill and necessitated constant care, the Mitzvah Corps was called on to make periodic visits on a scheduled basis, as the daughter could not visit as often as she liked due to her own disability. Members volunteered to visit on a weekly basis and read him short stories which he had said pleased him. The volunteers also brought him his favorite candies, and tried to make him feel as though he had a lot of family here who cared.

In addition to all the above individual cases which have been cited, there are many active committees within the Mitzvah Corps. The Transportation Committee has been expanded to not only drive

members to Sabbath services, but now drives members and their immediate families to doctor's appointments, medical treatments, and even social events. This is done especially in the case of elderly parents of members when the members are working and cannot take off work.

The Blood Drive is still held twice a year, in the spring and in the fall, and continues to collect and donate anywhere from 20 to 80 pints of blood to the Metropolitan Blood Bank. This program entitles Temple members and their immediate families access to blood any time and any where in the world they might need it with no cost to them.

The CIS Resettlement Program is now actively engaged in assisting 40 emigres to find and furnish apartments, obtain training in speaking English and getting job skills, acquiring necessary clothing and transportation for interviews and daily survival. In one of our proudest moments, the CIS Resettlement Program helped the thirteen-year-old son of a Soviet emigre family to have a bar mitzvah celebration, sponsored by the Temple family. It was the first bar mitzvah in many generations of Jews in this family. The 13 members of the family, who were now in the United States--and all members of Temple Shalom--beamed with pride over this simcha.

A special fund, the Herman Rosenfeld Memorial Resettlement Fund, has been established by Irene Rosenfeld in memory of her husband for the sole purpose of assisting our ex-Soviet emigres. Money may be requested for educational purposes, car loans, moving expenses, or whatever is needed.

A men's and women's bereavement committee is actively counseling widows and widowers. It is headed by persons who know first-hand how to deal with the grief from the death of a spouse. Individuals, as well as group counseling, is offered by these Mitzvah Corps members.

The year 1991 also saw the birth of two very new and very active subcommittees: Interfaith Couples Group and Operation Y'di'dut.

INTERFAITH COUPLES GROUP

The Interfaith Couples Group grew out of a need for the many intermarried couples who belong to Temple Shalom to discuss common concerns of the non-Jewish spouse or newly converted spouse in relating to the Jewish family members and in raising their children in a Jewish home. It also serves as a platform for the Jewish spouse to learn of the sensitivities involved with the non-Jewish spouse's holidays. The goals were to provide a place where interfaith couples could meet informally, develop friendships, and gain confidence through mutual acceptance. It also hoped to

provide an open and trusting environment in which to explore possible solutions to problems arising out of religious differences. Rabbi Kahn, at the first meeting, discussed the High Holy Days so that it would be more meaningful to the non-Jewish, as well as the Jewish spouses. Although most of the couples are young with small children, there are a few who have been married 20-25 years and have already weathered the problems that may have arisen with Christmas celebrations, inter-dating, holiday foods, identity, and other common concerns. By talking about various approaches, many ideas are shared, and a common ground for support may be found. This group is very new, but it is strong, growing, and seems dedicated to solving its mutual problems. They have discussed topics such as "How other couples celebrate the holidays", "What to tell a child when Mom and Dad practice different faiths", "How to deal with in-laws when the couple wishes to worship on the High Holy Days", and much more. The group held a Chanukah pot luck party with presents for the children at one member's home, and may meet in smaller more intimate Chavurahs for part of the year so members can really get to know each other well.

OPERATION Y'DI'DUT

The idea for Operation Y'di'dut was first conceived when the rabbi heard a description of the method Common Cause uses to remain in touch with its local chapters. The Religious Action Center was planning to stay in regular touch with synagogue social action committees using the Common Cause model. Immediately, Rabbi Kahn

saw the wisdom of training selected members of Temple Shalom to help him communicate regularly with the entire congregational family.

The concept itself is based on the tradition established in Shemot (Exodus) 18:21-27 wherein Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, advises his son-in-law to appoint chiefs for every group of ten people among the Israelites.

The Temple Shalom concept for Y'di'dut (Friendship) is to have one trained contact person for every ten Temple member families. The trained individuals are not to act as "chiefs" but rather as friends. They would be called chaveirim (chaveir or chaveirah). The chaveirim would call their respective ten members about three times a year, hopefully around the times of the High Holy Days, prior to the Thanksgiving/Chanukah season and around Passover. One goal is to ease the way for members to be with one another at special times of the year. If appropriate, the chaveirim might suggest that families get together for a holiday meal.

In no case are the chaveirim to act as counselors or to publicize Temple events. Rather they function as listeners, sounding boards, Temple contacts, and respond helpfully to what the congregant tells them, even if it is of a "gripe" nature. When indicated, the chaveirim will pass pertinent information along to the rabbis, or other leaders, who can act on the information

provided in helpful ways. The chaveirim are trained to handle sensitive and confidential information and to be supportive. is hoped that eventually a close enough relationship will be formed that congregants will call their chaveirim on their own, whenever they feel a need to reach out to someone in the Temple. Although this program has just begun, one round of phone calls has been made and the response so far has been overwhelmingly positive! Congregants are pleased to hear that they are being called out of concern for themselves, and not being asked for a contribution, or to serve on another committee. They seem pleased to know that the Temple is really interested in their ideas and well being. Conversely, if a congregant makes his or her wish known that they prefer not to be called, we honor this wish as well. Operation Y'di'dut, we see the future of the Mitzvah Corps expanding even more as additional needs are uncovered and contacts are made.

The leaders of Mitzvah Corps continue to call on the congregational membership at large for all sorts of assistance, depending on one's qualifications and willingness to help. It is Rabbi Kahn's opinion that the Temple Shalom Mitzvah Corps may be the most ambitious and successful program of its type in any synagogue in the United States.

Rabbi Kahn mentions that, from time to time, he thinks about the many individuals who, in the early years of trying, thought it would not be possible to establish, in the Temple, an organization such as Mitzvah Corps. Their negative attitudes were reasonable, given the grinding schedule nearly everyone in our community seems to pursue in everyday life. But his dream of what a synagogue should be was not surrendered. Irene Rosenfeld, by far, had the most to do with making the dream of Mitzvah Corps a successful reality. Though never formally trained, it was Herman Rosenfeld (z"1--may his memory always be for a blessing) who stepped forward to provide the greatest assistance to Irene. His dedication will not be detailed--as was his wish--but it was astounding in quantity and quality.

Many other dedicated members of Temple Shalom have helped Rabbi Kahn and Irene Rosenfeld to bring Mitzvah Corps to the position of respect and admiration it now occupies. Two of these individuals are Ken and Elaine Storms, who replaced Irene as the chair of the committee on June 11, 1991. The Mitzvah Corps now has 25 trained leaders with many "assistants" from the congregation. Mitzvah Corps is now the largest committee in the congregation. Rabbi Kahn says that the Mitzvah Corps stands alone as the most important and successful project associated with his rabbinical career. The basic and most vital commandments and acts of lovingkindness on which a synagogues's integrity stand are reinforced daily through the commitment of the Mitzvah Corps leaders and the cooperative spirit provided this effort by the members of Temple Shalom.