

Pfeifers of Arkansas: A Presidential Legacy

Installation of Carol Pfeifer Parham, President, Congregation B'nai Israel

Shabbat Chukkat 5778

June 22, 2018

Rabbi Barry H. Block

The Torah often makes itself perfectly clear – for example, repeating the commandment to “remember the stranger” thirty-six times. On other matters, the Bible expresses ambivalence. For example, our sacred Scripture is not at all sure if dynasties are desirable. On the one hand, as we read tonight, the priesthood is passed from father to son, generation to generation, beginning with Aaron’s death, giving way to the High Priesthood of his son Eliezer. On the other hand, Moses’s children, clearly introduced in their early childhood, disappear from the story. The great leader is succeeded not by one of his offspring, but by Joshua, who isn’t a relative.

The presidency of Congregation B’nai Israel, of course, is not dynastic. Each nominating committee designates a person who has served the congregation with distinction to lead our Temple family as our president. The congregation ratifies that recommendation at the Annual Meeting, while retaining the power not to do so.

Carol Pfeifer Parham, who became our President on Tuesday, has been devoted to Congregation B’nai Israel for decades. She grew up here and was an active member of LaFTY. With Greg’s support, she raised Kyle and Seth in our Religious School. When Jack Grundfest asked her to join our Board, she accepted, and she engaged deeply as both a leader and as a volunteer. As Carol said Tuesday, she has spent countless hours in the kitchen at Rita’s side. For four years, Carol has served as a Vice-President, serving as a trusted advisor to two Presidents; an involved member of the Executive and Budget Committees, confronting the most nettlesome questions that present themselves to Temple leaders to ensure the healthy future of Congregation B’nai Israel. She has been central to the stability of our administrative functioning in often challenging circumstances. All that is to say that Carol has become our President because of her own gifts, talents, and contributions, not because her dad was President and they both come from a long line of Temple Presidents from the Pfeifer family.

Nevertheless, we would do well to pause and consider the tremendous familial legacy that Carol brings to the presidency. Our detractors claim that

Reform is an exit path from Judaism. Over the generations, they charge, people go from Orthodox to Conservative to Reform and then out of the Jewish people for good. That's a lie, evident in many of our Temple families who have been steadfast, faithful Reform Jews for generations. Carol ascends to the presidency, succeeding her father, her great-grandfather, and her great-great-grandfather. Only one generation in five was skipped, stretching back to the era when that great-great-grandfather, Philip Pfeifer, was among our congregation's founders. Even in the otherwise "skipped" generation, other Pfeifer family members who are not Carol's direct ancestors served as President.

I asked Jim Pfeifer if he and Phillip Spivey could provide material from our Temple archives about previous Pfeifer family members who served our congregation as President. Pushing my luck, I even asked Jim if he might arrange an archives exhibit in the lobby to mark the occasion. Jim was reluctant, perhaps because he, too, is a Pfeifer, and he didn't want to do anything that might seem self-serving. Jim emphasizes that Phillip did much of the research, and Jim regrets being out of town and unable to be with us tonight. I hope you enjoy the splendid, inspiring exhibit as much as I do.

Tonight, I would like to share some of what I learned from Jim and Phillip and seek to link the Pfeifer presidential legacy to Carol's own gifts and the time in which she will serve.

Philip Pfeifer, Carol's great-great grandfather, was a founder of our congregation and its second President. His tenure was most fruitful, as the congregation called its first rabbi, built its first building, and initiated its Religious School. The rabbi, Jacob Bloch, was not my great-great grandfather. Bloch with an "h." While I don't know the nature of Philip Pfeifer's relationship with that Rabbi Bloch, I am grateful that Carol spoke on Tuesday of the sacred bond between President and rabbi. Even more, I treasure her guidance, which I have come to value throughout the last four years.

While we no longer occupy the edifice that Philip Pfeifer built, our Temple facility remains a challenging priority. Having grown up here on Rodney Parham Road, Carol is devoted to securing the integrity of this sacred structure.

In their research, Jim and Phil learned: "In 1873, the last year of Philip's tenure as President, yellow fever broke out in the community. ... Another epidemic broke out in 1878. Philip served on the Board of Health and they cancelled all trains into Little Rock since the epidemic hit Memphis first. From his

wholesale grocery business, Philip provided food and supplies to over 100 passengers stranded at a train station in Galloway outside North Little Rock due to the quarantine.” That caring spirit, reaching out to those most in need, is a trait that has survived and thrived across five generations.

Carol, of course, is the first woman in her family to serve as President, something that many of her earliest predecessors couldn’t even have imagined. However, Carol’s cousins Trudy Jacobson and Jana Cohen aren’t the only of the first Pfeifer women whose contributions to the congregation have been legion without serving as President. Clara Pfeifer, Philip’s wife, was the President of the Hebrew Ladies Benevolent Society, which donated a new chandelier to the Temple in 1872.

Philip’s son, Arthur H. Pfeifer, served as President in 1907-08. As Jim writes, “During his tenure, one of B’nai Israel’s most lauded rabbis, Louis Witt, was hired. Witt was a champion of social justice and spoke his mind to both the delight and consternation of the membership. Sound familiar, Carol?

I focus tonight primarily on Carol’s direct descendants who served as President, but want to mention the names of other Presidents from the family: Louis Mandelbaum, who served for many years as Treasurer and Vice-President, and stepped into a leadership vacuum as President in 1904. Eugene Mandelbaum Pfeifer, a brother of Carol’s great-grandfather, Arthur, served in 1939, as war raged in Europe. Leo Pfeifer, a member of the branch of the family who owned and operated Pfeifers of Arkansas Department Stores for over 100 years, was our congregation’s President in 1944, stepping in at age 75 to fill an emergency leadership void at the height of World War II and the Holocaust.

Jim’s father, Jimmy Pfeifer, Sr., served as President from 1969 to 1972. Jimmy opposed abandoning the downtown Temple on Broadway; but once the move was approved, he became a donor and he loved the new place. That devotion to the congregation’s past is emblematic of many descendants of historic Temple families. Those same families, though, have adapted to and eventually embraced the congregation’s new members and newer ways, just as Jimmy Pfeifer came to appreciate the new building – not so new now, as Richard Estelita was careful to point out in his written report for the Annual Meeting: Congregation B’nai Israel has now been located on North Rodney Parham Road for nearly one-third of its existence.

Arthur J. Pfeifer, Carol's dad, Art, who worships with us tonight, was President from 1980 to 1983. Art led the congregation at a time of changes in liturgy and music, including the first all-music services and the first cantorial weekend in Temple history. Congregational song leaders were recruited for the first time. Tonight, worshipping with the words of *Union Prayer Book – Sinai Edition*, accompanied by our volunteer Temple musicians, we blend the congregation's Classical Reform history with today's Contemporary Reform leanings. Adherence to both tradition and progress was as central to Art's presidency as it is to Carol's priorities. As Art said in 1980: "Our people learned a long time ago that there was a certain value in stopping for a moment to reflect on the past and consider the future. We have many blessings to count: A continuous line of dedicated spiritual leadership, a beautiful Temple, a religious school second to none, and much more, all of which reflect our cherished history and traditions. There is much evidence that we have not lost sight of the blessings we enjoy, living as we do in a land of liberty and freedom."

In a recent interview, Art said that his greatest accomplishment as President was, and I quote, 'Keeping the conversation on topic.' He was referring to Board meetings. Perhaps Carol will want to bring in her dad as Sargent-at-Arms.

Each generation of Temple Presidents, all those Pfeifers and many other Presidents in between them, brought their own gifts and priorities to leading the congregation. Each also served at a particular time and under circumstances not of their making which shaped their service. As Carol now dons the presidential garments worn by four generations in her family before her, she is prepared to face challenges that she expects, such as upgrading the Temple's mechanical system and striving toward stability in our office; and others that nobody can predict. Carol inherits a legacy and brings her own unique talents and sensitivities to each of these endeavors. As we look back tonight, we know that our successors, decades and perhaps more than a century into the future, will have much to celebrate as they reflect on the presidency of Carol Pfeifer Parham, 2018 to 2020.

Amen