

Monday, February 23, 2009

Arrival of Lubavitchers a noteworthy event for area

The issue: Congregation Shomrei Habrith synagogue has become the Chabad Center of Berks County.

Our opinion: The change opens a new chapter in Jewish life in our area.

SOMETHING FAMILIAR has disappeared from the religious landscape — but not completely. Congregation Shomrei Habrith, Berks County's only Orthodox synagogue, has ceased to exist, its shrinking membership not sufficient to maintain a synagogue.

Shomrei Habrith traces its roots to an infusion of Orthodox Jews, refugees from persecution in Russia and Poland during the 19th century.

In 1880, they began worshipping in a room at 11th and Elm streets, and in 1888, a judge issued a charter

establishing a place of worship and a burial ground.

In 1893, the main portion of a synagogue was built at 533 N. Eighth St., and the congregation later added to it and purchased a nearby building for social events.

The synagogue at 2320 Hampden Boulevard was dedicated in 1962, and the congregation celebrated its centennial in 1988.

But in December, faced with the financial hardships that come with dwindling membership, the congregation leased the building to Chabad-Lubavitch, a worldwide movement

within Judaism, transforming the synagogue into the Chabad Center of Berks County

Rabbi Yosef Lipsker will provide the continuity as he oversees the change. Lipsker, who was ordained at Central Lubavitch Yeshiva in Brooklyn, was the rabbi at Congregation Shomrei Habrith since 1997 and will remain as the Chabad rabbi.

In contrast to the synagogue's membership-based structure, the center will have an open-door policy, welcoming people from all walks of Jewish life and those who want to learn more about Jewish tradition.

The members of the former Shomrei Habrith will still have an Orthodox place of worship, with some small changes in the service, according to Lipsker.

So the Orthodox Jewish tradition is not just alive and well in Berks

County, it is newly energized. Chabad-Lubavitch is one of the most dynamic forces in modern Judaism — a philosophy, a movement and an organization, as described on the organization's Web site.

It is an embracing philosophy, eschewing exclusivity to encompass the totality of Jewish life, melding spirituality and study.

Appropriately enough, Lubavitch, the town in Russia that became the movement's base, is Russian for "the city of brotherly love."

An offshoot of the Hasidic movement that swept Eastern Europe in the 18th century, Chabad-Lubavitch is a new kid on the block for a religion whose cornerstone is the patriarch Abraham.

In a sense, Lubavitchers stand against the tide, as Judaism, like other religions in the Western World,

finds itself losing members to secularization.

Firmly rooted in tradition, Lubavitchers, as they are called, reach out to nonobservant Jews, inviting them to adopt Orthodox observance in ritual and in daily life.

To this end, the thousands of Chabad centers worldwide offer hospitality, respite, refreshment, instruction and inspiration.

In addition to helping Jews meet their religious needs, Chabad-Lubavitch is a multifaceted organization with a human side and outstretched hands, providing both physical assistance and spiritual guidance, counseling as well as instruction, companionship along with leadership.

We welcome the Lubavitcher presence in Berks County. It will add to our rich tapestry of religious life.