

Oneg Shabbat at B'nai Israel Temple

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As the Friday night service draws to a close at B'nai Israel Temple, children begin to squirm anxiously in their seats. They know that soon they will be set free upon a veritable feast provided by some of the best cooks in their small community. First, however, they must wait patiently as the adults pray before taking bread and wine. While Christians might recognize the similarity to the Eucharist, this tradition is a sort of "grace" to give thanks to God for one's "daily bread" and "the fruit of the vine," according to member Dot Frank. Spread out over two long tables are bottles of soda, pots of coffee, and dozens of plates of sweets, some traditionally Jewish, others not.

This is the *Oneg Shabbat*, which means "Sabbath delights" in Hebrew. The purpose of having food after the service is to "allow people to socialize, to get to know each other better and to fellowship," says Dot. She explains that it "keeps people from running off after the service." Presumably, this fellowship helps to bind the congregation closer together, yet still keep the atmosphere semi-casual. Such connections are especially important in this community, as members must be there to support each other during the struggles that arise from being a small Jewish community in a large, mostly protestant population.

As they eat, the men and women gather in their respective groups to talk about work, religion, family affairs, etc., as they would at any secular gathering, while the younger children run rampant around the small sanctuary. Although most of the families at this reform temple do not keep kosher, the foods served at its events are kosher out of

respect for those who do. Much of the congregation is made up of older individuals, so the hosts and hostesses are careful to provide several diabetic options as well.

Each year, the chairwoman of the "Hostess" committee, Sandy Nabow, plans out when each volunteer will bring food for the reception. Usually, small groups will work together to provide the spread for each gathering. They are made up of mostly adult women, although couples and sometimes single men will contribute as well. The responsibilities are divided so that each person or couple only has to bring food a few times a year. Some of the food is prepared individually and brought to the temple prior to the service, although the temple does keep a kosher kitchen for those who wish to prepare food on location or to meet as a group. In fact, the kitchen is thought to be such an important part of the temple that its renovation is to be a large part of a half-million dollar expansion project that is currently underway at B'nai Israel.

Although there are a number of volunteers, the best cooks are well known throughout the community. "I stayed later just because I knew that Dot would be making the food tonight," jokes Rivka Stein. Dot's chocolate mousse, cherry yum-yum, and seven-layer bars are quickly snapped up by greedy young hands and patient adults alike. Dot usually makes some sort of treat, like cupcakes, especially for the children. "The kids really feel special when we make something especially for them, and treats like cupcakes are sometimes better suited to their tastes than adult food," she explains. Rivka is also known as a talented cook and is especially renowned for her traditional Israeli dishes such as her "Israeli Chocolate Cake." Rivka, a native of Israel, primarily cooks food of her homeland and passes on her knowledge of food to her nineteen-year-old daughter. For members of B'nai temple, her authentic Israeli cooking is always a treat. Rivka also

says the members are always looking for new Jewish recipes, and that many buy cookbooks that feature Jewish cooking from other countries to add variety to their meals while still adhering to the kosher laws.

Clearly, food and cooking have an important role in this community. Through cooking, women help to bind the community together by passing on their traditions and by fostering fellowship and friendship among the members of B'nai Israel Temple. It is in part thanks to them that this community has remained so committed and has become so prominent in an area in which Jews are a distinct minority.

*Recipes for the dishes mentioned can be found in the Temple Cookbook