

Temple plans dedication of new ark doors

Connecticut artist was tapped as creative force

By Alexandra Lapkin
Advocate Staff

Members of Temple Shalom in Medford were greeted by new ark doors when they stepped into their sanctuary for High Holiday services this month.

The sliding doors, which have the effect of stained glass and fabric, were created by Jeanette Kuvin Oren, a Connecticut-based Judaica artist. The project was commissioned by Chuck and Debbie Winer, in memory of Chuck's parents, Dr. Samuel L. Winer and Dorothy R. Winer, both of whom died in the past 18 months. The ark doors will be dedicated Oct. 4 during an Oneg Shabbat at Temple Shalom.

Chuck's parents were lifelong members of the synagogue, their affiliation dating back to the days when the congregants gathered at Medford's Jewish Community

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Center on Water Street. In 1958, they were instrumental in helping to build the temple on Winthrop Street. "The temple was important to my parents and our family as part of the social fabric of our lives," he said.

When he spoke with the temple's administration, he asked, "What does the temple need? What could I do of some significance that extends ... my parents' memory for being such long-standing members of the community?"

Temple Shalom formed a small committee that included the temple's past President Charlotte Potak, current President David Sayres, Rabbi Braham David, Chuck and Debbie. Together, they decided the sanctuary could use new ark doors, which have not been replaced since the synagogue's current location first opened in 1958.

"I thought it would be a fitting tribute to my parents from our family," Chuck said. "I think my parents would really love it if I were to commission an art-

ist and do some really nice new ark doors for the temple, and my siblings — my sister Leslie and my brother Steven — were [also] happy to do it."

Oren, who was recommended to the committee, has done more than 350 projects for synagogues, schools, and community centers all over the United States, Canada, Israel, and even the Caribbean and South America. During her 30-year career, she has made countless Torah covers, ketubot, chupot, simcha chairs, wall hangings, family trees, and other Judaica.

She began creating commissioned art with calligraphy and painting of the ketubot and has since branched out to work in other media, including fiber, mosaic, stained glass, fabric, and wood. "I always loved to do art and art was passion, a hobby," Oren said. "And people started asking me to make things for them, like ketubot and other art, and eventually I realized that I could actually make a living from being an artist." In 1984, she decided to leave her graduate studies in epidemiology and de-



Chuck and Debbie Winer commissioned the project for the new ark doors at Medford's Temple Shalom.

vote herself to full-time artwork.

Oren draws her inspiration from Israel, and especially Jerusalem, where she has been going regularly since she was a child. "I grew up in Florida in a community where there weren't a lot

of Jews at the time," she said, "and we didn't know a lot of Jewish families, so my parents took us to Israel every summer." She explained that the art, beauty, and atmosphere of Jerusalem are a big influence not only on her artwork but also on "everything I do Jewishly."

When the Winers reached out to Oren, they initially envisioned incorporating colorful fabric into the design of the doors that would bring "the ark doors to life," Chuck noted. "The other ark doors didn't do anything special, they kind of blended in with the colors of the wood in the walls."

"I know she is known for her fabric work," Debbie said of Oren, "It's spectacular."

Oren, however, explained that fabric would not be a good choice of material because the doors would fade over time and deteriorate. The committee then explored the possibility of stained-glass doors, but as she researched that option, she realized that stained glass would be too heavy to function as sliding doors.

Instead, Oren came up with the idea of using a new technique: fiber-art images laminated onto glass. "We wanted it to look like stained glass," she said, "but we also wanted it to look like fabric

art, so it would look like a combination of having an ark curtain and stained glass."

Throughout the whole process, Oren worked closely with the committee to carry out their vision. "I think one of the reasons I've been able to do this for so long," she said, "is that I really enjoy working with clients, with committees, with synagogues, with organizations, so that we collaborate on what they want for their setting."

Oren began with a series of watercolor images of a menorah — the symbol of Temple Shalom — which she then sent to the committee. "We went back and forth a number of times, so the idea was refined and everybody had input," Debbie said, "and so it was created together and it was a really interesting process."

Once they selected the image they wished to use, based on a desired color scheme and design that would complement the sanctuary, Oren went on to the next step.

She dyed large pieces of silk and velvet, quilted the pieces together, and embellished them with metallic thread. Oren then took high-resolution photographs of the fabric and had those photos made into laminated film, which was then applied on to four panels of glass. The created effect of a combination of stained glass, fiber art and glass is "very unique, and it's translucent," Oren said, "so you can tell there are Torahs behind the glass, but you don't see them clearly, so they're hidden."

Once lighting was set up inside the ark, the illuminated doors acquired the "best possible look," Chuck said. "It's really spectacular, I think. I'm prejudiced, of course, because we did it, but I think it's beautiful artwork and it adds so much to the synagogue."

"This artwork reflects some of the light in the temple and looks a little different depending on where you are sitting in the temple. There is a different perspective in the morning versus afternoon, versus night. When you walk in, it's clearly the centerpiece of the synagogue now."



Connecticut-based Judaica artist Jeanette Kuvin Oren created these new ark doors for Temple Shalom in Medford.