

WHY DOES SIM SHALOM NEED OUTSIDE SUPPORT?

By Jesse Weil, Sim Shalom Treasurer

1) Most religious institutions in Hungary, and in many other European countries like Germany, receive major financial support from the government. So Hungarians in general are used to the idea that they don't need to contribute to the support of their own church or synagogue. Self-supporting religious institutions are just not a tradition here, as they are in the U.S.

2) For this reason most Jewish synagogues and social institutions get major support from the Hungarian government. At most, people will give some money to a Rabbi for a wedding or a burial. But congregational dues do not exist in the traditional synagogues. The problem is that all this government money funnels through the old Jewish establishment, which is run by the Neolog Jewish movement which doesn't consider that Reform as a valid form of Judaism. So it is not willing to give Sim Shalom any share in this money, including the use of one of their empty synagogues.

3) Since it can't share in the government's support of Judaism, Sim Shalom has modeled its financial system on that used in the U.S. and England, where congregations charge their members dues in order to belong, and encourage them to also make extra contributions to support the congregational expenses. There are several problems with this.

- a) Sim Shalom does not yet have many members.
- b) Many of the members we do have are students or are living on small pensions, or are out of work. So they don't have much money to contribute in dues or donations.
- c) We lack wealthy members who could give a lot, in contrast to many U.S. congregations.
- d) In order to grow in membership, we do a lot to attract new members, most of whom are in category b), and until they begin to appreciate the advantages of belonging to Sim Shalom, we feel it would be counterproductive to ask them for dues.

4) Reform Judaism's needs in Budapest are similar to those elsewhere in Europe. All of the above factors are fairly common in Eastern Europe, and recognition of this can be seen from the fact that there are an increasing number of Jewish foundations that are preferentially channeling their support to new and growing Jewish congregations and secular institutions in Eastern Europe. Among these are the Dutch Jewish Humanitarian Foundation (DJHF), The Rothschild Foundation and the Tachles Foundations in England, and many of the foundations that are part of the Westbury Group, listed on the website at www.compass europe.org. Sim Shalom has received money from the DJHF and Rothschild foundations. These foundations recognize that for many reasons major support is necessary to help revive a still deeply wounded European Jewish community trying to recover from the horrors of the holocaust and the rigors of 40 years of Communist rule. The World Union for Progressive Judaism and its European branch, the European Union for Progressive Judaism have done yeoman work in promoting this recovery.

5) The Leo Baeck College in London has trained more than half the Progressive/Reform Rabbis in Continental Europe. Why? Because there was a need and British Jews have tried to meet the need.

WHY SHOULD NON-MEMBERS CONTRIBUTE TO SIM SHALOM?

1) Because it's a moral obligation for the well-off parts of the Jewish world community to help those parts which are struggling and are in need of help. We recognize this easily when there is some emergency or tragedy like the bombing of a synagogue or an earthquake, but it is harder to stay focused on the need when it is long term, as in our case. It was long term in coming about, and will be long term in solving.

2) Most people in the U.S. have very little idea how traumatic the Holocaust all over Europe and the follow-up Communist rule in Eastern Europe were for European Judaism. Most of the Jews of Europe were killed, and every surviving family has lost at least some of its parents and grandparents. It takes generations for families to recover from the psychological effects of such losses. Among the psychological effects are an unwillingness to consciously identify oneself as Jewish. Most members of Sim Shalom over age 40 were brought up not knowing that they were Jewish! It was too dangerous, their parents thought. Before you can rebuild a community, you have to get people to the point where they can identify with the community, and it takes a lot of time and work to make these psychological changes.

3) And once one clears the hurdle of wanting to look for his Jewish roots, there is still the long process of learning all about this complicated and rich culture. This takes a lot of time.

In addition there are perhaps 100,000 people in Budapest who have some Jewish ancestors, and hence a reason to try to reconnect. Some of them are more interested than others, and there are all levels of interest. Some are only interested in learning something about Jewish culture. That is, this is as much as they can accept about their Jewishness at the present time. There's a very lively Jewish cultural scene in Budapest, with a newspaper, 2-3 Jewish journals, a weeklong Jewish music and culture festival that's been running for over 10 years, Jewish plays and books, etc.

Some people want to go a step further and learn about Jewish history, or two steps further and learn some Hebrew or Jewish practices. And then there are some, especially among the younger people who are 3rd and 4th generation survivors of the Holocaust, who are ready to start actually practicing Judaism as a religion. In Sim Shalom we have people who are at all these various stages of coming back to being Jews. So we have cultural programs with lecturers on Jewish topics, and we have several levels of Hebrew classes. There are people who will study the prayers in Hebrew, but are not yet ready to come to a service to say the prayers in public. One of the most popular programs is a serious study of the Torah Text, and some of those attending will come to services, and some won't. But they are all slowly adding to their Jewish identity, and deepening their relationship to Judaism from a past which had little of either.

All this takes money. If you want to be personally connected to something new and vibrant in Judaism, this is an opportunity. Contributors can at least expect to get a regular newsletter informing them what is going on and they will be extremely welcome when they visit Budapest and Sim Shalom.

Please take a look at our website: www.sim-shalom.org