CHANGING LIVES, MAKING HISTORY: CONGREGATION BEIT SIMCHAT TORAH

THE FIRST FORTY YEARS

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Make for Me a holy place so that I may dwell among you.
Exodus 25:8
3. THE IMPACT OF AIDS

For years the Religious Committee managed not only the ritual life of the synagogue but its lifecycle needs as well. At first, the pastoral demands were modest. The congregation was fairly young, with most members in their twenties, thirties, and forties. As such, there were few funerals. When Pinchas served as CBST’s rebbe, if there was a need for someone to officiate at a funeral or, in rare cases, at a wedding, he served in that role. There were almost no children, so there were few baby namings or b’nai mitzvah.

Later the Religious Committee developed a stable of knowledgeable congregants who could lead services and who could officiate when a lifecycle need arose. “Mostly we as a committee handled everything that needed to be handled,” Jack Greenberg recalls. “As a lay person, you could do a funeral, and sometimes that was OK. But there were some things where you really needed a rabbi. People often didn’t want just any congregant, no matter how competent. They wanted a rabbi.” As chairs of the Religious Committee, Saul Zalkin and, later, Jack Greenberg developed an extensive referral process to help members find friendly local rabbis.

No one anticipated how the need for rabbinical support would increase as the 1980s progressed.
February 1982

The February 1982 issue of Gay Synagogue News includes a small article entitled “Diseases That Plague Gays.” This was the first mention in the CBST newsletter of what would come to be known as AIDS.

Just below that article is a death announcement for member Michael Levien, who died on December 28, 1981. He is thought to have been the first CBST member to die from AIDS. Sheldon Post was one of the earliest CBST members to understand the seriousness of the illnesses that had started affecting the community. Under the auspices of the education program, he organized the first CBST program on the topic. “More than 30 gay-related diseases, some of them deadly, plague the gay community,” the newsletter announced. “The Gay Jewish Omnibus will present three prominent physicians who will speak about these diseases, their causes, effects and some preventative measures we must all be aware of for our own protection.”

The forum, featuring some of the doctors who would become the most prominent AIDS doctors in New York, drew 350 men, most from outside of CBST. Shelly Post, who would die of AIDS in 1988, wrote on the event, a report that highlights the tragic lack of knowledge at the time.

We learned that most gay-related diseases are transmitted during sexual encounters, many of which are one-night stands and/or anonymous. One of the doctors suggested, for starters, that those who engage in those types of liaisons can halve their exposure to disease by seeing every one-nighter a second time. The object, of course, is to try to know your partners and minimize risk of infection. Regarding the new gay-related immunodeficiencies (Kaposi’s Sarcoma, Pneumocystis Carinii Pneumonia), while there are some causal theories—i.e., use of nitrates/poppers, other drugs, numerous sexual partners—none of these has yet been proven.
Shelly urged members to become aware of the potential for exposure to disease and lobby for research funding. The term A.I.D.S (Aquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) first appears in the CBST newsletter in October 1982 in a discussion of the proliferation of new organizations for AIDS research and support. CBST members founded many of them. Paul Rapoport was among the small group that gathered in Larry Kramer’s living room in 1981 to launch the organization that became Gay Men’s Health Crisis. Larry Kramer joined and resigned as a member of CBST on a few occasions over the years. Mel Rosen served as GMHC’s first executive director, and Shelly Post was an early board president, as was CBST member Ira Berger, who was instrumental in the purchase and renovation of GMHC’s first building on West 20th Street.

In the months that followed, awareness and anxiety of the disease began to grow. The synagogue saw itself as having a role in providing AIDS education and resources; CBST hosted community meetings with AIDS doctors and disseminated information about the developing network of AIDS support organizations, freely offering its sanctuary at a time when it was still a rarity for a gay organization to have a large physical space.

By 1983, AIDS is mentioned in almost every issue of the newsletter. CBST became active in raising money for GMHC, selling a block of tickets for the GMHC Circus fund-raiser that would fill the 17,000 seats of Madison Square Garden. Shelly Post, representing CBST
on the newly formed AIDS Network, wrote updates for the newsletter, publishing AIDS statistics and noting Mayor Koch’s failure to acknowledge the epidemic in New York City, where by 1982 there were two hundred AIDS deaths and 540 new diagnoses, fully half of the cases reported nationally. Mel Rosen testified before Congress in the summer of 1983 about the severity of the crisis.

The September 1983 newsletter included an article by member Art Leonard about legal issues surrounding AIDS; a similar article about AIDS and Social Security appeared the following month. Members with professional expertise offered their services. Art, a law professor who has written on LGBT legal issues in law journals and the gay press for over three decades, recalls the significant role CBST members played as volunteers and professionals in the early days of AIDS.

As a new member of Lambda Legal Defense Fund’s Board of Directors in 1983, Bill Hibsher and his law firm represented Dr. Joseph Sonnabend, a prominent NYC doctor who had many AIDS patients, in the first AIDS-related discrimination case that went to the New York state courts, perhaps in any court in the U.S. In 1983, when there was much panic and little information about AIDS, the co-op apartment building where Dr. Sonnabend had his office refused to renew his lease because they were unhappy having PWAs coming into the building. Bill’s firm teamed with Attorney General Bob Abrams to persuade the court to order the co-op to allow Dr. Sonnabend to remain.

Another member, Peter Vogel, active in the New York State Democratic Party, became close to Governor Mario Cuomo. Art notes that Peter “played an important part in the legislative activities that led to the establishment of the New York State AIDS Institute, one of the first state agencies in the country devoted exclusively to dealing with AIDS. Peter also played an important role in lobbying for sane public health policies around confidentiality, contact tracing, and testing.” State Senator Roy Goodman, an East Side Republican who was the leading Senate sponsor of the bill that established the AIDS Institute, attended Peter’s memorial service at CBST.

As a member of the Legal Advisory Committee for Lambda Legal Defense in the early 1980s, Art Leonard volunteered as a cooperating attorney for Lambda to represent the first person to bring an AIDS-related discrimination claim
before the New York City Human Rights Commission. The favorable settlement set a precedent for the handling of AIDS discrimination claims under the New York City Human Rights law. Art helped lay the groundwork for Lambda to provide training on AIDS issues for all the offices of the New York State Division of Human Rights. In 1983, after a faculty colleague at New York Law School died from AIDS, Art helped set up the first AIDS pro bono legal panel through the organization that became the LGBT Bar Association and helped persuade GMHC to create a legal services department to run it. Art wrote the first published law review article

TESTIMONY OF MEL ROSEN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, GMHC

When a person is told he or she has AIDS it is not like hearing that they have cancer. When you have cancer you are told what the diagnosis, prognosis, and treatments are. When you are told that you have AIDS you are hearing that you have a time bomb inside of you, that any day you will get an opportunistic infection and one of these infections would kill you, usually within three years.

The Federal Government has not done its share. You must appropriate massive sums of money for research into this disease. You must appropriate money to the States so they can distribute moneys to local self-help organizations or set up their own programs. If you are not motivated to help disenfranchised groups, let me tell you something as a professional social worker.

Since most researchers and health officials have determined that this disease is sexually transmitted, it is probably the long incubation period that has kept the disease for the most part confined to certain groups. This will change shortly. There is a steaming locomotive roaring down the tracks at the general population. The people of this country depend on your God-given wisdom to ascertain the eventuality of certain events and to protect them.

I call upon you to not only appropriate the necessary funds but to create an office inside the Department of Health and Human Services that does two things: one, establishes a national effort that coordinates services to affected individuals and a national educational effort to the public at large and, two, gives resources and technical assistance to States and self-help organizations in locations where the disease is spreading or likely to spread.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Rosen follows]…

I sit before you a very changed man from a year ago when I called the CDC. I have discovered that medicine, research, and the so-called safeguards we have in place to warn us about pending disasters are political and do not work when disenfranchised minorities are involved. When toxic shock and Legionnaire’s disease first came on the scene there was an immediate response by government and press. Why did hundreds of people have to die before anyone moved in this case? …It is the American way for us to respect and care for the individual person who is in trouble in our country. I have become disillusioned about this in the past year in relation to our government. However, I take heart in the response of the community itself . . . .

on AIDS discrimination in 1985, based on a chapter he wrote for Lambda’s 1984
*AIDS Legal Guide*. Two years later he collaborated in publishing the first law school
textbook about AIDS.

**Controversy and Silence**

There were few mentions of AIDS in the newsletter in 1984, reflecting the
“AIDS fatigue” that many organizations experienced after the initial period of
fear and organizing in 1982 and 1983. Many felt the gay community was finally
reaping the rewards of the gay rights movement and that political and social
equality were within reach. The community was ambivalent about how much
attention to give AIDS. While advocacy for funding and resources clearly were
needed, some in the community were terrified of being re-stigmatized and
re-marginalized by focusing too much on AIDS. Some worried that so much
attention on AIDS was a thinly veiled anti-sex campaign. Many feared that
the fear and stigma of AIDS would reverse the modest achievements of gay
liberation.

Active volunteers at GMHC, such as Ron Weiss and Penny Dachinger,
encouraged other CBST members to become involved. “This is OUR crisis, they
are OUR brothers, OUR friends, and OUR lovers,” they wrote
in 1984. An AIDS update from Penny later that year highlights
a new controversy emerging as the earliest AIDS antibody tests
were becoming available. While the benefits of testing were
unclear, the dangers of being known to have AIDS loomed large.
Confidentiality was paramount:

Dr. Steve Caiazza, President of NY Physicians for Human
Rights, states unequivocally that Gay men should not be
tested for the AIDS virus at this time. The test that is being
developed is to test for antibodies only. In Caiazza’s view,
as many as 80% of all Gay men may have been exposed to
the active AIDS virus and have antibodies in their blood
streams. This does not necessarily mean that they are
carrying the virus (this will require an antigen test which will not be
available for at least another year), that they have AIDS, that they
will get AIDS, or that they are carriers of AIDS. In short, all the
test will do is tell you that you have been exposed and perhaps raise
your anxiety level to the point that you become more susceptible to
disease, and any disease may compromise your immune system.

Many worried that their names would be collected and that all gay men would be
considered AIDS carriers and thus denied jobs or housing. Most agreed that “this is
certainly a gray area in which we have to be as concerned about politics as we are
about staying well.”
CBST had yet to define a unique role in the AIDS crisis. There had been no real conversation of what CBST as a synagogue could offer in the face of the epidemic, nor any discussion of the spiritual or pastoral implications of AIDS. Likely the first AIDS service in which CBST participated, and one of the first AIDS services held in New York, was an interfaith candlelight prayer vigil for people with AIDS on Sunday, June 17, 1984. Representing CBST, Ron Weiss recited the Mourner’s Kaddish. In 1984, the notion of Jewish Healing Services had barely emerged. At CBST, the traditionally rooted members of the Religious Committee were more likely to use ancient Jewish liturgy for new applications than create new liturgy and new rituals. CBST would eagerly participate in services like the interfaith vigil, offering prayers and texts from the Jewish liturgical canon—Kaddish or Psalms. That fall, David Bank composed a prayer for his friend Jeffry Klotz, who was sick with AIDS in a Pennsylvania hospital. It began, “Dear G-d, Our community is afflicted and we know not why.” This was probably the first new AIDS prayer included in a CBST Friday night service. Although the prayer does not mention AIDS by name, it was clearly composed as a prayer of healing and strength in the face of AIDS.

As the AIDS deaths at CBST accelerated in 1985, the community continued to host events and disseminate updates on AIDS research. The newsletter reported without taking positions on the controversies surrounding the testing and closing of the bathhouses. That November, CBST featured Dr. David Axelrod, the New York State Health Commissioner, for a Friday night lecture and discussion. The talk, which came only weeks after the New York State decision allowing local health departments to close down bathhouses, was Axelrod’s first to a gay organization. Axelrod, who davened with CBST that night, praised the gay community’s efforts at safe-sex education. Gay Synagogue News reported:

In a lively question and answer period that followed, Dr. Axelrod was put to task with some incisive probing about how the state’s emergency health measure discriminated against Gays. One vocal questioner claimed that labeling Gay male sex acts as dangerous promoted the idea that Gays were meant to feel “shame for expressing love and carrying out sexual relationships with loved ones.” Someone in the audience aptly remarked that if the larger heterosexual community were denied their primary mode of expressing affection and love, the uproar that would ensue would be unfathomable. In relating these statements to the media-hyped closing of the bathhouses, the doctor stated that despite the efforts of many of the bathhouses to advocate safe sexual practices, it would be unthinkable to check that everyone there observed these recommendations.

We regret to announce the passing of our friend and member, JEFFRY KLOTZ, a victim of A.I.D.S., on December 7, 1984. CBST will hold a memorial service on Sunday, January 13, at 11 am. Many remember his fine piano playing at CBST and his participation in our musical onegs and Holiday services. We will all miss him.

January 1985

IN MEMORIAM

The Toll Rises

We regret to announce the passing of our friend and member, JEFFRY KLOTZ, a victim of A.I.D.S., on December 7, 1984. CBST will hold a memorial service on Sunday, January 13, at 11 am. Many remember his fine piano playing at CBST and his participation in our musical onegs and Holiday services. We will all miss him.
The following month CBST hosted its first consciously Jewish program targeted toward people with AIDS; seventy-five people attended. The event, a brunch including Chanukah candle-lighting and dancing, was intended to be the first in a series of programs for people with AIDS, with the proceeds benefiting AIDS research. But while lighting Chanukah candles among PWAs was a significant community-building event, it didn’t address the spiritual dimension of the AIDS crisis itself: CBST needed to take a more active, and more Jewish, role in the crisis.

A Jewish Response
Michael Levine recalls that, like most gay men, he lived in terror during the 1980s. ‘Every Friday night we would come to shul and we would say, ‘Oh no, someone else.’ The thin face, the marks on the skin from the cancers. The pneumonia. And in a year or two they would be gone.” Saul Zalkin, then a board member and Religious Committee chair, recalls that with members newly diagnosed every week, the CBST board sought ways to help beyond fund-raising for AIDS organizations, but they struggled to identify exactly what they could do. As the only gay synagogue in New York, CBST was uniquely poised to make a religious Jewish contribution. The board, with Arthur Strickler as chair, asked Saul to explore the possibilities. “I was instructed not to re-create what was already being done by GMHC or God’s Love We Deliver. I sent out inquiries to various rabbis, and the result was the creation of the Bikkur Cholim Committee, to visit people with AIDS.”

Interestingly, the Chevra Bikkur Cholim, established in January 1986 wasn’t focused on the needs of CBST members living with AIDS. Rather, CBST established the committee as the synagogue’s contribution to and a Jewish extension of the overburdened AIDS social services agencies. It became a crucial Jewish resource at a time when most of the organized Jewish community was still refusing contact with people with AIDS. Many people with AIDS had been treated terribly by Jewish community institutions, including Jewish funeral homes refusing to perform the ritual of taharah for people who had died from AIDS. Marc Blumenthal and Rabbi Isaac Trainin, founder of the new Coordinating Council on Bikkur Cholim, trained the volunteers. Rabbi Trainin had created the coordinating council to facilitate

FEBRUARY 1985
IN MEMORIAM

With increasing sadness, we report the loss of another member of the CBST community to the relentless scourge AIDS. DOV WERTHEIM, a CBST member in years past and a friend to many, passed away on January 7, 1985.
the development of synagogue-sponsored bikkur cholim groups. It was an ideal model for a community that had no rabbi of its own and that few, if any, rabbis were willing to visit. Saul recalls:

Members of the committee understood that their participation was on a confidential basis. Articles were written for the newsletter, and we expected people to call to let us know they would appreciate a visit. We began to contact rabbis at St. Vincent’s, Beth Israel, and Cabrini Hospitals to let them know we were available to visit. The board then expanded the program to create gift packages for Jewish holidays: Rosh Hashanah, Chanukah, Purim, and Gay Pride. We had a budget, we created the packages, and then, if someone in the hospital wanted one, we delivered them to the bedside. Sometimes we delivered them to the rabbi who then delivered them on our behalf.

While CBST encouraged members to contact the committee for visits, few did. Many members sought AIDS services away from CBST, without disclosing their AIDS status at the synagogue until it was too late to hide it or until they died. As such, most bikkur cholim visits were arranged by the various hospital chaplains. “We served anyone who requested a visit; they didn’t have to be Jewish. Certainly, the hospital chaplains did not ask if someone was a member of CBST,” remembers Saul. In fact, Saul recalls an awkward moment when he and the person he was visiting in the hospital recognized each other from the synagogue. “I went to deliver a package and recognized the person, not the name. Though he was embarrassed, he did say the chaplain had already told him we were coming from CBST, so we wound up having a pleasant visit.”

MAY 1985

IN MEMORIAM

In the past month, two more friends of CBST have succumbed to AIDS. Both were members of the Shul in its formative years. A memorial service was scheduled for HAROLD JAFFE on April 21. The family of the second victim requested that his name not be published. We all grieve together and pray for a better future.

NOVEMBER 1985

IN MEMORIAM

We are saddened by the death of our member, DR. STUART SCHWARTZ, from AIDS complications. We offer condolences to his family and friends.

FEBRUARY 1986

IN MEMORIAM

With much sadness, we announce the passing of LOUIS BLAKE, our member, on December 27, 1985, yet another casualty of AIDS. May his family and friends find comfort in his memory as we pray for a speedy end to this plague which is decimating our community.
Our member PETER VOGEL died of AIDS on February 21. Peter was chair of Governor Cuomo’s Gay Task Force and vice-chair of the AIDS Advisory Council at the time of his death. He was also a founder and president of Brooklyn’s Lambda Independent Democrats, head of the National Association of Gay and Lesbian Democratic Clubs, and a founding Board member of the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center. The California State Assembly adjourned in his honor upon his death. His funeral at CBST drew over 500 mourners. The warmest condolences are offered to his father, Adolph, his life partner of 20 years, Don Castellanos, and to all who knew him and were touched by his courage and compassion.

On Friday, March 7, it was announced at services that CBST lost two of its long-time members. DR. LAWRENCE LERCHER was active in the Synagogue’s early years and could always be counted on to provide for the shul anonymously. MARK TURKEL was involved in many worthy causes, notably Lambda Legal Defense Fund. We share in the sorrow of their friends and families.

Art Leonard recalls that in 1987 when Governor Cuomo attended the installation of a plaque honoring Peter Vogel’s contributions to the Center, Irving Cooperberg, who had been bedridden and unable to walk, had a “miraculous” remission and was able to greet the governor there.
At a spring 1986 AIDS planning session, thirty CBST members gathered to help define CBST's role in the AIDS crisis. “As of now the shul has a Chaverim Committee, chaired by Pam Plastock and David Spegal, dedicated to helping any member of the shul in time of need. Saul Zalkin, chair of the Religious Committee, now coordinates the Chevra Bikkur Cholim, which provides religious counseling to Jewish AIDS patients. And Michael Hirsch is chair of the NY AIDS Action Committee, which provided meals at the Shul on Friday afternoons to any persons with AIDS (PWAs) who request them.” Some of the many AIDS-related oneg programs included “The Body and Its Dangers,” by AIDS educator and writer Allen Barnett and pianist Gary Knox with a program of “healing and meditation music.”

CBST members participated in many emerging AIDS initiatives—including GMHC's new AIDS Walk, a bold act of visibility in New York City in 1986—and the new National Jewish AIDS Project with Art Strickler representing CBST. Thanks to the advocacy of a few devoted activists, the Jewish community was trying to repair its track record of treating people with AIDS. Mel Rosen worked tirelessly to get the organized Jewish community involved with AIDS, as Art Leonard recalls, “cajoling the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services to establish services for people with AIDS, modeled on the buddy system he had devised for GMHC, and later helping to plan the establishment of the first day treatment program for people with AIDS.”

In early 1987, Mel and later Art Leonard served on the advisory committee of the JBFCS AIDS Project, which received a grant from the Philadelphia Federation.

From the April 1988 newsletter.

**PWA**

_We challenge the label “victim” which implies defeat, and we are only occasionally “patients.” We are people with AIDS._
“ACT UP knew how to manipulate the media and it was exciting,” recalls Gary Adler (center). “In ACT UP there was no constitution, so it was every person for themselves. If you wanted to rip up a sign in front of St. Patrick’s at Gay Pride, you could. It was against the philosophy of ACT UP but not against its policies.”

With a history in the militant non-violent Gay Activists Alliance, Gary Adler felt frustrated with many members of GMHC. “They weren’t political enough for me.” Gary found his way to another meeting at Larry Kramer’s apartment. “I was in on the founding of ACT UP. Ten years into the AIDS epidemic and the Reagan silence was deafening.” He recalls the early involvement of women in ACT UP. “They had a better sense of the gravity of the situation and how needed they were. They patiently educated men about sexism. There were painful confrontations sometimes, but the women patiently kept on. To some extent, they were the brains of ACT UP, the proponents of non-violence.

The Controversy on Testing
The first AIDS test had become available in 1985, but it was still new and controversial. With an epidemic of fear escalating as quickly as the AIDS crisis itself, discrimination was rampant, and no effective treatments had been discovered.

Without a system of confidential testing, many worried that a positive test would only cause despair and discrimination. This fear, as well as misinformation and misunderstandings about transmission, delayed the widespread adoption of AIDS testing.

CBST held a public AIDS forum in January 1986 exploring these issues, featuring Steven Caiazza of NY Physicians for Human Rights, Dixie Beckham, a social worker at Memorial Sloan-Kettering, Art Leonard offering the legal perspective, and Mel Rosen, by then the executive director of the New York State AIDS Institute. The newsletter continued to highlight the testing debate, as well as the advent, potential availability, and efficacy of AZT, an early AIDS treatment.

Both Mel Rosen and Irving Cooperberg became passionate advocates for testing and made a point of being open about their HIV status, pleading with the congregation to be tested. In his 1989 Yom Kippur Yizkor drash, Irving spoke on the death toll from AIDS at CBST: about 3.4 percent of the men of CBST had died that year.

MAY 1986

TURKEL SERVICE
A memorial was held at the Shul on May 4 for MARK D. TURKEL, who died of AIDS in March. A lawyer active in civil rights campaigns, Mark was on the national board of Lambda Legal Defense Fund and was a founder of FAIRPAC, a political action committee that worked toward the passage of legislation for Lesbian and Gay civil rights. He was free with his time for any organization that needed his help.
After telling stories about members who had died and were suffering from AIDS, he told his own story of testing positive three years earlier. “It is not enough to remember the dead at Yizkor. We have to work on the living.” Irving called on the congregation to be tested for HIV, saying that his early detection had given him at least three more years. (He would survive until 1997.) “There’s no reason to be surprised by pneumonia. We don’t have to sit like sheep to be slaughtered.” Mel Rosen declared in the April 1990 newsletter, “Everyone at risk for AIDS in our shul should be tested. Whatever your immune status, through monitoring and drugs you can continue a quality of life and diminish your risk of getting sick.”

**Filling the Spiritual Void**

With so many deaths, the synagogue needed to provide some ritual resources the congregation had not considered before this crisis. Mark Bieber convened a Yahrzeit Plaque Committee that designed a memorial board, dedicated on Shemini Atseret 1986. Saul Zalkin, on behalf of the Religious Committee, researched purchasing a CBST cemetery plot and establishing a relationship with funeral parlors. The shul made its sanctuary available for anyone who wanted to hold a memorial service regardless of membership or Jewish status.

In 1986 there were 4,224 AIDS diagnoses and 2,720 deaths in New York city—and 6,523 deaths since the beginning of the crisis. It had become increasingly clear that CBST’s needs around AIDS were greater than the informational resources, sanctuary space, bikur cholim visits, and holiday food baskets the synagogue was providing. As more members struggled with physical and spiritual

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**October 1986**

**In Memoriam**

Sadly we mourn the passing of two of our members this past August: **DR. GILBERT MILLER** and **JONATHAN SAND**. A memorial service for GIL MILLER was held at CBST on August 26. His family and friends spoke movingly of his activities in the Synagogue, his care and concern for all who knew him, and his love for Israel. May both men be long remembered in our extended CBST family.

**November 1986**

**In Memoriam**

Sadly we report that our member **RONN CHARLES** died of AIDS complications this September at his family’s home in San Francisco. Who can forget his rendition of “Sam, You Made the Pants Too Long” at our cabarets and New Member socials? Ronn was an active force in the fashion industry’s AIDS fundraiser last May, and we draw strength from his courage and determination as he attended our Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebration in June.

We must also announce the AIDS-related death of our member **MORT GINDI**. A friend to many of us, Mort served as an openly Gay Democratic district leader in Manhattan. A memorial service is planned at CBST for October 29.
crises, they increasingly wanted to turn to a rabbi for their pastoral needs. Jack Greenberg recalls, “With AIDS, the rabbi referrals became a full-time occupation.”

Yehuda Berger created the first AIDS healing services for CBST, announcing the first service, scheduled for February 1987, with this introduction:

When times are hard, Jews traditionally go to shul and daven, that is, pray and petition for better times. These are assuredly hard times: for People with AIDS or AIDS-related Complex, for the worried well, and for those who try to help and support and love those who are ill. In our dedication to the living, and in memory of those who have passed away, the Synagogue is planning a service in which we may grieve and mourn, express our fear and pain, and seek solace and hope.

Jack Greenberg recalls that the service included “prayers and readings meaningful to all of us in the age of AIDS/HIV before there was any sort of medication or hope for survival, whether we were infected or not or didn't know.” The Religious
Committee, propelled into a new inventiveness by the urgency of the situation and by Yehuda Berger’s liturgical creativity, experimented with a few different formats before establishing the Service of Hope and Comfort as a monthly event. In April 1987 CBST held its first Passover seder for people with AIDS. The Religious Committee called a communal fast for AIDS in May of that year. Committee chair Saul Zalkin invited the larger Jewish community to join in a day of fasting, prayer, and study—a historical Jewish religious response in times of extreme communal crisis intended to focus the community’s energies on the illness and to pray for God to intervene. In the newsletter, the synagogue struggled to address the theological and spiritual questions created by the crisis.

But where is God when we think we choose life, and tragedy strikes? When someone contracts AIDS and dies of the disease? Where then is God?

God is in the compassion we feel for the stricken.

God is in our resolve to fight for more responsible governmental action.

God is in the strength that we must all search for as we make our way through the shadow.

Rosanne Leipzig led High Holiday services during some of the most devastating AIDS years. She recalls the difficulty of approaching the High Holiday liturgy within the context of AIDS “and trying to understand how you could take the liturgy and make it meaningful and not painful. It was hard.

The CBST Yizkor list grew by ten names between Yom Kippur 1985 and 1986.
Because there is so much in the machzor that makes it seem you are responsible for your own fate.” These High Holiday services became another way in which lay leaders tried to adapt Jewish liturgy to face the crisis. A parallel Kol Nidrei service had been added in 1987 because of overcrowding, the overflow service tapping new service leaders. “I just couldn't say the words or think about the meaning of the holiday, ignoring what we as a community were going through,” Rosanne reflects. Invoking a traditional theology of reward and punishment...
would be destructive and traumatic for many people in a community in the throes of AIDS. Rosanne felt, as a service leader, she needed to adapt the liturgy in order to serve the spiritual needs of the community. She remembers this effort as the impetus for the parallel Kol Nidrei service evolving into an alternative, less traditional service. “We needed to be able to change things more than was customary at CBST. We began asking everyone to rise for Kaddish because we needed to be saying Kaddish for those people for whom no one was saying Kaddish. So we began having both a more liberal High Holiday service and a more traditional one.”

The plaque in memory of Paul Rapoport that hangs in New York City’s LGBT center

The memorial board, dedicated in fall 1986, initially provided room for 340 names and included two plaques, one to commemorate the Holocaust and another, much debated, of equal size to memorialize those who had died from AIDS.

SEPTEMBER 1987

IN MEMORIAM

We sadly mourn the passing of our members:

MARK LUTVAK ROBERT NACHEMIN
PAUL RAPOPORT

We offer condolences to their families and friends.
The Quilt

A significant CBST delegation traveled to the October 1987 March on Washington. In the newsletter Lee Levin wrote an account of the march and of seeing the AIDS quilt, from the newly established Names Project, displayed on the Mall:

How can any who participated forget the surge of people gathering on the Ellipse, or the seemingly never-ending wave of marchers along Pennsylvania Avenue swinging into the vast greenery of the Mall? How could we not be caught up in the spirit of all that Life? As I walked my way back through the crowds on the Mall, I reached a crossover—passing through an invisible curtain—into the stillness of the air hovering above an expanse of variegated tapestries, woven together into a gigantic patchwork quilt, which encompassed the length and breadth of two football fields. My God! the enormity of it—the thousands of names spread out like a carpet upon the lawn before me—engulfed me. The first vision of it—etched forever in my minds’ eye. And in the silent stillness, as I walked along the paths, gazing upon the names—a whole generation of life—not totally fulfilled. I wept as I walked the field—trying to fathom the myriad tasks left incomplete by the departure of all these names—these human beings—representative of the thousands who had succumbed to AIDS.
Pat Morgan had a dream in which she envisioned the design of the quilt. She and Yolanda Potasinski organized the first quilt in connection with the Names Project.

**JANUARY 1989**

**IN MEMORIAM**

**BOB HELLER** died Wednesday, December 14 of AIDS-related complications. He was a member of CBST for many years, and had helped at times with the production of this newsletter. He was 44 and lived in Jersey City. About 100 persons attended his funeral at the synagogue that Friday morning. Many in attendance were from the hearing and visually impaired communities, on whose behalf Bob had served both professionally and as a volunteer.
When the first CBST AIDS quilt was completed in 1993, Lee Levin’s name was among the sixty-four names embroidered on it. The Scroll of Life quilt was created to be donated to the Names Project. A second quilt for permanent display at CBST, called the NuQuilt, by coordinators Leslie Deutsch and Elizabeth Deutsch, adding the names of those who had died since the completion of the Scroll of Life quilt, was completed in 1998. Member Larry Gifford, an accomplished quilter, initiated the creation of a third AIDS quilt in 2003—which would accommodate still more names—and taught a quilting class to interested volunteers.

**A Place of Refuge**

By the late 1980s, service leaders regularly included some AIDS-related liturgy during Friday night services, most often prayers for healing and strength written by Ron Weiss. When a member died, on the Friday night following the burial, the community would stand and recite a memorial prayer based on an elegy by S. Y. Agnon, the Israeli writer and Nobel prize laureate. Member Sheila Michaels introduced a new prayer in memory of member Alfred Schwartz, who died in 1991. By the fall of 1991, there were so many deaths that the Religious Committee assembled a booklet for use during the frequent CBST memorial services.
Mel Rosen worried that CBST focused too much on death and dying and not enough on living with AIDS. In a 1990 newsletter article, he told of being first hospitalized with AIDS-related illness and receiving phone calls from other congregants who had kept their own illness a secret. “Shul people who know I’m sick treat me differently and I want to be treated like I always have been. People are afraid of me. The service doesn’t comfort me; I’m living with AIDS and all I hear from the pulpit is ‘death’ and ‘dread disease.’ I’m trying to live a high quality life with AIDS and the shul’s message contradicts this.” Mel worked to sensitize the community as how to best welcome and embrace people living with AIDS. “We’re dealing here with disease, death, pain, fear. We don’t know how to act in these situations. We don’t know what to say, how to comfort. And that’s where we need to begin.”

By 1991 there had been close to 32,000 recorded AIDS deaths in New York since the beginning of the epidemic, with 6,475 AIDS deaths in New York City that year alone. The synagogue continued to develop its healing liturgy and to expand its successful efforts of bikkur cholim visits and distributing holiday packages to PWAs. Still, many tried to conceal their illness, to protect themselves or respect the wishes of their families. They wanted CBST to be a respite from the disease, preferring not to be known there as sick. Why more people were not open about having AIDS at CBST was an ongoing question. Without a rabbi to provide spiritual and pastoral counseling, it wasn’t clear what CBST had to offer people with AIDS.

**MARCH 1989**

**IN MEMORIAM**

**ALLEN BORNESTEIN**, a CBST member who was also co-founder and the first president of our sibling congregation Beth Chai of Long Island, passed away on January 30 as a result of complications from AIDS. Allen’s death came at a time when our friends on Long Island were just coming to grips with closing their congregation that same month. Friends of Allen and of Beth Chai request donations be made in his name to the Long Island Association for AIDS Care and to CBST.

**MAY 1989**

**IN MEMORIAM**

**LLOYD WELLS** was an accomplished and respected school administrator. Prior to his retirement, he served as principal of a high school near Nyack, NY, where he resided. The father of two, Lloyd had also been the devoted life partner of the Reverend Ron Balint, who died this past January. Friends report that while caring for Ron, Lloyd displayed great calm and an abidingly deep faith. They say that Lloyd met his own death with the same tranquility.

**MAY 1989**

**MEMORIAL CONCERT**

Saul Zalkin, a past member of the Board of Trustees, will show his virtuoso side in a benefit recital at the Shul on April 9 from 4:30–6 p.m. The concert is a benefit for the Caring Community and the Village Nursing Home. It is in memory of **SHELLY POST**, another past Board member who died last June. Shelly was our representative to the Caring Community, which helps the elderly of the Lower West Side. Every year in that capacity, he would organize some Synagogue event to raise money for it.
MAY 1989

IN MEMORIAM

A memorial service will be held at the synagogue on Sunday, June 11 at 2 PM for our member, HOWARD SCHOENHOLTZ. Howard died of AIDS-related illness May 14 at his home in the Bronx, and was laid to rest the following day. A fellow CBST member and friend remembered Howard as “understanding, fun, friendly, and a great voice.” Howard, a frequent attendee of Friday night services, was a Physical Education instructor in a Bronx intermediate school. He had been a teacher in the City schools for about 25 years.

JULY-AUGUST 1989

IN MEMORIAM

MICHAEL SUSSHOLTZ, 45, died May 26 of complications from AIDS. Michael was a psychologist employed by the State of New York and worked in a group home. He was also a member of the Gay Male S&M Activists. About 3 years ago, he and another GMSA representative presented a heavily-attended oneg program on sadomasochism. Among Michael’s survivors is his lover of seven years, Jim Strassburger.

JEFFREY A. SHUMAN, 41, died from AIDS-related illness on June 5. Jeffrey was a partner in the law firm of Shuman and Wood-Smith. Among Jeffrey’s survivors is his lover, Richard Coyne. Memorial contribution may be made to the Lambda Legal Defense Fund.

SEPTEMBER 1989

IN MEMORIAM

Our member RENY ISMOND, 35, died from a heart attack on August 12. Reny was a steady volunteer at the synagogue, always willing to help with whatever needed to be done. He is survived in part by his lover, past Board Vice-Chair Lee Levin. Our profound condolences go to Lee and all of Reny’s friends and relatives.

OCTOBER 1989

IN MEMORIAM

DON KAUFMAN died September 1 at the age of 46 after a brief illness with PCP. He was actively involved with the synagogue’s Theatre and Entertainment productions and outings. He was also strongly devoted to the cause of planting trees in Israel. He was the father of two boys and a girl.

HAROLD SADOWSKY, a real estate developer, died in late August. He is survived by his lover, Vincent Ruizio.
APRIL 1990

IN MEMORIAM

HOWARD SCHWARTZ, 41, died on February 23 from AIDS. Howard was an unusually gentle, earnest, and caring man. During the Yom Kippur War, he went to Israel as a volunteer. His active participation at CBST included several years on the Religious Committee.

Howard was an environmental biologist employed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. His main project involved exposing environmental violations along the Hudson River…. He felt a strong need to help people more directly, so he went back to school for a dental degree. Howard was determined to provide services to people with AIDS and was one of a handful of dentists in this city who accepted PWAs as clients without any special fuss and a no fee basis in many cases. In 1987, Howard developed tuberculosis and was diagnosed with AIDS. He was able to secure access to AZT and able to practice until this past fall. Howard is survived by his lover of nine years, Dr. Jose Sotolongo, who provided love and support during his illness, and by his parents and sister.

EDITED FROM ART LEONARD

JUNE 1990

IN MEMORIAM

We mourn the loss of our member ROGER CHUNG, who succumbed to AIDS in April at the age of 43. Roger came to the United State from Taiwan in 1973. Several years later he joined CBST as a result of a strong interest in Judaism. He learned Hebrew, including the ability to read the commentaries of Rashi. He was an active member of the Talmud class, and could often be found on Friday evenings studying Talmud with Carl Bennett in the library. Roger worked as a computer programmer for Chemical Bank, and enjoyed sailing.

JULY 1990

IN MEMORIAM

YOSEF DORMAN (Naine Dorman, who after converting to Judaism preferred to be called Yosef), died from AIDS on June 10. Yosef volunteered in many ways, but will be remembered for chairing the Jewish Outreach Committee, which coordinated efforts on behalf of Soviet and Ethiopian Jewry. He worked as permissions editor for a publishing house. He is survived by his lover, Johnny Lopez.
JULY-AUGUST 1990

IN MEMORIAM

**STAN MARCH,** 49, a hard working member, died June 10 after a prolonged illness. Stan worked as a photo retoucher, computer graphic artist, and word processor. Before his illness, he had been an active member of the synagogue’s Food Services and House committees. He was there when needed, ushering on High Holy Days, baking hamantaschen, helping run the antique sale. He is survived by his lover of six years, Ralph Julius.

**DR. LARRY SILVER,** 32, who joined CBST last year during the High Holy Days, died May 2 from meningitis. He attended Yeshiva University High School, NYU, and Downstate Medical College, and as a doctor worked for Beth Abraham hospital and HIP.

SEPTEMBER 1990

IN MEMORIAM

We mourn the loss of our member of several years, **HERBERT HERTZ,** who died from AIDS-related complications in early August. Herbert, a veterinarian, was a service leader for CBST’s Service of Hope and Comfort series, a special outreach for PWAs.

OCTOBER 1990

IN MEMORIAM

Our member **PETER HRUSKA** died from AIDS on Friday, September 14 at the age of 53. Peter co-founded the Unexpected Company, an improvisation group. He also volunteered for the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, designing and supervising the renovation of its office space in the Community Center. Peter was a lifetime New Yorker, working nearly 30 years as a speech therapist for the Jericho, Long Island school system. Our sympathies go out to all Peter’s friends and relatives, particularly Arthur Goodman, his beloved companion for seven years.

DECEMBER 1990

IN MEMORIAM

**ROBERT MARK DENNET,** who has been a member of the synagogue for many years, died from AIDS complications October 26. Former Board of Trustees Chair Mark Bieber delivered the eulogy at the funeral. Bob was very active with the Imperial Court of New York City, which every year stages a grand drag charity ball. Bob coordinated several synagogue events, including an anniversary party. He frequently drew on his talents as a professional decorator. For one party, he put up Japanese lanterns to cover up the lighting in the social hall. The room looked so much better that the lanterns remained in place for many years. Bob was born and raised in Queens, and got his degree in architecture. He devoted much of the last two years to his home on Fire Island. He is survived by his lover, Daniel Sager.
JANUARY 1991

IN MEMORIAM

LEE LEVIN, Vice-Chair of the CBST Board of Trustees from 1986–1987 and 1988–1989, died from pneumonia Tuesday, December 4. In addition to serving on the Board from 1985 through 1989, Lee led the Food Services Committee, which managed our Shabbat Kiddushes, Rosh Hashanah luncheons, Passover Seders, Gay and Lesbian Pride Dances, and countless other synagogue events. Hundreds of mourners crowded in to the synagogue sanctuary for the funeral on Thursday morning, December 6. Among those present were Lee’s parents and siblings from Toronto, his three children, synagogue members, and volunteers from other community organizations with whom he worked. Rabbi J. B. Sacks and Cantor Jay Azneer officiated.

CBST Board of Trustees Chair Mel Rosen gave the first of four eulogies. Rosen recalled the many sermons Lee delivered on the High Holy Days and other occasions, always starting with words in Yiddish, and always with the purpose “to make us feel.” Arlene Kochman, Senior Director of Volunteer Services for Senior Action in a Gay Environment, spoke of Lee’s work with Group Activities Committee, including the monthly Saturday socials held at CBST. Lee and Charles Ching co-founded the Dance Committee, the first volunteer committee at the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center. Charles recounted all the fundraising events Lee ran. “From set up to take down, Lee did it all.”

Former Board Chair Art Strickler, who called Lee “a human dynamo,” knew him both as a fellow Board member and as an employee. “He was so trusted and relied upon that he ran the store and allowed me to go to Israel for a month, saying, “don’t worry, everything will be taken care of, and it was.” The eulogies revealed Lee as a man of wide-ranging interests, accomplishments, and good works, even beyond what was generally known. Lee, known professionally as Dr. Leon Levine, graduated from Brandeis University, and went on to obtain two doctoral degrees, including one in Mid-Eastern Studies. Lee was Editor-in-Chief of The CEO Club, and helped run such prestigious places as the Harvard Club. As a volunteer, Lee devoted himself to Jewish causes as well, including Soviet and Ethiopian Jewry. He was the head usher for the annual gathering of Holocaust Survivors at Madison Square Garden. Rosen described how Lee sought out and took care of those in the final stage of AIDS, and how many people died in his arms. Just sixteen months earlier, Lee himself suffered the loss of his lover Reny Ismond, who died of a heart attack. Summarized Strickler, “A more sincere, caring, loving person cannot be found.”

JANUARY 1991

IN MEMORIAM

Another member, KENNETH MEYERSON, died from complications of AIDS on November 24. Ken volunteered for many of our mailings.

APRIL 1991

IN MEMORIAM

We are saddened to learn of the death of our member MICHAEL SILVER, who died of AIDS-related complications on February 22.
WALTER SCHWARTZ, a member of CBST for many years, died on May 4. Walter was born and brought up in New York and received a BA from Marietta College in Ohio. After training for the Peace Corps, he worked as a caseworker for the NYC Welfare Departments. His true calling was in the world of art, however, and he worked as a free-lance artist for many years, specializing in hard-edge geometric painting. He was also the associate art director of Family Circle Great Ideas. But his masterpiece was the apartment he lived in on East 9th Street for over twenty years. Not only his artwork, but also the furniture he built and the total environment he created there made it a visually exciting as well as eminently livable ambience.

Having joined CBST back in the days when we were on Ninth Avenue, Walter became active in two areas where his skills allowed him to make great contributions to the synagogue. He did the layout for the newsletter for many years, bringing to it a professionalism that gave it the visual image he thought the synagogue deserved. His long-lasting creation in this regard is the “lambda-star” design he incorporated into the newsletter masthead (a Magen David composed of six lambdas) and made into a sign that still decorates the synagogue entrance. Walter’s second great contribution to the look of the synagogue came about in the major renovations that were done in our current premises on Bethune Street, notably his graphic sunrise that dominated the eastern wall and the design of the lions and lionesses sculpture atop the Aron Kodesh. When it was decided to replace the eastern wall graphic last year, Walter was slightly amused that the committee asked his permission to do so, and freely granting it, showed how little his ego was involved in such things. But the greatest contribution Walter made to CBST was in his quiet strength, which showed itself for years in his hard-working and cheerful participation in all kinds of synagogue activities and then, during the years of his illness, when his bravery and optimism made him an example and source of inspiration to all, both those already ill and those not yet so. Not one to use a lot of words and preach his message, Walter taught, by example, how a positive attitude and love of G-d’s creation could make a life cut short in number of years into a full and rich one.

CARL BENNETT
I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name. I will give them an everlasting name which shall not perish. **ISAIAH 56:5**

ינתי להו בבית ובחלומתי ויהיו عليه כל ימי ושם-national
שם עולם אמן לו אשר לא יברת.