



## OJC to celebrate 50th anniversary

Terri Kayden

From modest beginnings on the grounds at Camp Shanks to its blossoming as a vibrant Conservative congregation serving Rockland County and northern New Jersey, Orangetown Jewish Center will celebrate 50 years of rich history with a gala weekend.

"We are somewhat off the beaten path but people come to us and find what they are looking for and are willing to make the sacrifices and commitment required to be part of our community," said Rabbi Craig Scheff.



**The original Orangetown Jewish Center at Camp Shanks**

The weekend of events begins Friday, Nov. 6, when the congregation celebrates the old and the new. Both will come together to celebrate with events that include a Kabbalat Shabbat beginning at 6 p.m., followed by a Shabbat dinner. On Saturday, Nov. 7, there will be Shabbat services beginning at 9 a.m. honoring Bernie Schiffmiller, Leslie and Allen Levinson and family and Kim Lori and Howard Sokol and family.

That evening the celebration continues at 7 p.m. with a gala celebration. A cocktail reception begins at 7 p.m. followed by OJC alumnus Neil Berg & Company performing "100 Years of Broadway" at 9:15 p.m. On Sunday, Nov. 8 at 1 p.m. there will be a gala birthday party with a candle lighting ceremony, show and dessert. The evening will also include a Chinese auction, with the preview beginning at 6:30 p.m., and bidding from 7-8:30 p.m.

In addition, the congregation will be raffling off a three-year lease for a 2010 Ford Focus sponsored by Shultz Ford, Nanuet and the Comfort Inn & Suites in Nanuet. The cost is \$54 per ticket.

An egalitarian synagogue, OJC places emphasis on the values of connection to God, Torah study and attachment to Israel. With a congregation of 500 families and growing, OJC has come along way from its humble beginnings.

The story of OJC began in late 1958 when a few local families gathered with the sole purpose of forming a synagogue. Meetings were held, the word spread and on Jan. 12, 1959 a general meeting with an attendance of about 150 people marked the birthday of Orangetown Jewish Center. In the beginning congregants met in people's homes, used borrowed space at the Blauvelt Fire House and Tappan Zee Community Nursery School and rented a storefront.

Eventually, the congregation transformed an old tarpaper building at Camp Shanks in Blauvelt and the "shack" was home until 1961. Around that time it became apparent that the congregation had outgrown the space.

Some say, build it and they would come but with OJC they came and they needed to build it. After months of investigation and negotiations the newly formed building and site committee secured the purchase from the Prel Corporation of the three-and-a-half acres where OJC stands to this day at 8 Independence Avenue in Blauvelt.



**Bernie Schiffmiller**

"From the beginning my family and I always felt welcome," said Schiffmiller, who has been a member for 48 years and is the current chair of the archives committee. "At OJC the kids experience the joy of being a Jew. It is wonderful to hear the laughter of the kids in the shul."

A pivotal point in OJC's history came in 1995 when Rabbi Scheff joined as the cantor. In his second year at OJC he began rabbinical school and was officiated as the rabbi in 1997.

"When I began, 180 families out of the 220 were at the shul for 25 years or longer," said Rabbi Scheff. "We've always had a committed core of long-time members but we gained momentum when we had our core families joined by an influx of new families. Our congregation was hungry to engage the children and our multi-generational congregation reflects that.

Associate Rabbi Paul Mack Drill joined OJC in 2004 and works hand-in-hand with Rabbi Scheff. A former social worker, Rabbi Drill brings a strong world view towards social action. "We feel strongly about bringing the outside world into our temple and also bringing the strength of our temple to the outside world," said Rabbi Drill. Projects such as Tents of Hope, which works with refugees from Darfur, Sudan, People to People, Rockland County's food pantry, and Helping Hands of Rockland, which deals with homelessness, provide opportunities for social action for the congregation.

To accommodate the growing congregation, expanding programs and school, OJC increased its size by about 10,000 square feet in 2004. The sanctuary was expanded and a new ark was created, a new multi-purpose room was developed along with a new office suite and the religious school was given its own wing and the sanctuary was rededicated in that July.

Over the years OJC has developed programs to meet the needs of the children from nursery school through their NA'ASEH ("Let's Do It!"), which represents the merging of the Hebrew High School, and the United Synagogue Youth programs and provides formal and informal education with an added community service component.

Looking ahead, OJC is working on a mitzvah initiative and 25 Hour Shabbat program. According to Rabbi Drill, "We are interested in opening as many doorways as



**The Sokol family from left: Kim Lori , Alana and Howard; in front,**

possible into the Jewish life. Some people come to study Torah, others for community and others to education

their children. We are interested in growing the souls of our congregants and there are many portals for that."

When looking towards the future, Rabbi Scheff acknowledges that they have grown but that OJC has a reflective community that is continually renewing and rededicating themselves. They will continue with their strong focus on adult education and a connection to Israel but according to Rabbi Scheff they take a proactive position on programming, OJC is looking at ways to continuously welcome new families, form new committees and strengthen and empower its volunteers.

"An exciting new development is the addition of two rabbinical interns from the seminary. We see ourselves as a teaching institution and want to offer different types of role models. We feel everyone is both a learner and a teacher," he said.

"We believe that the synagogue should model the behavior we'd like to see beyond our walls and to provide something to aspire to."

For information visit [theojc.org](http://theojc.org) or call 359-5920. To purchase tickets for "100 Years of Broadway" contact Amy Nelson at 201-370-4580. For more information about the OJC 50th Weekend please contact Marc Levine at 398-3646.

***Terri Kayden is a freelance writer and public relations consultant who resides in Nyack.***



**The Levinson family from left: Jennifer, Allen, and Leslie. Julia and Jonathan in rear.**

November 2009