Beneath a clear sky and noon sun, the members of Temple Beth Am in Monessen gathered one last time as a congregation. Surrounded by family, friends and well-wishers, the group who had shared weddings, funerals, bar and bat mitzvahs, holidays and simchas together for most of their lives buried the synagogue's prayer books.

Temple Beth Am was closing, and this was their final ritual.

Created in 1967 when Kneseth Israel Hebrew Congregation merged with Rodef Shalom Congregation of Charleroi, the Reform temple was a staple of Jewish life in the Mon Valley. At its high point, the synagogue membership neared 175 family units but has been slowly dwindling for decades. As families moved away and younger generations moved out of Monessen and surrounding communities like Charleroi and Donora, the synagogue slowly had to reevaluate what it meant to be a functioning temple.

According to longtime member Jack Bergstein, “It’s been 10 to 15 years since a Sunday school existed.”

Bergstein recalls the synagogue as essential. “It was the center of my Jewish experience. We had, at its most active time, services every Friday evening. For a while, we even had Saturday morning services and the kids had Hebrew school each week and Sunday school. I have memories of Sunday school. High Holiday services were filled to the brim with people.”
Sadly, even the observance of the High Holidays felt the strain experienced by so many synagogues in communities that struggle to maintain Jewish life. “The last few years, there have only been 25 to 30 people,” Bergstein said. “It’s hard but I accept reality.”

Rabbi Sara Rae Perman led Shabbat services for the last year. “Rabbi Perman came and did services once a month,” said congregation president Phyllis Ackerman. “It was very nice, but we could not afford to do that again.”

It was this realization, Ackerman said, that forced the synagogue to make the difficult decision to shutter its doors. “Because of money and lack of people we had to close it up. We didn’t have a choice.”

The building that members called home for over 50 years will now be sold. The proceeds will go toward maintaining the congregation’s cemetery a short ride from the temple. Ackerman said that former members will continue to care for the cemetery.

“Our funds will go to take care of our cemetery. When we no longer can, the Jewish Federation is putting together something and they will hopefully take it over. For now, we maintain it. It’s in beautiful shape right now.”

Temple Beth Am’s legacy was celebrated and remembered during a deconsecration service on Saturday, Aug. 17. “Rabbi Perman led a beautiful service,” Ackerman said. Havdalah followed.

After the deconsecration nothing was left to do but pass on the Torah and bury the prayer books. Congregation Dor Hadash will be the Torah scroll’s new home; the prayer books were buried following Jewish tradition. Perman led a brief service similar to a funeral and attendees shoveled dirt and covered the siddurim.

Shelly Zegart came from Louisville, Kentucky, to add her father’s prayer book to the collection. “He was a stalwart of the Monessen Jewish community and one of the founders of the synagogue and cemetery,” she explained. “I thought it would be fitting to bury his prayer book with the temple’s.”
Asked why she traveled so far, Zegart said she wanted to be there as a representative of her family. “And more importantly, to honor these people like Phyllis, who have kept Jewish life alive here for all these decades. When we heard it was closing, we knew we had to be here.”

“The worst part was when we turned off the eternal light on Saturday night. Then we knew it was done,” said Ackerman, whose wedding was the second to be held at Beth Am. “Until then, you just don’t think about it. But when they did it, it hurt.

“This has been very difficult. This has been my temple for many, many years; I’ve been president forever and this has been my baby for a very long time. I hate to see it go, but the writing was on the wall.”

Now, Beth Am members will travel elsewhere to attend services.

“Some are going to Monroeville, others Washington, we’ve joined Temple B’nai Israel in White Oak,” Ackerman said.

What does this mean for the community that worshiped together for decades? Ackerman wasn’t certain what the future would hold. “We’ve all been busy trying to get the temple ready to be sold. There are no other plans to get together.” PJC

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