

Temple Aliyah Lobby Artwork

As you enter Temple Aliyah, you see a large wall-mounted sculpture created by the husband and wife team of Michael Kraatz and Susan Russell (www.kraatzrussell.com). The Temple Aliyah community commissioned this work following the untimely death of Neil Sacks, a former president of the Synagogue and long-time “volunteer extraordinaire.” The sculpture is intended to evoke a sense of joy, celebration and community which were embodied in Neil.

Every person who views a work of art does so from his or her own perspective which is informed by the person’s life experiences. Accordingly, the work is subject to multiple interpretations. In viewing this sculpture, you may wish to consider some of the following elements:

Hebrew Quotation

Three lines in Hebrew are integrated in the sculpture. These words are attributed to the first century Jewish sage Shammai in Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers), the ethical classic from the Mishnah. It offers the following three pieces of advice:

Make your Torah a fixed practice;
say little and do much; and
receive everyone with a cheerful face.

Although written in the singular as words of wisdom for each individual to follow, these words also suggest three elements that are essential for maintaining the vital Jewish community depicted in the sculpture.

The first line points to making Torah study - read broadly to include the study of sacred Jewish texts and the application of their lessons in our lives - a core value of the community. The word “make” encourages not just the act of study but the application of study and learning in the furtherance of Jewish values.

The second line speaks to the importance of engaged community members acting in concert through volunteer activities and through the manner in which they conduct their lives. Although it is important to speak of what needs to be done, it is as important, if not more so, to actually do it.

Finally, the last line recognizes the importance of being a welcoming community which demonstrates through its actions that all members are valued and diverse opinions are respected. A small gesture, such as a warm greeting, is an outward sign of a deeply held community value.

Figures

The members of the community are represented by the fifteen figures which span the width of the sculpture. They are depicted as moving in an upward direction, evoking the name of our congregation - Aliyah - which means “to go up,” not just in a physical sense but in a spiritual sense as well. The figures vary in shape and size, reflecting the diverse group of adults and children that together comprise a community. One of the figures is oriented horizontally, evoking a sense of someone who is no longer physically part of the community. It reminds us that those who are no longer with us continue to be a part of, and continue to influence, the community.

Water

Water images are prominent in the sculpture, appearing as raindrops, clouds, and a flowing river. Water is used throughout scripture and rabbinic literature as a metaphor for Torah. The clouds, residing in the heavens, remind us of the divine source for Torah. The drops of rain create an image of Torah invigorating our world “...as the small rain upon the tender grass, and as the showers upon the herb.” (Deut 32:2) The stream flowing through the scene underscores the way in which Torah sustains us and informs our decisions and actions.