

Educating the Generations: PAS Community Dedicates the Eli M. Black Learning Center

October 25, 2017 by Maxine Dovere

There was dancing in the streets, singing on the stage, and sweets and celebrations for all as over a thousand congregants and friends gathered Oct. 15 on 89th Street to inaugurate the Park Avenue Synagogue (PAS) Eli M. Black Lifelong Learning Center. The center is named in honor of a Polish-born American rabbi turned businessman, for whom, said his son Leon, Jewish education was an essential part of his American Dream.

Educated at Yeshiva University, Eliyahu Menashe Blachowitz—later “Black”—spent three years as a rabbi. Reading from a 1942 sermon presented by Eli Black, then a young Orthodox rabbi in Woodmere, New York, Leon Black conveyed the gratitude his father felt toward America and the important responsibility he believed the American Jewish community has for the continuity of Judaism.

Eli Black was active in Jewish and secular philanthropies including the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, the American Jewish Committee, the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, Babson College, the Jewish Guild for the Blind and the Jewish Museum, and was chairman of Commentary magazine’s publication committee. Black left the rabbinate to enter business, first working at Lehman Brothers and eventually becoming chairman, president and CEO of the international United Brands Company. However, he never abandoned his love of Jewish learning, said Leon, a founder, chairman of the board, CEO and director of Apollo Global Management.

The dedication of the Eli M. Black Lifelong Learning Center was part of the facility rejuvenation of the 135-year-old Park Avenue Synagogue. Founded as Agudat Yesharim, the Upper East Side congregation’s state-of-the-art, multimedia learning, worship and activity center “is the midpoint of the creation of a vibrant campus linking the new LLC with the congregation’s historic home at 50 East 87th St.,” said synagogue chairman Art Penn. The 87th Street community house will be renovated and reconfigured, with project completion anticipated for the fall of 2019.

Speaking with audible emotion, Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove said, “The Eli M. Black Lifelong Learning Center is an expression of our hopes and dreams toward creating lives of Torah....At every stage of life, our tradition teaches that each one of us is capable of learning and observing our sacred tradition....This extension of our synagogue will house incalculable opportunities for intellectual engagement, spiritual uplift and communal connection.”

Art Penn, Board of Trustees chairman, explained, “Four years ago, we created a plan to address our need for growth....We envisioned a new lifelong learning center on 89th Street and a renewed 87th Street building that together would create a center for prayer, learning and community.”

Housed in a landmarked 1913 townhouse, the contemporary interior—designed by Murphy Burnham & Buttrick Architects, specialists in “religious” design—provides 12,000 square feet of accessible learning and community facilities on seven floors and two rooftop spaces. Amy Reichert, an architect and Judaica artist, designed the contemporary art installations, chapel ark, eternal light and reading table “to embody the building’s educational and spiritual mission.” A sky-lit glass stairwell in the building’s core features abstract expressionist artist Adolph Gottlieb’s stained-glass windows depicting Jewish holidays, originally designed in 1954 for the façade of the synagogue’s former Milton Steinberg House, an artistic link to the refurbished 87th Street building.

The center will house the congregational school attended by nearly 500 children.

Honorary co-chairs John B. Hess, Leon D. Black, Ralph Lauren and David Simon headed the capital campaign, “A Synagogue in Action: Building the Future.” Steering committee members included Penn; Cosgrove; Andrea Bauman Lustig, Capital Campaign chair; Marc Becker, Space Committee co-chair; and Beryl P. Chernov, executive director.

In an exclusive conversation, Penn told NYJL, “Our existing facilities were bursting at the seams. Space was needed for more engagement.”

He noted that “the last significant building project was completed in 1982. [The sanctuary was constructed in 1927, and an additional space was added in 1954.] Nothing had been done for a generation.”

The Black building is the first phase. He explained that two years from now, PAS will open a totally revitalized 87th Street facility with totally different space. More than \$79 million was contributed by more than a thousand donors.

He noted that the sanctuary will remain open throughout the construction. For 16-18 months, congregational activity will be split between the 87th Street sanctuary and the Black Center.

“The payoff will be in 2019,” said Penn. “People will see a building with magnificent natural light—a beautiful new chapel and more community rooms.”

Asked why the synagogue had not expanded its Madison Avenue structure, Penn responded that vertical expansion is a very difficult process involving complicated engineering. He explained that it could involve taking down the existing building, calling it “a project for the next generation, not this time around.”

Asked what the most exciting aspect of the project was for him, Penn told NYJL it was “to see our community’s vibrant engagement. It’s not just about the dollars; it’s about participation. It can never be about bricks and mortar. There’s something more important: our community heritage.”

The youngest member of the current building committee is in his 30s. Of that member, Penn said, “He has to view participation—as did those on earlier committees—not only as sheer engagement, but for his kids and grandchildren as well.”

He added that several members of the 1980 building committee are still active in the synagogue.

“The campaign shows an optimistic vision of an American Jewish community,” said Penn. “When you combine members who prioritize Judaism with terrific clergy, the combination is vibrant. We need members who care and clergy who inspire!”

“There’s always the go-no-go decision. It’s a big thing, and it takes a lot of money to engage the community, execute a project, get it done and make it work.”

“The go-no-go decision moment for PAS was 2014,” Penn concluded. “We had lay leadership that had conviction to work, wisdom and wealth. We were getting the sense that we could. It’s a team—not only money.”

Said Craig Solomon, co-chair of the Space Committee, “I am grateful to have had the opportunity to work with extraordinary leadership and to be doing my small part to help the community establish its physical presence. This was an extraordinary collaboration among staff and lay leaders representing all aspects of this vibrant, thriving and rapidly growing institution....I’ve come to understand that PAS has something to offer everyone in an extraordinary community.”