

Finding Beth El's History in the New Building

By Elisabeth Wechsler



"The building is so new but you can see Beth El's roots everywhere if you know where to look," said Sue Austin, compiler and author of *A Leap of Faith: A Short History of Congregation Beth El*. The phrase "leap of faith" is a nod to the

congregation's courageous decisions related to building the Vine Street synagogue as well as our Oxford site.

The booklet, published last fall, grew out of the synagogue's strategic planning process, which included a section on the history of Congregation Beth El. New members will receive a copy in their New Member Packets, although Sue believes everyone will find the history pertinent. Congregants can find the full version on our website. Included in the history is a page with various teasers to finding some of the tangible history in the building. For example, do you know where to look for the copper doors that welcomed congregants to the Vine Street synagogue?; the ancient Monkey Puzzle Tree, preserved from an earlier era; the original pews from Vine Street; and the Time Capsule hidden in plain view? These are just some of the curiosities awaiting the adventurous sleuth.

The move from Vine Street in 2005 initiated an effort to preserve precious documents, thanks to the foresight of Robinn Magid, who stored

many boxes of material in her home as we awaited the completion of our new building. Alison Moore shared her archival expertise in organizing our

historical memorabilia and documents and preparing our time capsule. A great deal of work remains to be done in archiving materials, photographs, and other treasures of our past. Sue likes to point out that preserving and learning from our past can help us confront an uncertain future. She chose Shakespeare's famous quote from *The*

Tempest—The past is prologue (transliterated into Hebrew, of course) —to open *The Leap of Faith*.

Sue's work on the history of Congregation Beth El is an extension of her professional interest, as a writer of historical fiction for kids 10 and older. Her current work-in-progress is a story based in Capitola in the summer of 1924 (*Just the Ticket: A Summer Adventure-by-the-Sea*). Another of her books is set in Berkeley in 1923 (*The Bamboo Garden*). At home she and her husband Mike delight in watching their four grandchildren take on the world. At Congregation Beth El she chairs the Marketing and Communications Committee and helps out with the Pantry Chug. She is particularly proud of being a graduate of Rabbi Zellman's trope class and loves her Sunday mornings in Rabbi Kahn's class, "Leaves and Branches."