

Labor Of Love

Martin Abel marks his 65th wedding anniversary with a monumental menorah at The Shul.

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Contributing Writer

A 65th wedding anniversary is a significant milestone, and Martin and Phyllis Abel are marking theirs in a very significant way — with a 9-foot stainless steel menorah adorning the Maple Road entrance to The Shul-Chabad Lubavitch in West Bloomfield.

Abel, who is a retired manufacturing engineer, inventor and entrepreneur, naturally turned to The Shul as a way to commemorate his upcoming anniversary. He is a longtime supporter of the Lubavitch movement and has volunteered his time and talent over the years to create many of the accoutrements adorning The Shul sanctuary. His projects include the Holy Ark, the *mehitzah* (divider that separates the men from the women during services), the rolling *bimah* (podium) used during the Jewish High Holidays, and the *ner tamid* (eternal light) that hangs over the ark.

“Some people at his age go golfing,” said Phyllis Abel. “He’s busy making things for The Shul.”

Abel liked the idea that the menorah, 16 feet tall including the stone base, carries forth the Lubavitch principle of spreading light throughout the world. Like his other projects, the design and construction of the menorah was a labor of love. He carefully orchestrated and supervised each step of the process, from the initial design to the final inspection. He enlisted the services of skilled craftspeople from disciplines that included engineering, architecture, welding, glass blowing and masonry and coordinated their efforts to achieve a finished product that would meet his stringent specifications for quality and adherence to Jewish law.

Abel took care to ensure that the menorah fulfilled the guidelines set forth by Maimonides, which stated that the flames must be equal in height and that no curves should be used in the construction. To achieve this, each bowl-like flame holder has 18 faces to give the appearance of roundness without using any actual curved surfaces.

“Mr. Abel has to keep up with all of the rabbi’s requirements and all of his own requirements of perfection and beauty,” said Itty Shemtov, whose husband, Rabbi Kasriel Shemtov, is director of The Shul. “He has a lot of things to keep in mind.”



Martin Abel stands with Chana, 4, Mussi, 9, and Yisroel Shemtov, 11, of West Bloomfield beside the menorah he designed and had built for The Shul in honor of his 65th wedding anniversary.

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— Phyllis Abel

Abel designed the branches of the Menorah with a 45-degree angle to convey a welcome feeling, like a pair of outstretched arms. The main column is an obelisk, with the same taper as the Washington Monument: 2.5 degrees. An intricate, multistep welding process was used so the menorah would look as if it were cast in one solid piece, like the orig-

inal gold menorah in the ancient temple of Jerusalem.

The menorah went through an elaborate finishing process that involved both sandblasting, to remove any flaws in the metal, and electropolishing, to create a shiny finish. The process was repeated until no flaws remained.

“I was trying to do what the Good Book

says: When you bring something to God, it should be without blemish,” Abel said. “In spite of all the things that went wrong, it came out right. Somebody up there was watching.”

The “flames” of the Menorah were designed by the same local glass blower from Greenfield Village in Dearborn who made the solar-powered *Ner Tamid*. The flames sit in heavy bronze bowls plated with 45-carat gold and cobalt to withstand severe weather conditions. Each bowl contains 47 LED lights soldered to circuit boards housed in aluminum containers.

The intensity of the lights, as well as the on and off times, are regulated by a control panel stored inside Rabbi Shemtov’s office and connected to the menorah by an underground cable. The lights are programmed for the next 100 years, with a special schedule for the eight days of Chanukah.

“It’s kind of audacious to program something for 100 years; you’ve got to have chutzpah,” Abel said.

The hand-blown glass flames are surrounded by thick plastic guards to protect against vandalism. Although he understands the reasoning, Abel regrets that this protective measure was necessary.

“The flames standing alone in the night sky would have had such a dramatic effect,” he said.

The cement base of the menorah is covered with stone cut from the same Jerusalem quarry that produced the stone for the Second Temple. The stones were cut into various sizes to simulate the stones in the Western Wall and hand-coated by an artist to give a more ancient appearance.

“It’s quite incredible, the amount of detail and care that was taken every step of the way,” Itty Shemtov said. “Every time he’s here, he’s looking around, wondering what can he do, what can he make more beautiful.”

Abel agrees that he is always on the lookout for things he can enhance.

“Except Phyllis,” he said. “I can’t improve on that one. She was perfect from day one.”

The menorah will remain covered until its official dedication at 7 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 10, at The Shul, 6890 W. Maple Road in West Bloomfield. The event is open to the community at no charge. For more information, contact (248) 788-4000 or visit www.theshul.net. □