

A Holy Calling

One of retired psychologist's many philanthropic efforts is repairing prayer books

Story and photo by Marc Shapiro

Racks of specialty tape line the walls; a hot glue gun sits on a work bench; various tools are stored all over the room; and books are piled high on a table in Arnie Feiner's workshop.

This space, in a room of the basement of Feiner's Pikesville home, is no regular workshop but where Feiner performs a sort of holy work: repairing prayer books for Chizuk Amuno Congregation.

Feiner, who moved to Baltimore from Florida with his wife, Lisa, in 2009, estimates that he has repaired around 10,000 books for his congregation.

"I had never done this until I came here," Feiner, 72, said. "I came in and saw there was a tremendous need, especially at Chizuk, which has thousands of books."

Over the last six years, Feiner has taught himself how to treat a long list of ailments that plague older prayer books. He uses a specialty tape dispenser to tape up spines that are worn. To reattach spines to the pages of the books, Feiner carefully uses a hot glue gun, which he replaces about once a year because they break from heavy usage.

"I've got to be very careful," he said. "This hot glue gun is something like 400 degrees. I've only been burned once."

He has tape in colors that match the books and winged tape that can be used when the top or bottom of a spine or the corners of the front or back covers are frayed.

"All these tapes and gadgets and what-not are special ordered for these purposes," he said.

Whether using the specialty tape dispenser, applying winged tape or a blot of hot glue, Feiner applies his tools with the most careful precision.

For other fixes, he has adopted some of his own methods. To prop a book up, he pushes two bookends together and puts the prayer book in between them. To tape ripped pages



Arnie Feiner repairs a prayer book in his basement workshop. He estimates that he has repaired around 10,000 books.



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back together or back to the spine of the book, he uses clamps to hold pages together on both sides of the book as he tapes the page.

"It's kind of like doing surgery," Feiner said.

For pages that need replacing, he pulls from a collection of books that are too damaged to repair. He even keeps handy a folder of photocopies of commonly replaced pages — he uses the double-sided copier from his old family practice and trims the pages to fit in the prayer books. He brings discarded pages to Sol Levinson and Bros. so they can be buried.

"These are holy books. These are not just library books," Feiner said. "I think it's holy work; that's the way I approach it."

If he comes across books that were dedicated to and by people he knows,

he puts those aside until he sees them at synagogue so he can show people their newly repaired book.

Chizuk Amuno reimburses him for his costs, but the labor is free.

Rabbi Moshe Shualy, Chizuk Amuno's ritual director, said that Feiner not only has saved the synagogue thousands of dollars, but also has helped restore books that he thinks have more character.

"There's something particularly, I think, beautiful about picking up a siddur that's been prayed from, and he really is a masterful siddur repairman," Shualy said. "The spirit just shines from a book that's been used as opposed to something brand new."

Feiner walks the entire shul every few weeks, checking the books. He repairs a couple each morning when he attends minyan, and he even has a

special box on Shabbat for books that are in need of repair.

"It's almost like a joke," he said. "Every day, people come over to me in shul [and say], 'I got another one for you.'"

But book repair is hardly the bulk of Feiner's Jewish and philanthropic involvement. The Brooklyn, N.Y., native, who moved to Florida in 1969, was extremely involved in Jewish life in the Hollywood-Ft. Lauderdale area where he lived.

"The only position I think I didn't hold at synagogue was sisterhood president," Feiner joked. He served on several rabbi and cantor search committees and as ritual director.

Outside of Jewish life, Feiner was very involved in the medical world as a psychologist. He headed up one of the first veterans' centers after the

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Vietnam War, a difficult task at a time when veterans were not looked upon favorably.

He began to specialize in ADHD in the 1980s, and from seeing so many children in his practice, he affectionately became known as "The Fun Doctor." (These days, some call him "The Book Doctor.") He, his wife, a clinical social worker, and their daughter, Sherri Abraham, also a psychologist, ran a family medical practice, Feiner, Abraham and Associates in Hollywood, Fla.

Feiner served on medical ethics committees at hospitals and was on the board of various organizations in Broward County, Fla.

The Feiners came to Baltimore in 2009 to be closer to their daughters and four granddaughters. Two of their granddaughters attend Beth Tfiloh Dahan Community School and the other two attend the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Rockville. Arnie and Lisa are very active with all four of them and even drive to Rockville once a week to pick their granddaughters up from school. Lisa helps them with secular homework, and Arnie helps them with Hebrew homework. He's even teaching one of them her Haftarah portion for her bat mitzvah.

Arnie and Lisa maintain the library for their neighborhood and also help manage the library at North Oaks, the retirement community across the street from their home. The two also volunteer as patients in the Clinical Foundations of Medicine, a program in which Johns Hopkins medical students learn how to interview patients.

"I frequently say I have never been busier since we retired," Feiner said.

The Feiners and another couple also run a Chavurah program.

For Feiner, all this sharing and giving of his time is rooted in his Judaism and its principle of tikkun olam.

"I take seriously the prayers I utter every day," he said. Jr

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