

Landmarked temple needs restoration

by [Liz Rhoades](#), Managing Editor

11/12/2009



The beautiful sanctuary at the Free Synagogue of Flushing needs restoration. Some windows have already been removed and leaks threaten the stained-glass dome. PHOTO BY PJ SMITH

A landmarked synagogue in Flushing needs at least \$500,000 to restore its domed sanctuary. The Free Synagogue of Flushing, located at 41-60 Kissena Blvd. was landmarked by the state in July and by the National Register of Historic Places last month. The two designations allow the congregation to apply for grants, which are sorely needed to complete the restoration, according to Rabbi Michael Weisser.

Some of the stained-glass windows have already been removed and taken to Philadelphia, where an expert in stained-glass restoration will take over. "They need total restoration, the leading is loose and the window frames also need to be redone," Weisser said.

Particularly worrisome are the leaks over the last few years which have damaged the the ceiling and art work. The sanctuary features a stained-glass dome designed around a Star of David. According to the temple's literature, "dark green pilasters are graced with intricate gold-leaf filigree. Stained-glass windows, crafted in Czechoslovakia, surround the sanctuary in rich radiant colors."

The 1926 structure was not considered for city landmarking, a common practice among religious institutions, which are fearful that strict municipal laws would hinder future exterior work and be more costly.

The neo-classical temple was designed by Maurice Courtland and includes a massive portico supported by four Ionic pillars. It is the oldest Reform synagogue in Queens and was founded by the Hebrew Women's Aid Society in 1917.

The group's original structure was built by noted architect Sanford White on the corner of Kissena Boulevard and Sanford Avenue and later moved several feet down the avenue to make way for the larger synagogue.

The congregation now rents out the older building to the Windsor School, a private middle and high school.

Weisser, who has been with the synagogue for a year, called the restoration work time-consuming and tedious. "We need a new roof, which is a major job," the rabbi said.

He refused to divulge how much members have raised for the project, but called the congregation "good stewards of money" to get it started.

Weisser expects the project to take three years to complete, but that during the work, the congregation will not have to move.

Allan Goldberg, first vice president at the synagogue, said the work is critical to preserve Free Synagogue's cultural legacy. "From an architectural standpoint, our synagogue is a national treasure and it would be tragic to lose the magnificent stained-glass windows," Goldberg said.

The congregation has been sent pledge requests and fundraising events are being planned. Weisser said aside from federal and state grants, the synagogue will apply to private foundations, although he acknowledged the bad economy, which is a problem right now.

Free Synagogue has approximately 120 members in a predominantly Asian area, but Weisser said there are still plenty of Jewish people living in Flushing. Since he arrived, the congregation has picked up 20 families and credits it to the new programming being offered.

"It's a balancing act to make the congregation comfortable and be innovative for new families," he said.

New programs include special services such as chanting by a Kirtan rabbi, a jazz accompaniment and a torah-palozza monthly singalong. There are informal services on Saturday, bar and bat mitzvah classes for adults, conversion classes and a tot shabat for young children.

Weisser loves the ethnic diversity of Flushing and says he's doing a lot of networking in the community. The synagogue also hosts interfaith events and concerts.