

TEMPLE BETH EL

LEGO menorah is engineering marvel

BY HOWARD POSNITZ
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More than 200 children and their parents got a foretaste of Hanukkah at Closter's Temple Beth El Sunday, Dec. 11.

Led by Livingston architect Steven Schwartz, this group assembled what was billed as the "The world's tallest LEGO menorah."

Schwartz, who created the LEGO menorah, as well as other LEGO projects based on Jewish history, divided the crowd into small groups, each following a template to build the menorah's foundation. Schwartz then assembled the layers of LEGO blocks and added a pre-built candelabra.

Rabbi Debra Hachen conducted the candle lighting and the temple's children's choir, led by Cantor Rica Timman, joined in Hanukkah songs.

The completed menorah reached 13.2 feet, said David Fisher, president of the temple men's club, which organized the event.

"We set a record. We had more pieces built, but the architect was fearful about placing them so high."

Schwartz added that his ladder wasn't tall enough.

The menorah is part of Schwartz's Jewish History Construction Series, seven projects using LEGO pieces to create a hands-on experience in teaching Jewish history. Other projects in the series include the Old City of Jerusalem, the Second Temple, the Warsaw Ghetto and ancient Persian city of Shusun, the setting of the Book of Esther and Jewish Purim festivities.

Schwartz, a practicing New Jersey architect specializing in retail store design for 34 years, presents his LEGO projects on weekends. The inspiration came several years ago when his daughter, an elementary school teacher, asked him to speak to her second and third graders about city planning. Schwartz brought in LEGO blocks.

"I saw that when the kids were building with toys they could understand architectural concepts. They were very focused and I had their complete attention," said Schwartz.

He introduced Jewish themes at the suggestion of fellow members of his temple.

The menorah program is so popular that Fisher had to book Schwartz in June. Schwartz has taken the LEGO menorah to temples throughout New Jersey, as well as to Baltimore and North Carolina and his native St. Louis.

In addition to his full-time time

practice and his Jewish history series, Schwartz also presents a secular LEGO project. His Architectural Heritage series uses LEGO blocks to teach children about historic city districts.

"New Jersey has some wonder-

ful old cities with compact historic districts," said Schwartz, who first photographs and then maps the district. Children construct models of 20 to 40 buildings in a given district using LEGO pieces.

Schwartz has worked with his-

toric societies in Montclair, Summit and Kearny. He is currently designing a model of the Morristown historic district.

The Montclair project focused on the historic district on Bloomfield Avenue, from the Montclair

Museum to the railroad station. Children had the opportunity to construct models of actual buildings from Schwartz's templates.

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