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Grounded in reverence

Inside and outside their Cherry Hill home, a rabbi and an artist proclaim their love of Judaism, books, and nature.

Updated: SEPTEMBER 3, 2010 — 3:01 AM EDT



Barry Schwartz works trimming a Chinese Elm bonsai tree. Barry is an avid bonsai gardener. (Charles Fox / Staff Photographer)

by **Sally Friedman**, For The Inquirer

When Rabbi Barry Schwartz and his wife, Debby, began house-

hunting in Cherry Hill
back in 1999, he had
just accepted the
position as spiritual
leader of
Congregation M'Kor
Shalom, moving his
family from Buffalo.

After several days of
touring homes, Debby
had to return to
Buffalo, but the rabbi
continued the search.

"The minute I saw the
grounds of this
house," the rabbi, 52,
recalled recently, "I
knew it was the one.
The house felt right,
but most of all, I saw
the potential of the
yard and knew this
was going to be our
home."

And after years of
working from that
home base and
through the local
congregation, in July

the rabbi was named chief executive officer of the Jewish Publication Society in Philadelphia, the nation's oldest Jewish publishing house. He



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has spent 25 years as a pulpit rabbi in several congregations, and is a well-known social justice activist and communal leader with a special interest in working with the beleaguered city of Camden through its ministries.

The couple, the parents of three young adult children, have long recognized their Cherry Hill home as a sanctuary, an oasis, and a place of shelter from storms. Debby and Barry Schwartz each bring their individual passions for beauty, nature, and art to the house. And as the Jewish High Holy Days approach (Rosh Hashanah begins at sundown on Sept. 8) the Schwartzes continue to live by the Hebrew concept of "Shalom Bayit" - peace in the home.

The couple's devotion to Judaism literally begins at the front door, where an Israeli door harp bears the biblical legend from Psalms, "Blessed are you as you enter. Blessed are you as you leave." An eclectic collection of "Hamsas," hands presented upside-down as an ancient symbol of peace and protection, decorate a nearby wall.

The hands have significance for Debby, 51, who is a certified hand rehabilitation specialist, and now a teacher and lecturer who travels the country working with other professionals in that field.

Down a small hallway hangs the wedding canopy under which the couple recited their vows in Jerusalem, where they met on a kibbutz. The chuppah, designed and created by hand by the bride's mother, is decorated with seven doves. It bears the biblical message: "Once more shall be heard the voice of rejoicing and gladness."

A sun-filled family room that stretches across the back of the two-story house reflects the avocations of its occupants. Debby Schwartz is a potter whose work frequently has appeared in juried shows throughout the region, and one wall holds vases, bowls, and other vessels, displayed on custom-designed shelving. The effect is striking, finishes and colorations adding beauty and drama.

Until recently Debby also ran her own business, Hand and Heart Ceramics, and frequently used a studio in the basement with kiln and potter's wheel. Reluctantly, she recently parted with the kiln and closed the business. "I'm traveling so much now that I've had to cut back. Still," she says, "creating these pieces will always be a part of my life."

The family room is where the couple's large collection of wooden bird figures landed, and where Barry Schwartz's nature photographs are displayed. Those photos track the

couple's hiking and travels around the country and the world, and each has a story behind it.

The rabbi, a raconteur and published storyteller, is the author of several books for adults and young readers about Jewish values, and a children's book, *Honi the Circlemaker*. The original pen-and-ink illustrations from *Honi* decorate the home's dining room walls, the gift of the artist, Stewart J. Thomas of Gainesville, Fla.

Schwartz is pleased that his new position with the Jewish Publication Society places him squarely in the world of books and literature. The legacy of the society, chartered in 1888, includes two acclaimed translations of the Hebrew Bible, and more than a century of scholarly and popular Jewish-themed literary works.

The couple's collection of books with a Judaic theme numbers more than 1,500, and fills several walls in a guest room. "We may run out of space, but we'll never run out of interest," the rabbi says.

Their love of nature's creatures is as strong as their passion for books. A fish motif dominates their blue-and-white living room, with "flying fish" on walls and an aquarium with brilliantly colored inhabitants.

That reverence for nature culminates in the yard that celebrates the joys of water, growing things, and serenity.

"This is Barry's world, but I'm lucky enough to enjoy the benefits," says Debby, who clearly delights in his handiwork. With a pool and some plantings as the former

owners' legacy, Schwartz transformed the yard into a paradise with waterfall, koi pond with lively residents, and a bonsai garden, his passion, within a pergola. The rabbi loses himself among the Chinese elms, lacy split-leaf maples, and other specimens, and derives pleasure from the plants' pots, most of them created by his wife.

"Bonsai mimics the natural landscape in perfect miniature, and the plants do take a lot of care - from spring until the first frost, when they're outside, I water them every day," he says. Trimming these miniatures is painstaking, but clearly a labor of love.

And then there are the garden's fig tree and grapevines, planted by the Schwartzes and resonant of a passage from Micah 4:4, "Every man shall dwell under his vine and fig tree and not be afraid. . . ."

No small feat, it turns out, especially when it comes to the tree. "This is the northernmost part of the country where a fig tree can survive," explains this intrepid gardener. "But the figs come, and the roots live. I like to think of it as a lovely symbol of continuity."

The Jewish New Year is meaningful for Debby and Barry Schwartz. Debby will soon be receiving her OTD, occupational therapy doctorate, enhancing her educational and healing work with hands.

And Schwartz is opening a new chapter of his professional life, focusing on books, his personal passion and the hallmark of Jewish learning.

"We're in a very good place," says Debby Schwartz, surveying her outdoor world and its gifts. "Like our fig tree, we've planted some very strong roots here for the new year."

Published: September 3, 2010 — 3:01 AM EDT

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